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Module 1 Learning Objectives

- Understand the relationship between Vietnam and foreign colonizers.
- Identify why the United States helped assist France in Vietnam after WWII.
- Recognize the role of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnamese independence.
- Identify the motivations for increasing American involvement in Vietnam.
- Understand the role of American advisors in Vietnam.

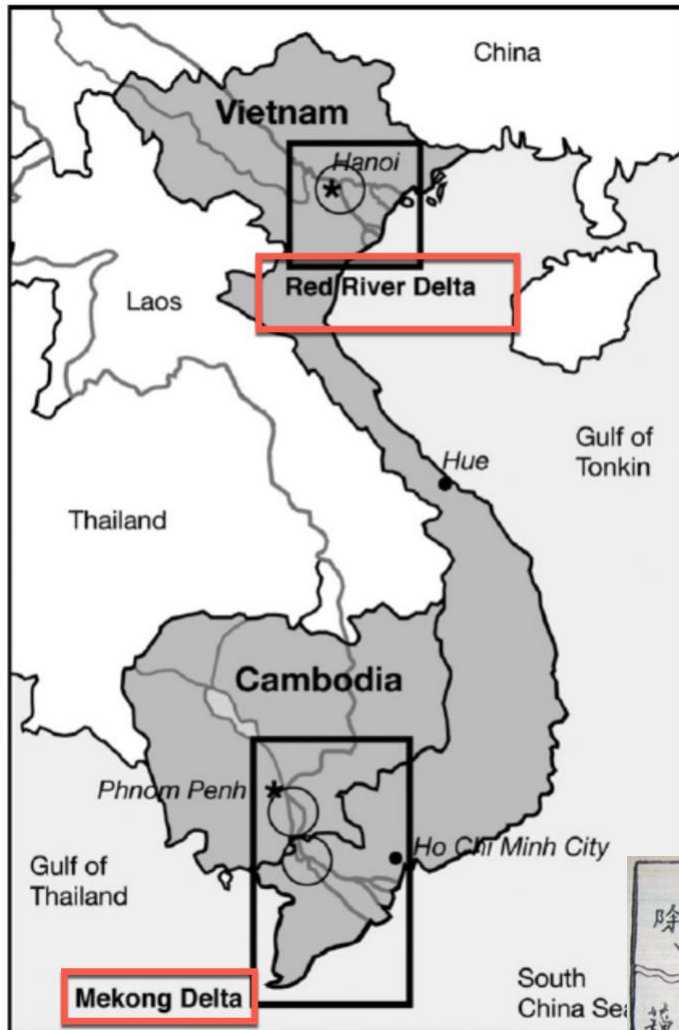
A Brief History of Foreign Invaders in Vietnam

There are two major river deltas in Vietnam – the Mekong River Delta and Red River Delta. The earliest inhabitants in Vietnam are traced back to approximately 10,000 years ago on the Red River Delta. These were small communities that cultivated rice as a staple crop. Around 800 – 200 BCE, a Bronze Age culture emerged that is referred to



as the Dong Son. These peoples used bronze to make ritual drums carved with scenes of their daily lives, such as boats, farming, music, and animals. A rich culture was flourishing in the country.

However, by the early Second Century AD, members of the deposed Chinese Qin Dynasty began to settle in Northern Vietnam after the Han Dynasty rose to power. They brought with them technology, Chinese culture, and the Chinese language – all of which had deep impacts on Vietnam. These new additions to North Vietnam intermarried with the local population, leaving a lasting legacy. The Han Dynasty wanted to gain Vietnam as a vassal state and soon began to govern the country directly with the goal of assimilating the Vietnamese people and absorbing them into their empire. This had long lasting significance for Vietnamese culture as local elites adopted Chinese culture – they attended Chinese schools, learned the language, studied Chinese philosophy and took the Chinese Civil Service exams to be a part of the bureaucracy. Vietnamese farmers benefited from Chinese agricultural practices such as irrigation, and increased the production of Vietnam agriculture. The Vietnamese adopted Chinese political and



military organization as well as parts of Chinese religions, including the practice of ancestor worship which has remained a key practice in modern day Vietnamese culture.

Despite the benefits the Vietnamese gained by adopting Chinese cultural practices, there was the fear of a loss of Vietnamese cultural identity. For example, the Chinese administrators demonstrated a disdain for Vietnamese traditions, which led to resentment. Also, Vietnamese women were used to playing a role in the agricultural economy, and

compared to their Chinese female counterparts, they enjoyed more freedom in society. Some Vietnamese women came to resent the Chinese views on women which confined them to the home and placed them below men in the social order. Farmers resented Chinese landlords who became wealthy on the Vietnamese land. Eventually, the Vietnamese began to rebel against Chinese rule beginning in 39 CE (common era) with the Trong Sisters Rebellion.



