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## Guerrillas in the Mist: COMINT and the Formation and Evolution of the Viet Minh, 1941-45 (U)

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Editor's Note: This paper was presented at the 1995 Cryptologic History Symposium.

(U) In September 1945, the Viet Minh took control of Vietnam prior to the Allied occupation. The popular image we have is the Viet Minh, accompanied by a handful of American advisors from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), suddenly emerging from the misty hills of Tonkin and the swampy delta of the Mekong to take power in Hanoi, Saigon and the rest of the three colonies (Cochin China, Annam, and Tonkin) that made up Vietnam.

(U) How they were able to do this often is not told in any depth. Popular histories, such as Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam*, relate the wartime activities and exploits of the Viet Minh in just a few paragraphs. The gritty details of how they were able to organize themselves, avoid French and Japanese efforts to eliminate them, and be in a position, militarily and politically, to take over after the Japanese surrender are glossed over in capsule form: the Viet Minh organized in 1941 under Ho Chi Minh, trained in camps in southern China, were armed by the Americans and then seized control. Unfortunately, it is this lack of both contour and details in our picture of the Viet Minh that led to misjudgment and misunderstanding about its relative political position and strength at the end of World War II and the immediate postwar Indochina.

### SOURCES AND LIMITATIONS (U)

(U) With the recent declassification and ongoing release to the National Archives from the National Security Agency of all World War II COMINT translations, a new source of information on Viet Minh activity during the war years is now available.

(U) The COMINT translations mentioning Viet Minh activities and personalities are secondhand; that is, they are intercepts of French, both Vichy and Gaullist, and Japanese military and diplomatic communications. These translations are contained in a master diplomatic collection which has been declassified and is being released to the National Archives in Record Group 457. The diplomatic translations are cited SIS/SSA # H-series, and the Japanese Army translations, which likewise are declassified and soon to be released, are cited SIS/SSA # J-series.

(U) Allied COMINT units exploited Japanese and French (Vichy and Gaullist Provisional Government) diplomatic and military communications in Southeast Asia and southern China. Most of the exploited communications consisted of high-frequency radio

links utilizing manual Morse between various cities in the region and capital cities of Tokyo, Paris, and Vichy.\* A small portion of the messages, all Gaullist diplomatic messages from Paris to Washington, D.C., were taken from copies held by the Office of War Information's Cable Censor. The messages themselves were either plain text or coded/enciphered. The cryptographic systems used varied from the relatively sophisticated Japanese diplomatic cipher, known popularly as PURPLE, to simple codes and manual ciphers.

(U) These messages were intercepted by a number of Allied listening posts positioned around the world in locations optimized for such monitoring. Intercepted messages were either decrypted on the spot, if possible, or (most of the time) were forwarded to Washington for decryption and translation. Early in the war, these latter duties were shared by the U.S. Army and Navy cryptologic services (SIS and OP-20-G, respectively); by 1942, the Army's SIS took sole responsibility for the diplomatic and military messages. The resulting translations were issued in stand-alone series. In early 1942, the SIS began to issue MAGIC Diplomatic and Far East Summaries which synopsized series of translations relating to an individual topic, often including intelligence from other sources, such as the OSS. By the last year of the war, the U.S. Navy would begin issuing its own set of similarly compiled reports from the Pacific Strategic Intelligence Section of the Commander in Chief Fleets and Chief of Naval Operations, some of which concerned events in Indochina.

(U) The new releases are plagued with the same problems as earlier ones. There are plenty of gaps in the intercept, reflecting the generally lower priority that Indochina was given vis-a-vis Allied strategy, except, of course, when events turned critical. During the stages of the Japanese occupation of Indochina from September 1940 to July 1941, there was a marked increase in intercept. Once the war started, coverage of Indochina slackened. It was not until the invasion of France in June 1944 that interest in Indochina revived. For the Japanese, worried about their position, the relationship of the colony to De Gaulle's provisional government became a major concern. From this point, the Japanese occupation authorities began serious contingency planning to head off a perceived Gaullist coup.<sup>1</sup>

(U) There is also a problem with the references to the Viet Minh in the translations. With over two dozen Vietnamese nationalist organizations, including two or three Japanese-supported groups, it is a wonder that any kind of taxonomic order could be put to them. Both the French and Japanese were loose in the names they used to describe the Viet Minh and these nationalist groups. This makes it difficult to work with the COMINT from early in the war because tags like "Annamite revolutionaries" or "nationalists" are used interchangeably to describe insurgent or political activity in Indochina.

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\* (U) There was no intercept of Viet Minh communications until September 1945, and that consisted of a few messages supporting early Viet Minh diplomatic activities that were carried on French and Chinese Nationalist diplomatic circuits originating in Hanoi.

The above difficulty is compounded by the uneven quality of the translations. The U.S. military translators were a mixed group. While some translations could be quite good, with a good rendering into idiomatic English, others are stilted, syntactically incorrect and prone to literalisms or transcriptions. In truth, coming up with the English equivalent of a Japanese transcription of a French or Vietnamese name or title was quite a task. Add to this the inevitable errors that could (and did) creep into Japanese reports themselves. One good example of this general problem is a Japanese diplomatic report from Hanoi of 6 April 1944 (Fig. 1). Note the name. This is a Japanese translation of Nguyen Ai Quoc, the cryptonym used prior to the adoption of Ho Chi Minh. There is a reference to the Yen Bay incident which the Japanese have wrong. Yen Bay was a nationalist-inspired revolt by Vietnamese troops at that garrison; the communists had nothing to do with it. Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party was driven underground in 1930 after the suppression of peasant soviets organized in Annam.

