

The French in Vietnam, cont'd
Lecture No. 0015 (February 20, 1974)

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Preliminary remarks

My exercise for the week: about fifty people talk to me by the time I leave my automobile until I get to my office and down here. And it's at that point that I try to get into a train of thought, so that at least ten minutes I've been thinking about my subject. So when it gets peculiar... I couldn't get to my office. I just stopped on the stairs because of somebody who was bigger than I.

Lecture

Now, we've made a number of observations. I think three rather important observations about the modality of French imperialism in Southeast Asia. And it seems to me rather important to keep those observations in mind. In the first place, of course, because it helps us to provide a framework for understanding why it was, and for what purposes, the Vietnamese people mounted such a fantastic political and social struggle after 1945, first against the French and then against the Americans. And we must try to keep the observations we tried to develop rather carefully in mind, but for a rather larger purpose also, and for something rather more important. And that is because the case in Vietnam, and what we say about French imperialism in Vietnam, really reveals to us something about the larger phenomenon of imperialism: tells us, if you please, something about what happens to societies and economies whenever they become hostage to the imperatives of Western capitalism, and whenever peoples of the Third World become hostage of the racism of the West. All of those things, it seems to me, are inscribed in three very important observations about French imperialism in Indochina.

In the first place, of course, that there was on the part of the French imperialists — whether we're talking about policymakers back in Paris, politicians who make the laws for Indochina, or whether we're talking about administrators in the colony itself, or whether we're talking about those *colons*, those French colonists and investors who are on the scene and are really exploiting the riches of that colony — that French imperialists had no interest at all in the development of Indochina. And what we mean by development in this sense, quite obviously, doesn't mean, surely, the statistics on economic growth. What it means is a rational exploitation and growth of the economy, and it means a distribution of the rewards and the benefits of that growth to the population itself. In other words, what we mean when we talk about development is something very social and very human. It means the shoring up and the buttressing of the power of peoples.

And when we say that the French imperialists had no interest in development, we mean, in a sense, that there was systematic underdevelopment in Indochina. Something that, it seems to me, we can demonstrate in a number of ways.

First of all, and quite crucially, in terms of what I call the deindustrialization of Indochina and, especially of Vietnam. Deindustrialization which we can define in two ways: in terms of the destruction of what had been the indigenous artisan crafts of that particular people — just as you get that destruction in so many of the colonial situations in the period of the twentieth century — and that, of course, because there was to be no competition to the French industrial goods sent into the colony, because there was actual administrative fiat that prevented the Vietnamese people from carrying on their crafts.

But we mean something more important than that when we talk about deindustrialization. What we mean is that the capacity for those people in Southeast Asia, in the Indochinese peninsula, actually to create an industrial base which should put their people to work, which should employ the unemployed, which should raise the standard of living, that the potentiality for that was very real and very direct; that fundamentally what the French did was to keep Indochina as a raw material area: to send the rice out of that country, to send the coal out of the country, to send the raw rubber out of that country and not to use those reserves, after all, as the basis for any kind of genuine industrial development. So that you get — and keep this in mind — so that you get all of the resources for actual economic development. You have a population, after all, that is large in terms of the economic activity that is available.

You have, in other words, a surplus labor supply. You have, in the second place, considerable energy supply. You have coal in large quantity; you have hydroelectric power; you have raw materials like iron, like tungsten, like tin, like the timber that comes out of the forest. But the primary example of showing how these resources are not turned into industrialization comes with the rubber itself. Because rubber, after all, is a fantastic product in Indochina. And by 1938, the plantation owners were producing 60,000 tons of raw rubber a year, and their profits were tremendous. But they were profits that were used for the lavish living of the plantation owners or profits that were sent out of the country. But, you see, the latex, in other words the raw material, was actually exported out of Indochina. It was not used for processing and transformation inside the colony; it was sent back to France so that it could become the cheap raw material for the Michelin Society, for that great tire and rubber works inside France itself.

Now, the explanation of that strikes me as rather important because there were two coordinate groups that really prevented industrialization in Indochina. One group, quite obviously, the French industrialists who wanted a protected market. And they constituted a real pressure group upon the French government to prevent there being industrialization inside the country. The other group, the investors who were French inside Vietnam itself. In other words, we're talking

about the *colons*, about the investors, about the ones that are there exploiting the raw material. Now, this group doesn't want extra competition. It doesn't want a crowd of investors coming into the colony, because it fears that that will undermine its primary political influence. It really rules the colony, and it doesn't want competition. But secondly, it doesn't want a kind of varied economy in which the labor force that it controls will have other alternatives rather than being, for example, forced to corvee labor on the rubber plantations. And, you see, if you have these two interests, what is phenomenal about Indochina is that these two interests are combined in a single leading element in the whole picture, namely the Bank of Indochina.