The Trong Sisters were the daughters of a local leader deposed by the Chinese. They united the local Vietnamese against the Chinese and one of the sisters declared herself



queen and ruled for three years. According to Chinese sources, the Trong Sisters were defeated by the Chinese in 42 CE, but according to Vietnamese sources, the sisters chose to drown themselves rather than surrender to the Chinese. But either way, their rebellion was put down but showed that the seeds of rebellion against foreign powers had been planted.

The Vietnamese eventually are successful in expelling the Chinese through the Ngo Quyen rebellion in 939 CE. During this time, the Tang Dynasty in China fell and political chaos ensued. Ngo Quyen led a successful rebellion against the Chinese army and installed himself as king. He died within five years, leading to more unrest in the country. However, the Chinese weren't able to consolidate their power in Vietnam, but their influence remained a large part of Vietnamese culture.

French Colonization

During the 16th and 17th centuries, French missionaries arrived in Vietnam and by 1862 the French had taken over Cochin China. By the mid-1880s, they had control over Tonkin and Annam.



The purpose for the French in colonizing the area was economically motivated, in the sense that they exported natural resources from the region. This was during a period when powerful European nations were colonizing African and Asian countries for their own economic benefit. This fundamentally changed Vietnamese society and created a divide between the rural and urban populations, and also resulted in political repression of the local Vietnamese population.

Vietnamese Nationalist Movement

Beginning after French colonization, a Vietnamese nationalist movement emerged under Phan Boi Chau and the “Vietnamese Modernization Association.” The goal was to modernize the nation, gain independence from the French, and create a Vietnamese republic. Initially he sought help from the Japanese and then the Chinese after their revolution in 1911, but ultimately he was jailed by the French and died while under house arrest. While his



movement was not successful, it paved the way for a later nationalist movement under Ho Chi Minh that grew more active after WWI.

During WWI, the French increased taxes on the Vietnamese to help pay for the war, which led to unrest. After the war, a young Ho Chi Minh hoped to seek help from President Woodrow Wilson and the US at the Versailles conference in France in 1919. Part of Wilson's platform at the conference was one of allowing countries self determination, which led Ho to think the US might help expel the French from Vietnam. This help never came, but while he was in Europe, he was inspired by Vladimir Lenin and joined the French Communist Party in 1920. In 1930 Ho formed the Indochinese Communist Party with the base of their support in the peasant population. Many historians believe that if Wilson had assisted Ho at this time, then Ho would not have not created the Indochinese Communist Party and would have unified Vietnam under a western style capitalist government.