WAR DEPARTMENT  
~~SECRET~~

From: Hanoi (MIRODA)  
 To: Tokyo (F.O.)  
 6 April 1944

#2 Part 1 of a two-part message<sup>a</sup>

Reference the last part of your Circular #60.<sup>b</sup>

(We have no information relevant to points 1 and 3 of your circular.) The India-China Communist Party which was (?formed?) under the leadership of GENAIKOKU (阮元愛) in 1929 was disbanded as a result of the Yenbay incident in February 1930, and since that time has (?been underground?). However, it has continued its activities just as before, and the recent movement of this party can be shown by the first of December of last year...<sup>c</sup>

a - Second part <sup>same number.</sup> not yet available.

b - SSA #114337.

c - Rest of message in too had a shape for rendition.

Inter 7 Apr 44 (8) Japanese #120829  
 Rec'd 21 Apr 44  
 Trans 5 May 44 (10)

~~SECRET~~  
 WAR DEPARTMENT

~~This sheet of paper and all of its contents must be safeguarded with the same care as the original source of information. Carrying up the part of vital intelligence or its source.~~

Fig. 1. (U) Sample COMINT translation

(U) A useful technique to overcome these problems was to compare COMINT with histories and memoirs of the period, such as Decoux's *A la Barre D'Indochine*, Hammer's *The Struggle for Indochina*, and Deviller's *Histoire du Viet-nam*. The chief advantage of these works is their detail, which is a useful backdrop to which the COMINT can be added to fill in the incomplete picture mentioned earlier.

#### BACKGROUND TO INDOCHINA (U)

(U) French Indochina was divided into five colonies: Annam, Cochin China, and Tonkin made up Vietnam; Laos and Cambodia were the other two. The Communist strongholds were located in My Tho in Cochin, about fifty miles south of Saigon, and in the northern Tonkin or what the French referred to as "Haute" or "High" Tonkin region. My Tho was a center of uprisings and agitation throughout the war. The Viet Minh element there was in competition with an assortment of nationalist groups, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious-nationalist sects and a splinter Trotskyite group. The Viet Minh in the Tonkin region started out in small bases on the Sino-Tonkin border near Cao Bang, Bac Son, and Lang Son provinces. These regions are inhabited by the Tho tribe, who made up the bulk of the early Viet Minh military units. The mountainous and vegetation-covered terrain offered good cover, while the proximity to China allowed them to escape French Colonial Army sweeps. Training bases, supported and run by the Koumintang Party, were located near the border near Longzhou and Jingxi and further north near Kunming and Chungking.

(U) The French administered Indochina under a system overseen by a governor-general. For most of the war, Admiral Jean Decoux, an ardent admirer of Marshal Petain, ruled as governor-general until removed by the Japanese in the 9 March 1945 coup. When the Japanese occupied Indochina in September 1940, they allowed the French internal control of the colonies. For example, the border forts of northern Tonkin were manned solely by French troops. For the Viet Minh, the French remained *the* enemy, the imperial presence to be purged from Indochina. The Japanese, although targeted politically by the Viet Minh, were seen as temporary conquerers.

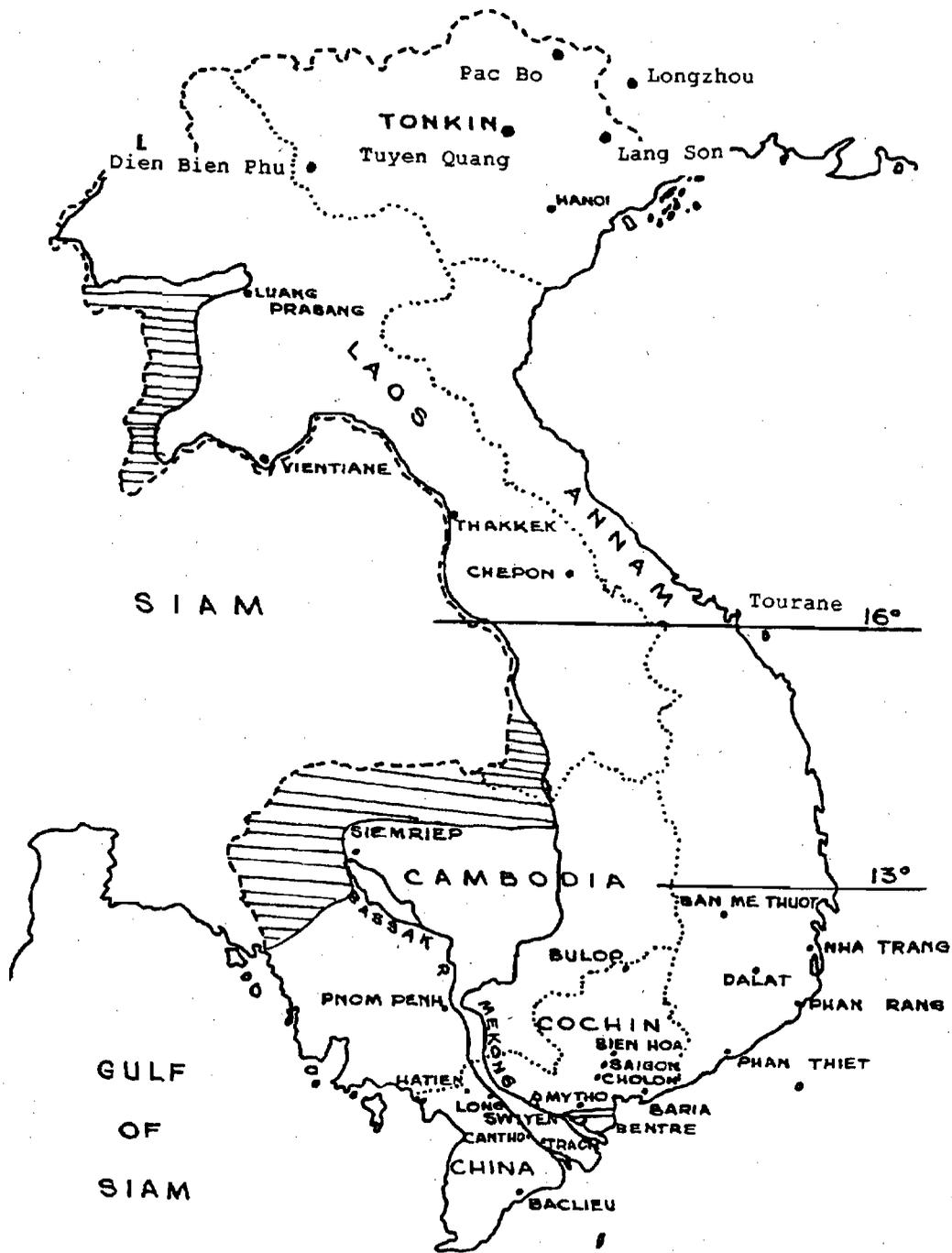
#### 1940-43: EARLY VIET MINH ACTIVITY (U)