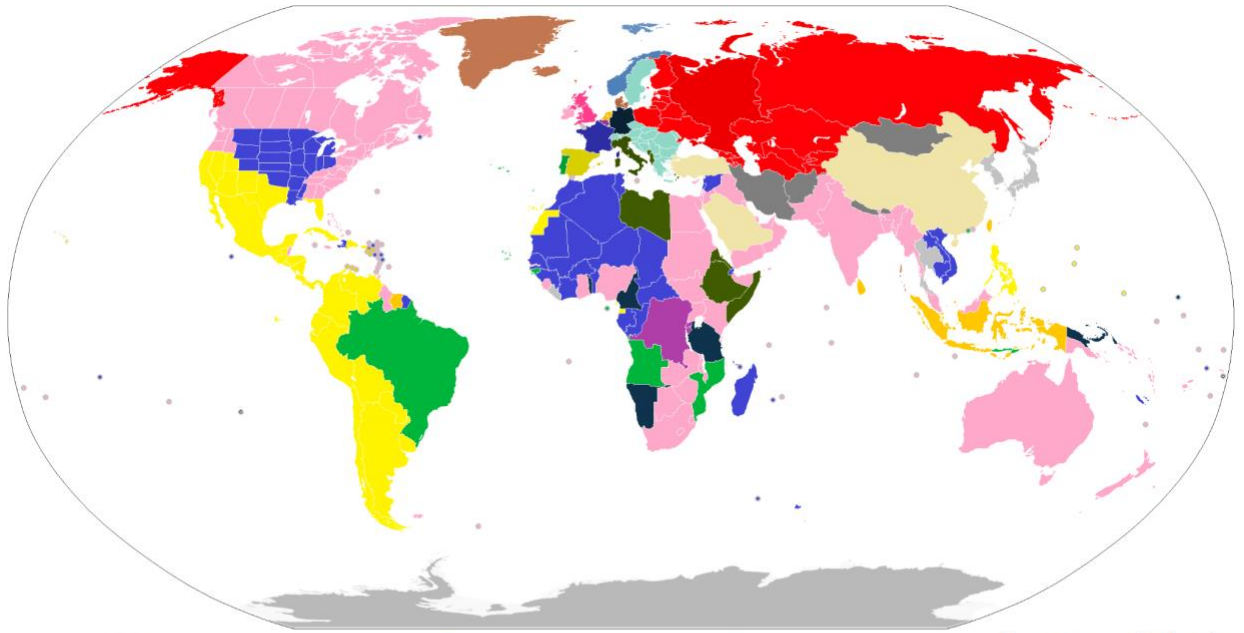
Vietnam During WWII

During WWII, France was occupied by the German army but part of the French government collaborated with the Germans and this was referred to as the Vichy French government (the legitimate French government operated out of London). The French colonists in Vietnam were loyal to the Vichy government. In 1940, Germany, Japan, and Italy signed the Tripartite Pact as a defensive treaty. In this pact, Japan was given landing rights to Vietnam by the Germans. Japan occupied Indochina beginning in 1941 as this was a prime strategic location for the Japanese war in the Pacific. In response to the Japanese occupation, Ho created the Viet Minh – a nationalist organization. As war began to come to a close, Ho hoped that the end of the war would finally signal Vietnamese independence. In fact, the Viet Minh and Ho agreed to help the US in the last days of the war against Japan.



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt even indicated that he was open to Vietnamese independence. But FDR died in April 1945 and Harry Truman succeeded FDR as President and Truman did not hold the same views as FDR about Vietnamese independence. In 1946, Ho Chi Minh declared independence for Vietnam and you will have the opportunity to read this declaration in the primary source analysis activity later in this module.

Watch this video clip from the film "[Vietnam: A Television History, Part 1](#)" about the last days of WWII, Ho Chi Minh's assistance to the United States at the end of WWII, and the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence. The video begins at the 18:21 mark with FDR and watch through the 25:25 minute mark (but feel free to watch as much of the video as you want!). One thing to keep in mind about the First Indochina War – this was a war between the Viet Minh and France as the French were desperately trying to keep hold of their colony in the wake of WWII. After WWII, most European powers lost their colonial holdings. This map shows the areas of the world colonized by Europeans. In the two decades after WWII, most colonies reverted back to home rule as European economies were devastated by WWII and they could not afford to rule their former colonies.



- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| Europe | Dutch Colony | German Colony |
| English/British Empire | Danish Colony | Italian Colony |
| French Colony | Norwegian Colony | Partial European Control |
| Spanish Colony | Russian Empire | European Sphere of Influence |
| Portuguese Colony | Belgian Colony | Never Colonized by Europe |

European Colonies
of the World

The French were no exception - they could not afford a war in Vietnam and so the United States paid approximately 80 percent of the French military budget for this war. The US did not send ground troops to assist the French, but were still heavily involved because of US economic aid to the French. You might be asking why the United States assisted in the French war effort, even at a time when other countries were decolonizing? Great question! The answer is due to the Cold War which began immediately after WWII. [Click here to read a bit more about the Cold War](#). France was severely weakened after WWII - economically and politically. The French Communist Party grew stronger after WWII and the United States feared that if the French continued to weaken, then they could be drawn into the Soviet sphere of communism. Ultimately, the Truman administration felt that helping France in Vietnam would help stop the spread of communism in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia.



The end of French Involvement

As noted earlier, the French fought the Vietnamese after WWII in an attempt to maintain their colonial holdings, in the years after WWII when many European countries lost their colonies. The United States assisted the French with military and economic aid beginning in 1946. But things ultimately did not go well for the French over the next eight years. The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was a major battle in which the Viet Minh defeated the French from March – May 1954 and signaled the end of the First Indochina war. During the battle, major world powers such as the US, Soviet Union, China, France, and Great Britain met in Geneva to try and resolve current problems in Asia. This conference marked a turning point in United States involvement in Vietnam and eventually led to the United States entrenchment in Vietnam by the 1960s.

The French public were weary of the war in Vietnam – it was a money drain and there was a lack of public opinion to support the war. At the same time, the United States feared that the Viet Minh would spread communism throughout Southeast Asia using [the Domino Theory as their reasoning](#). Keep in mind that the Cold War began right after WWII and the United States foreign policy was of containment – meaning containing communism where it already existed. So it makes sense that the US did not want the Viet Minh to spread communism throughout the country or the entire region.