(U) In November 1940, the first communist revolt of the war occurred in Cochin. At the time, Thailand hoped to exploit France's collapse and regain land in western Cambodia ceded to the French in 1896. Thai troops advanced into Cambodia and clashed with French colonial forces. As Thai military pressure grew, more French troops were pulled in from other parts of Indochina. Seeing an opportunity, the communist cadre in Cochin organized a revolt. Despite misgivings by communist leaders in Tonkin and a recently arrived Ho Chi Minh, the revolt went forward. It was a disaster. For about a month, 15,000 Vietnamese insurgents closed roads, seized villages, and executed collaborators. A force of

Foreign Legionnaires, backed by artillery and planes, struck back mercilessly. The American consul in Saigon reported that the French were "promiscuously machine-gunning" towns and burning entire villages.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of Vietnamese were imprisoned or executed. The Japanese, reporting from Saigon to Tokyo on the state of affairs in Indochina at the end of November, referred to this as "a little unrest" caused by sweeps against the communists in Cochin China and blamed it on Vietnamese who were "puppets" of either the Chinese or Gaullists.<sup>3</sup>



(U) French governor-general Admiral Jean Decoux and unidentified Japanese general officer receive salute from French sailors.



(U) Map of French Indochina

(U) The fallout from this failed revolt was predictable. The usual purges and criticism sessions followed, but, more critically for the future of Indochina, the communists reorganized. In May 1941, at Pac Bo on the Sino-Tonkin border, Ho and his fellow Vietnamese communists met and formed the Viet Minh, short for the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh. The Viet Minh platform adopted a plan for guerrilla warfare to be an integral part of revolutionary strategy, forming self-defense units and National Salvation Associations. The Viet Minh set themselves the task of building up core regions in northern Tonkin.

(U) In mid-1941, the French began an aggressive pacification campaign in northern Tonkin. A partially intercepted report from Governor General Decoux to Vichy in late September 1941 recounted some of the fighting as French units drove off attacks at various strong points, some with air support, while mobile columns ambushed the "brigands." Some of the fighting involved Chinese guerrilla forces, as well as coastal pirates. But, at this stage, the French seldom distinguished between brigands and nationalists. Decoux reported that by mid-August the fighting had ceased.<sup>4</sup>

(U) The effect of this campaign was to drive the Viet Minh remnants across the border into China. There they would be aided by the Koumintang (KMT) and join other Vietnamese nationalist groups under the KMT-sponsored Vietnamese Revolutionary League or Dong Minh Hoi. This organization was the KMT's attempt to unify all the Vietnamese opposition groups and control their activities. It was composed of a variety of nationalists, imperial restorationists, and even pro-Japanese (but anti-French) elements. But the Viet Minh was the largest and most effective of them and soon came to dominate it, even though Ho was imprisoned in August 1942 by the Chinese, who were suspicious of his communist and COMINTERN connections.

(U) The Chinese organized a series of bases and training camps for the Vietnamese. This did not escape the attention of the Japanese or the French. In August 1941, Japanese intelligence in Shanghai reported to Tokyo the existence of a training camp located near Longzhou in Guangxi Province. There were eight battalions being trained there, three of which were assigned guerrilla operations along the Tonkin border. Furthermore, about 300 young men and women were being specially trained to "maintain secret contacts with . . . operatives in French IndoChina"; the control of these youth had been given to a former "Shanghai Chinese Communist."<sup>5</sup> In April 1942, a Japanese intelligence report from Hanoi to Tokyo added more details on the camp. The Japanese said that the camp had been established in mid-1941. It trained 200 young Vietnamese men and women for six to nine months in military and political administration and then sent them into French Indochina for work in the "liberation movement and agitation" (*sic*). Another source in the same message mentioned a similar camp near Chungking.<sup>6</sup> Decoux reported his awareness of the "Annamite movement" in Kunming in Yunan province.<sup>7</sup> Later, in mid-September 1941, the Japanese ambassador in Hanoi discussed with Decoux his concerns with what might be called the "Chungking connection." The ambassador, Yoshizawa, was concerned with allegations that officials in French Indochina were in collusion with Chungking and providing them with intelligence. Decoux assured Yoshizawa that French

security had been at work "suppressing communism." He added that the Communists lately had been very active against both the French and the Japanese and were following orders from Chungking.<sup>8</sup>