Some key stipulations from the Geneva Accords were:

- The French agreed to withdraw their troops from Northern Vietnam
- Vietnam was split at the 17th parallel
- The country would remain split until free elections to be held in 1956
- The elections were supposed to unite the country and choose a president
- During the two years until the election, no foreign troops were allowed to enter the country

- The South Vietnamese government under Emperor Bao Dai and the United States did not sign the accords but signaled their commitment to abide by the agreement.



The issue at hand was that US officials feared free elections as they knew that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were quite popular and would win the elections - then the entire country would become communist. So the United States responded by establishing an anti-communist government in South Vietnam – the idea was that if the entire country couldn't be saved from communism, then at least South Vietnam could be. The United States provided financial and

military assistance to the South Vietnamese government – signaling that the US was yet another step closer to full on war in Vietnam.

From the end of the Geneva Conference through 1961, the United States concentrated on supporting the South Vietnamese government and military through economic aid and sending US military advisors to train the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN – Army of the Republic of South Vietnam). The idea was that eventually the South Vietnamese government would be strong enough one day to stand on their own against Communist expansion. Part of this was replacing Emperor Bao Dai with a new South Vietnamese President – Ngo Dinh Diem.

Diem was a Catholic and was staunchly anti-Communist. However, he proved to be an ineffective leader. As a Catholic, he persecuted the largely Buddhist population in South Vietnam and was known to give political positions to family members. In other words – he was not popular





with the people of South Vietnam and was never able to effectively lead the country without assistance from the United States. More importantly, Diem blocked the elections that were supposed to happen in 1956 by claiming the North Vietnamese had violated the Geneva Accords so he therefore was not obligated to hold elections. This is significant on two levels – one it signaled war between the Viet Minh in North Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh and the South Vietnamese government, but it also meant that Vietnam would be split in two until 1975 and the fall of Saigon.

Another important event – in January 1959, the North Vietnamese Communist Party decided to support an armed rebellion in South Vietnam. They created the National Liberation Front (NLF) which was the political wing of the North Vietnamese Communist Party that would operate in the south to try and overthrow the Diem government. The military wing of the NLF is known as the Viet Cong (stands for Vietnamese Communists)

The Role of American Advisors in Vietnam

Even before the French loss at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the United States was sending advisors to Vietnam, to help with overseeing the provided aid and then also training South Vietnamese soldiers. As time marched on, the Truman presidency ended, the Eisenhower presidency began in 1952, and the Kennedy presidency began in 1960, while increasing numbers of advisors continued to arrive in Vietnam. [Click here to read a brief article about the use of advisors in Vietnam.](#) Then, [click here to listen to Army Veteran, Caesar Smith, describing the role of military advisors in Vietnam in the 1960s.](#)

Political Unrest

As the 1950s ended and the 1960s were ushered in, the United States continued to support South Vietnam and President Diem. John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960 and took office in January 1961 and his administration had several Cold War issues to worry about - including the [Bay of Pigs incident](#), [the Cuban Missile Crisis](#), and

the increasingly difficult position in Vietnam. November 1963 was a pivotal month in the conflict, as two political leaders were assassinated. First, on November 1, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother were assassinated in a coup in Vietnam. [Click here to read more about the coup that toppled the Diem government.](#) A few weeks later, on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, TX. His Vice-President, Lyndon Baines Johnson was sworn in as president shortly after Kennedy's death.



Module 1 Summary

- The Vietnamese have a long history of resisting foreign colonization from China, France, and Japan during WWII.
- Ho Chi Minh wanted to see the Vietnamese have self-determination regarding their rule and announced Vietnam's independence in September 1946.
- Despite this declaration, France fought Vietnam until their loss in 1954 in an attempt to keep their colonial holdings after WWII.
- After the French loss, the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel until elections in 1956 to unify the country.
- Elections were never held and the country remained divided with South Vietnam led by Ngo Dinh Diem and North Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh.
- The United States sent advisors to assist South Vietnam during the 1950s and early 1960s.
- Kennedy and Diem were both assassinated in November 1963.



What's Next?

- Complete the Module 1 Primary Source Analysis Activity.
- Complete the Module 1 Knowledge Check.
- In Module 2, you will learn about increasing American involvement in Vietnam, including the first use of ground troops.

Here are some acronyms you will see throughout the instructional unit, in readings, and in videos.

NVA – North Vietnamese Army under Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap

NLF – National Liberation Front. Political wing of the NVA and NVCP that operated in the south to support armed rebellion against the South Vietnamese government

VC – Viet Cong (Vietnamese communists). The guerilla fighters that were the military wing of the NLF

ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam (AKA: The South Vietnamese Army)

DRV – Democratic Republic of Vietnam (AKA: North Vietnam)

Republic of Vietnam – AKA: South Vietnam

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