(U) It may be useful here to mention that the Vietnamese connection with Chungking created confusion in observers' minds about the "Chinese" character of the nationalist movement. In December 1942, American diplomats in Chungking believed the Dong Minh Hoi to be "overseas Chinese from northern Indochina." Even in mid-1943 Vietnamese resistance groups were seen as pro-Chinese Annamites.<sup>9</sup> The Japanese, who suspected Chinese subversion everywhere in Asia, broke up several KMT spy rings in Indochina later in the war in Haiphong, Hanoi, and Saigon, which employed Vietnamese.<sup>10</sup>

(U) French attempts to crush Viet Minh and nationalist agitation continued throughout 1943. In the spring of that year, French security forces attempted to decapitate the communist position by arresting several leaders in the Red River Delta region of Thai Binh. In Tuyen Quang, north of Hanoi, the French, through a network of informers, arrested several unnamed Viet Minh leaders.<sup>11</sup>

(U) A greater threat to the French rule occurred in August in the Saigon area. After a series of inflammatory public comments by a Japanese general on Vietnamese independence appeared in local newspapers, Vietnamese nationalists, including the Viet Minh, Cao Daists, and Japanese-supported nationalists, met in a Saigon movie theater on 18 August. During the meeting, several revolutionaries made speeches about Indochinese independence. Placards appeared proclaiming the same line. In their reports to Vichy, the French now admitted to the existence of the coalition of various groups, including a "nationalist party along the lines of the Soviet Party (*sic*)."<sup>12</sup> This remark is interesting because it reports a Viet Minh/communist willingness to make a common front even with nationalists who championed the restoration of Prince Cuong De to the throne in Hue. It is also possible that some of these groups had been infiltrated by the Viet Minh; it would surface after the Viet Minh seizure of power in September 1945 that French- and Japanese-sponsored nationalist and cultural groups had been infiltrated by the Viet Minh.<sup>13</sup> The French arrested many of the leaders of the August demonstrations, but this was not the end of it, for Decoux reports more problems as the political and religious groups tried again unsuccessfully in December to coordinate actions.<sup>14</sup>

(U) In early fall of 1943, Decoux took a series of inspection trips through Cochin, Annam, and Tonkin. In Cochin, he visited the region of Cao Lanh on the Mekong River, which he called a traditional center of communist and nationalist disturbances.<sup>15</sup> He mentioned that he traveled with gunboats which made a "very good impression" on the locals. In all his visits, he was met with demonstrations of loyalty to him and France which he reported to Vichy. He seemed convinced by these displays that the majority of Indochinese were loyal to France. Whatever revolutionary activity there had been was now under control. But doubts about conditions continued. In March 1944, the French embassy in Tokyo would question Decoux's claims of internal peace.<sup>16</sup>

**1944: THE VIET MINH SURGE (U)**

(U) Revolutionary activity resurfaced in Tonkin in December 1943 and February 1944. Decoux reported military clashes on the Tonkin frontier had started. He noted that the revolutionaries involved had been harbored in southern China and were supported by the Chinese. More arrests were made, and other suspects were put under surveillance.<sup>17</sup> That summer, both Cochin and Tonkin saw renewed outbreaks of Viet Minh political activity, mostly propaganda. There was also more plotting by nationalist and the religious sects in Cochin at this time. Decoux mentioned that the arrest and sentencing of the leaders of these particular groups was effective.<sup>18</sup> But it is important to note that Decoux was now distinguishing the Viet Minh from the other groups.<sup>19</sup>

(U) The Japanese also were now more concerned about the communist movement in Indochina. In February 1944, the Greater East Asian Ministry had queried its major diplomatic missions about native communist movements. The Japanese had detected a surge in communist activity throughout its Asian territories and were worried about Soviet and Chinese Communist influence, as well as the effectiveness of anti-Japanese propaganda. Tokyo asked the posts to report on significant communist activity.<sup>20</sup>

(U) In April 1944, Hanoi reported the existence of two groups: the Viet Minh and the Dong Minh Hoi. The Japanese Army also had information about a communist group that had an office on Tientsin Road in Hanoi. This may have been the Indochinese Communist Party which was the core of the Viet Minh political arm. The report goes on to describe how these communists used employees of the French Post and Telegraph Department in an unknown capacity.<sup>21</sup> They issued a regular periodical (possibly the *Viet Lap* or *Independent Viet Nam*) and held regular lectures. The report went on to describe several instances of propaganda leaflets being distributed in rural areas. The Japanese were not certain of the names of the leaders of the communist activity, except for Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh).<sup>22</sup> The Japanese also admitted that the movement had spread (though they didn't say how far) and that it had a definite anti-Japanese flavor to it, as well as the expected anti-French.



Ho Chi Minh

The Japanese added two more points which were significant. The first was that the communists had recovered from the wholesale arrests of their leaders in the Thai Binh region. The other point was the observation that it was difficult to judge what the "real" activities of the communists were since they were masked in the "colors of an independent (sic) movement."<sup>23</sup>

(U) It was in the spring of 1944 that some Viet Minh leaders began planning for a stepped-up campaign of uprisings in Tonkin. Ho, returning from Jingxi with Vo Nguyen Giap, managed to persuade the Viet Minh to delay the attacks as premature, favoring a continued program of political preparation.<sup>24</sup> However, events soon outran the Viet Minh plans.

(U) In early November 1944 a rebellion broke out in two provinces north of Hanoi, Thai Nguyen and Tuyen Quang, as peasants revolted against French economic policies that were exacerbating a famine. French rice agents were gouging them with unfavorable, compulsory rates of exchange, laborers were being charged fees to work, and much of the crop was being expropriated for the Japanese. The famine-like conditions, which had existed for nearly a year, had intensified. A drier-than-usual rainy season followed by a colder-than-average winter had seriously reduced the rice harvest in Tonkin. Japanese agricultural policy in Tonkin had supplanted rice-growing acreage for industrial crops such as flax, jute, and castor beans. Another factor was the Allied air campaign that had destroyed all north-south heavy transport and effectively cut Tonkin and Annam from the "rice baskets" of Cochin, Cambodia, and Thailand. This famine would intensify and by March 1945 would claim the lives of over 1,000 Vietnamese a day, at least by Japanese estimates.<sup>25</sup> By summer of 1945, maybe as many as 1 million Vietnamese in Tonkin and northern Annam had perished in the famine, though the Viet Minh claimed over 2 million deaths, while the French estimated 600,000 had perished.<sup>26</sup>

(U) The Japanese reported that the Viet Minh were involved with the rioting that had preceded the uprising. About 6-7,000 people were fighting the French using captured arms, though the Japanese said that only pistols and homemade lance-swords were evident. The French initially committed a battalion of Foreign Legionnaires to put down the revolt, but they soon had to dispatch two more battalions from Hanoi backed by artillery and tanks. The rebels reacted to the overwhelming French military force by dispersing into the jungles. The French were hampered by desertions by native troops who had been influenced by Viet Minh propaganda.<sup>27</sup> The Japanese thought it would take the French three to five months to put down the revolt.<sup>28</sup> They reported that this revolt had made a strong impression on Vietnamese nationalists in Hanoi and that Decoux himself had arrived in the area to oversee efforts. The Japanese, interestingly, also reported to Tokyo that the French had been reluctant to discuss the revolt with them, possibly fearful of Japanese intervention.<sup>29</sup>

(U) By February 1945 this revolt had spent itself. The Japanese reported that the villagers were coming out of the hills because of lack of food and the cold weather. Some

pockets continued to resist, but the French had been successful in isolating them by blocking avenues of retreat, then waiting for starvation to set in.<sup>30</sup>

(U) This revolt is interesting since it doesn't appear in either French or Viet Minh histories. Viet Minh mythology places the beginnings of Giap's military successes to this time and place - December 1944 attacks on two French outposts. It could be that this revolt began spontaneously and that the Viet Minh joined in. With its failure, the Viet Minh could disassociate themselves from it. However, the Japanese claimed that peasants who were members of the Viet Minh took part in the rioting.<sup>31</sup> Devillers, in his history, suggests that it was a purely a military campaign which began on 8 November.<sup>32</sup> The omission of the peasants' role and the famine by both is interesting.

#### 1945: THE VIET MINH TAKE OVER (U)

(U) But if the Tonkin revolt had failed, the Viet Minh were now a major factor in the future political calculations of Indochina. In a February 1945 political assessment sent to Tokyo, Japanese diplomats in Saigon concluded that the Viet Minh had become a serious political influence in the Tonkin region. The Viet Minh were pushing a concurrent anti-French and Japanese line demanding independence. Such was the Viet Minh influence that during the planning for the March coup de main in Indochina, Japanese diplomats in Saigon and Hanoi argued that the Viet Minh agitation for independence necessitated a similar Japanese platform to forestall them; otherwise, the "communists would have excellent material for popular agitation."<sup>33</sup> The Japanese also counseled surveillance of the Viet Minh "Armed Propaganda units" and self-defense units which were organizing in both cities and the countryside.<sup>34</sup>

(U) The Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 caught the Viet Minh by surprise. But if the Japanese thought the removal of the French would win over the Viet Minh, they were soon disabused of that notion. The Viet Minh publicly objected to the Japanese coup, seeing it as a substitution of one colonial master for another. The Japanese viewed the Viet Minh dissatisfaction as sour grapes at being left out of the action.<sup>35</sup> The investiture of Bao Dai in Hue and the cabinet under Pham Quynh was greeted by opposition, public meetings, and demonstrations in Hanoi organized partly by the Viet Minh. So serious was this opposition that Bao Dai dissolved his cabinet on 19 March and installed a new one under Tran Trong Kim, an academic of modest nationalist tendencies with no stomach for the snakepit of Indochinese politics.<sup>36</sup>

(U) What about the French? For the most part, French forces were disarmed and interned by the Japanese within a day of the coup. On the Tonkin frontier and in Laos, French posts were overrun or the units manning them retreated. Ironically, an effort was made to rally troops at Dien Bien Phu. But Japanese pressure was so great that this plan was abandoned. About 4,000 survivors struggled into China to sit out the war. During this retreat, French units were harassed by local inhabitants and deserted or were



(U) French colonial troops retreating into southern China, March 1945

attacked by their local levies. The Japanese even offered some Vietnamese guerrilla units a bounty for French troops. It is not evident from any of the COMINT that the Viet Minh were involved in the latter.<sup>37</sup>

(U) With the disappearance of French forces, the field was left to the Viet Minh. It was shortly after this that the first American OSS team reached the Viet Minh. The Americans brought weapons and equipment. They trained the Viet Minh in small arms and tactics; a number were trained to intercept Japanese communications.<sup>38</sup> However, this was not the first time American intelligence had worked with the Viet Minh. In April 1944, U.S. Navy cryptologic personnel outside Chungking trained Vietnamese as radio intercept operators.<sup>39</sup>

(U) Military operations by the Viet Minh increased in tempo and audacity through the spring and summer of 1945. Viet Minh units in Tonkin so intimidated local native security units that they would surrender their weapons to the Viet Minh when attacked. The puppet premier Tran would complain to the Japanese in July that supplying these units was as good as supplying the Viet Minh.<sup>40</sup>

(U) In June, the Japanese twenty-first Division struck at Viet Minh units and bases in Thai Nguyen and Bac Thai provinces while security police made large-scale arrests in Hanoi, Haiphong, and other cities. Military operations were made against Viet Minh supply lines and bases. The police sweeps picked up about 300 suspects, but the Japanese admitted that they caught few leaders because of sympathetic Vietnamese and the "crafty" organization of the Viet Minh.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, the Japanese would arrest 2,000 Viet Minh suspects, and more military units would be committed to border regions to seal off infiltrators.<sup>42</sup>

(U) The fighting between the Japanese and Viet Minh was not much more than small unit skirmishes. A good example of a rare "major" action was the Viet Minh strike at Tam Dao in Tonkin on 19 July. Contrary to Bernard Fall, this was not just a small police station.<sup>43</sup> Tam Dao was also an internment camp for French civilians. About 500 Viet Minh attacked and massacred around 50 Japanese troops and civilian officials. The Viet Minh split the French civilians into three groups and managed to escort some of them to the Chinese border and safety.<sup>44</sup>

(U) The Viet Minh continued to exploit the ongoing famine; it would become the engine of their popularity among the Tonkin peasants. They seized warehouses that held rice for the Japanese and distributed it to the starving peasants.<sup>45</sup> Rural agents were replaced with "people's committees" and were backed by locally raised peasants units. Rice supplies were now a matter of life and death, and most peasants were unable to afford rice, which had risen in price 1,000 percent since March.<sup>46</sup>

(U) The sudden surrender of the Japanese forced the Viet Minh to accelerate their plans. Fearful of a French return, they moved quickly to seize power. At a party congress in Tan Trao from 13-15 August, Ho and the other Viet Minh established a National



(U) Vo Nguyen Giap addressing Armed Propaganda Unit, 1945

Liberation Committee to oversee taking power. Within two days of the Japanese acceptance of the Potsdam declaration, the Viet Minh began to take power in the cities of Indochina. In Hanoi, a Political Action Committee was formed to facilitate cooperation with Bao Dai's government.<sup>47</sup> By 23 August, Hue was solidly Viet Minh, as was Saigon, where the Executive Committee of the South Vietnam Republic was established. The Viet Minh seized the government buildings in Hanoi on the 19th. On 25 August, Bao Dai abdicated and turned over his seal to representatives of the newly proclaimed Provisional Government of the Republic of Vietnam. Although swift, the Viet Minh seizure wasn't always smooth. The political vacuum created by the Japanese surrender had spawned serious problems with public order in the cities, while some Japanese units were still fighting the Viet Minh in Tonkin.<sup>48</sup> Most Japanese soldiers and diplomats remained neutral and kept government functions and weapons out of Viet Minh hands, though some local Japanese commanders, sympathetic to Vietnamese independence, sold weapons to them.<sup>49</sup> The Japanese Army, for the most part, agreed to help the Viet Minh keep order. By the end of August, the Japanese reported that there were few reports of attacks against foreigners.<sup>50</sup>

(U) The Viet Minh soon embarked on a "de-Frenchification" program. They blacked out road signs in French and destroyed statues of prominent Frenchmen.<sup>51</sup> French troops and specialists arriving with Allied teams were being singled out, disarmed, and confined, usually for their own safety, as the Viet Minh explained. The OSS team that arrived in Hanoi by plane on the 22nd had five Frenchmen who were arrested as soon as they got off, though not before the news of their arrival caused the local French population to celebrate.<sup>52</sup> The Viet Minh, conscious of a French return, intensified their nationalist propaganda campaign and arranged mass meetings. Hanoi was festooned with anti-French and pro-Allied placards and posters. Behind the scenes, the Viet Minh arrested prominent Frenchmen, and gunfire was heard in the streets at night. The Viet Minh flag – a yellow star on a red background – flew over the cities of Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina. The tricolor was nowhere to be seen.

(U) On 23 August, the Allies announced the occupation of Indochina. The demarcation line was the 16th parallel, with the British in the south and the Nationalist Chinese in the north. On 2 September, the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh. In Saigon, the Viet Minh arranged an independence rally to coincide with the arrival of the Allied occupation commander, British General Douglas Gracey. The Southern Committee staged a parade of Viet Minh troops during the late afternoon which, according to the Japanese, led to several incidents with local Frenchmen. The Japanese police were called in to quell the disturbances, but not before 2 Frenchmen and 20 Vietnamese were dead and another 143 injured. Throughout the city, Frenchmen suspected of concealing arms were arrested.<sup>53</sup> The Japanese were uncertain if the rioting was deliberately incited by the Viet Minh or the French, who might be seeking Allied intervention. In any event, Gracey ordered the Japanese to restore order and disperse the Viet Minh. Some units were disarmed and the Frenchmen released. The city was treated to the sight of French, British, and Japanese

troops jointly attacking Viet Minh strongholds in the Saigon area. By 14 September a quiet had fallen over the city, but the Japanese on the scene foresaw trouble because of the anti-French feelings of the Vietnamese.<sup>54</sup>

(U) In Hanoi things went much smoother, mostly because French troops were still in prison camps, and the advance units of the Chinese occupation had not arrived. To a huge crowd of 500,000, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam. By the middle of September, the Japanese reported that the Viet Minh government had achieved "good form" and that liaison with them was improving.<sup>55</sup> But the Chinese forces were soon to arrive, and, in the background, the French already were negotiating with Chiang Kai Shek for their return to Tonkin.

### CONCLUSIONS AND AFTERMATH (U)

(U) From this brief history, we can see certain aspects that run counter to the conventional view of the Viet Minh during World War II. For one thing, the tempo of Viet Minh activity during the war was far more sustained and dynamic than is commonly held. Far from being holed up in Tonkin and southern China bastions during the war, the Viet Minh were much more active from at least 1942 onwards, if French efforts to suppress them are any indication. By early 1944, the Viet Minh had become one of two preeminent opposition groups in Indochina. But the Japanese observed that the Viet Minh were far more resilient and were capable of operating under nationalist colors.

(U) By 1945, the Viet Minh had eclipsed all other Indochinese opposition groups. Japanese intercepts emphasize the political preeminence of the Viet Minh everywhere; in the streets and fields, the Viet Minh were organized and prepared to take over after the Japanese surrender. Of course, there were other Indochinese groups, mostly nationalists, but they were never able to marshal the public demonstrations or organize the Vietnamese population in anywhere near the numbers the Viet Minh could.

(U) During the war, the range of the Viet Minh activity was far larger geographically than typically portrayed. Southern Vietnam, especially the Saigon area and pockets in the Mekong Delta region, were centers of communist activity, requiring intervention by French security and military forces. At the same time, the Viet Minh carried on propaganda and subversive activities within the major cities of Saigon, Hanoi, and Haiphong. The speed at which these and other urban centers, especially Hue, were taken over suggests a much longer involvement in urban affairs, contrary to the popular agrarian-only image.

(U) The Viet Minh also appear to have been willing to cooperate in some fashion with other resistance groups. Aside from the formal union under the Dong Minh Hoi, the Viet Minh worked with other groups, especially in the Saigon region of Cochin, on an ad hoc basis. In late 1943 and early 1944, the Viet Minh worked with nationalist/religious groups fermenting anti-French agitation. It is probable that this cooperation was fragile; in 1945, the Viet Minh efforts to organize a provisional government in Saigon was far more a

case of accommodating other nationalist (and Trotskyite) groups in a coalition government than was the case in Hanoi. Although the Viet Minh were a powerful group in Cochín, they hardly dominated as in Tonkin.

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(U) In the end it is fair to ask if the intelligence on the Viet Minh position in Indochina that was garnered from COMINT ever influenced the policymakers in Washington. Sadly, the answer has to be "no." It was not for a lack of intelligence; over 100 COMINT translations exist documenting Viet Minh and other Indochinese nationalist activity. Many of these translations were digested in about three dozen Magic Diplomatic and Far East Summaries and the Pacific Strategic Intelligence Studies. These Summaries were distributed to secondary levels in the executive branch, and many items concerning Indochina would be included in White House briefs.<sup>56</sup>

(U) Yet the intelligence probably never made an impression at the highest levels. For one, President Roosevelt generally ignored the COMINT he received.<sup>57</sup> In a notable incident in February 1944, Chief of Staff General George Marshall specifically had to remind FDR of COMINT's usefulness.

(U) Roosevelt's policy regarding Indochina developed from his anticolonial notions.<sup>58</sup> The French position in Indochina was untenable. The French had exploited the region and had done nothing to improve it. The French administration (Decoux) had cravenly caved in to Japanese demands in 1940 and 1941. The U.S. would do nothing to restore French rule. FDR envisioned a trusteeship status for Indochina, but this was always a vague notion, one quickly dropped for fear of irritating Churchill. Whatever plans about Indochina that Roosevelt held, they never included the Viet Minh (or any nationalist) aspirations for independence.

(U) At the very least, FDR would not help the French return. When the Japanese removed the French from power in March 1945, the American command in China refused to heed all the French pleas to help the retreating columns. For two weeks, the American command claimed that its local military resources were committed to ongoing operations. They also claimed that there was no guidance from Washington, much to the growing chagrin of the French.<sup>59</sup>

(U) After FDR's death, American policy swung towards the French position, mostly out of a regard for France's role in postwar Europe. In late May 1945, barely after the last stragglers from Indochina had reached sanctuaries in southern China, the French Foreign Ministry triumphantly informed its ambassador in Chungking that the American State Department "never doubted" that the French would automatically reestablish its sovereignty over Indochina.<sup>60</sup> The French would successfully fight off efforts to deny its control over those colonies at the UN Conference in San Francisco.<sup>61</sup>

(U) Ultimately, all the intelligence derived from COMINT and other sources, such as the OSS, that documented the opposition that French would face when they returned to

Indochina was ignored. Similarly, pleas by Ho Chi Minh and Emperor Bao Dai to Truman, Charles De Gaulle, Stalin, and British prime minister Atlee to forestall the French return went unanswered.<sup>62</sup> All the auguries of the ensuing tragedy were ignored.

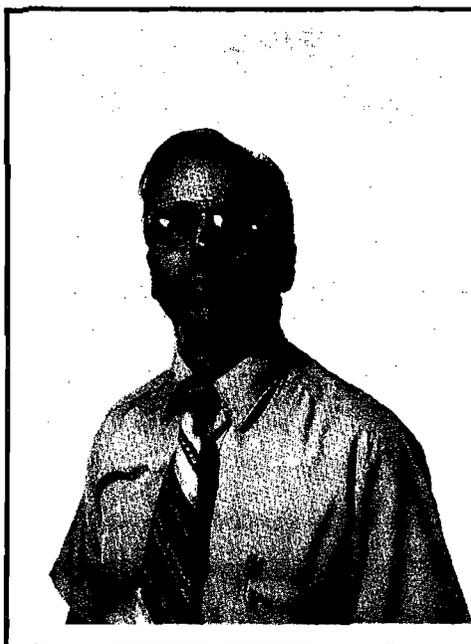
### Notes (U)

1. (U) National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group (RG) 457; H-127035, Hanoi to Tokyo, 9 June 1944; H-126733. Tokyo to Vichy, 15 June 1944.
2. (U) Ronald Spector, *The United States Army in Vietnam, Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-60*. Washington, D.C. Center for Military History, United States Army: 1986, 182.
3. (U) RG 457. H-12748, Saigon to Tokyo, 30 November 1940.
4. (U) RG 457. H-141378, Hanoi to Vichy, 26 September 1941.
5. (U) RG 457. H-21053, Shanghai to Net, 11 August 1940.
6. (U) RG 457. H-34531, Hanoi to Tokyo, 27 April 1942.
7. (U) RG 457. H-33697, Hanoi to Vichy, 14 April 1942.
8. (U) RG 457. H-50167, Tokyo to Vichy, 26 September 1942.
9. (U) Spector, 38.
10. (U) RG 457. H-33127, Hanoi to Nanking, 24 March 1943; H-60067, Hanoi to Tokyo, 18 December 1942, inter alia.
11. (U) RG 457. H-117052, Hanoi to Vichy, 24 March 1944.
12. (U) RG 457. H-102586, Dalat to Vichy, 23 August 1943.
13. (U) Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*. Stanford University Press, 1954, 100, and James Pinckney Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam*. The Free Press, 1982, 86.
14. (U) RG 457. H-107368, Hanoi to Vichy, 24 December 1943.
15. (U) RG 457. H-101596, Dalat to Vichy, 25 September 1943.
16. (U) RG 457. H-116185, Tokyo to Hanoi, 24 March 1944.
17. (U) RG 457. SRDJ-14414, Hanoi to Vichy, 18 February 1944.
18. (U) RG 457. H-125508, Dalat to Vichy, 27 May 1944.
19. (U) RG 457. H-131994, Hanoi to Vichy, 4 July 1944.
20. (U) RG 457. H-112150, Tokyo to Hanoi, February (no day), 1944.
21. (U) RG 457. H-122721, Hanoi to Tokyo, 10 April 1944.
22. (U) RG 457. H-120829, Hanoi to Tokyo, 6 April 1944.

23. (U) Ibid.
24. (U) Harrison, 90.
25. (U) RG 457. H-172278, Hanoi to Tokyo, 3 March 1945.
26. (U) Hammer, 145-6.
27. (U) Philippe Devillers, *Histoire Du Viet-Nam de 1940 a '1952*. Paris Editions Du Seui: 1952, 112
28. (U) RG 457. H-153918, Hanoi to Tokyo, 25 November 1944.
29. (U) RG 457. H-166336, Hanoi to Tokyo, 4 December 1944.
30. (U) RG 457. H-166872, Hanoi to Tokyo, 12 February 1945.
31. (U) RG 457. H-153918, Hanoi to Tokyo, 25 November 1944.
32. (U) Devillers, 112
33. (U) RG 457. H-166960, Saigon to Tokyo, 6 February 1945.
34. (U) Ibid.
35. (U) RG 457. H-175696, Hanoi to Tokyo, 31 March 1945.
36. (U) RG 457. H-178505, Tokyo Circular, 14 April 1945.
37. (U) RG 457. H-180015, Paris to Washington, 24 April 1945.
38. (U) Spector, 42
39. (U) John M. Quesenberry, "Personal Reminiscences of an Intercept Operator," *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol 15, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 1994), 64.
40. (U) RG 457, H-199160, Hanoi to Tokyo, 26 July 1945.
41. (U) RG 457. H-196322, Hanoi (via Saigon) to Tokyo, 7 July 1945.
42. (U) RG 457. J-99801A-C, Hanoi to Hankow, 11 July 1945; J99802A-C, Hanoi to Saigon, 13 July 1945; J-99795A-C, E, Hanoi to Saigon, 18 July 1945.
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44. (U) RG 457. H-201111, Chungking to Paris, 10 August 1945.
45. (U) RG 457. H-196458, Hanoi to Tokyo, 9 June 1945.
46. (U) RG 457. H-187655, Chungking to Paris, 29 May 1945.
47. (U) RG 457. H-202459, Hanoi to Hue, 19 August 1945.
48. (U) RG 457. H-203052, Saigon to Hue, 24 August 1945.
49. (U) RG 457. H-204846, Hanoi to Tokyo, 5 September 1945.
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51. (U) Ibid.
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53. (U) RG 457. H-205974, Saigon to Tokyo, 8 September 1945.
54. (U) RG 457. H-206382, Saigon to Tokyo, 16 September 1945.
55. (U) RG 457. H-206585, Hanoi to Tokyo, 14 September 1945.
56. (U) RG 457. SRH-111, *MAGIC Reports for the Attention of the President, 1943-44*, 1980, 24, 29.
57. (U) Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*. Harper Collins Publishers, 1995, 126.
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60. (U) RG 457. H-186840, Paris to Chungking, 24 May 1945.
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