The Banque de l'Indochine really is the policymaker in terms of what imperialist policy will be on the part of French colonialists in Indochina. That Banque de l'Indochine combines these two interests because it is a great investment bank. Founded in 1875 in France, out of investment by a group of other banks. In other words, it's a consortium of bankers. And those other bankers, coming out of the Banque de Paribas, for example, those other bankers have contact with the industrial milieu. And so, they speak for the French industrial interests. But the Banque de l'Indochine also is the leading investor inside Indochina. And so it combines the interest of both French industrialists and these indigenous *colons*, these French, that were on the scene. And that bank really is fantastic. I tell you, frankly, if you understand the Banque de l'Indochine, or if you understand the bank of [J. P.] Morgan, for example, you understand one hell of a lot about imperialism. This Banque de l'Indochine, which got in in the late 1870s — already by the turn of the century had a monopoly of printing paper money inside Indochina — it already had the monopoly over the distilling trade in the whole country. By 1904, it was the leading shareholder in that society of distilleries which, after all, had the monopoly of distilling in the country. But it then went into coal mines; it went into land.

Well, you want to know about the Banque de l'Indochine? Look at it in several ways. Look at it from the point of view of a personage like Paul Baudouin. And Paul Baudouin is, after all, a key figure in the entire story. He is somebody who becomes the director of the Bank of Indochina in the 1920s and the period of the '30s. And Paul Baudouin you already have encountered once before if you provoke your memory. And he is that minister of foreign affairs in the Vichy government that really does make the armistice with the Germans in June of 1940, so that you're dealing with a perfect Vichyite. But Baudouin is just perfect from the point of view of influence back home and influence in a colony because he is the permanent under-secretary in the finance ministry for years on end. There are different finance ministers, they come from different parties. But it is Paul Baudouin is that expert financier who really does set economic policy for the Third Republic, and ends up, for example, as the Permanent Under-Secretary of Finance at the time that Vincent Auriol — who is a socialist in the Popular Front, presumably — is the finance minister of that particular government. And Baudouin becomes the foreign minister under Vichy. And always his idea, after all, is to make very friendly relations with the fascist powers because

he feels that that will guarantee the maintenance of that French Empire in which he has such a very large stake.

Or consider that Banque de l'Indochine from the point of view of the list of companies that it owned in Indochina as given to us by Pierre Lavallée. Lavallée is one of the very few who, really, writes very realistically about the French position in Indochina in the period before 1940. Now, Lavallée himself, an extremely distinguished social scientist in France, a man of the left. And in his little book on Vietnam, because he was there for a period of time, he simply lists — and I didn't write the entire list down, just partially — the companies controlled by the Banque de l'Indochine in Indochina. Of course, there's the bank. Then there's Crédit français, which is the bank that gives agricultural credit in case the peasantry, after all, is in debt, which it always was; the Chemins de fer [de l'Indochine et du] Yunnan, in other words, the northern railway system of the country; the Messageries fluviales de Cochinchine, which is the river transit company; then the Charbonnages de Tonkin, which is the big coal company; then Le Nickel, which is the nickel company; Étain Compagnie, which is the exploiter of the tin mines; l'Électricité de l'Indochine, which is the electrical company; the Caoutchouc de Plantation, which is the rubber plantation of the south; the Distillerie de l'Indochine, which are the distillers; the Sucrée, which are the sugar refineries of the area of Cochinchina — and so it goes. It's a list that really extends two and a half pages in the Lavallée book. And it tells you something about ready wealth. You see, it's magnificent imperialism, because you go in and you take those raw materials and there really is no problem. There's no problem of thinking about a rational development of the economy at all.

Or finally, as a diagnosis into this kind of control, take, for example, the description that is given in an excellent book by Harry Franck called *East of Siam*, a book that was written way back in 1926 by somebody who went into Indochina and into Southeast Asia and really gives us some pretty good pictures of the way in which imperialism works. And he's talking about the mines of Đông Triều in Indochina, in other words, the coal mines that are owned by the Banque de l'Indochine: "The mines of Đông Triều are a phenomenon. The syndicate, namely the Banque de l'Indochine, owns everything for many miles around about the bank: the fields, the woods, the houses, the roads, the railways that carry the coal down to their jetties, the barrages, the whole thing. Everything from the bowels of the earth to the slightest sprig of grass that may force its way through the coal dust, all of that is owned by the Banque de l'Indochine." Well, all of that tells you, you see, that there doesn't have to be rational development, because imperialist agencies of that kind are concerned only with the kind of profit that they can take out of a country. So we're talking about systematic underdevelopment, or systematic deindustrialization.

But that's not the only criterion for underdevelopment, to say that there is no industrialization. We're talking also about dehumanization. And note it well as part of the underdevelopment of a colony. Because you find this, certainly, as the human theme in all of those data, for example, that Pierre Jalée gives you in *The Pillage of the Third World*, which you are reading today. And

you must remember this in terms of Indochina, talking about dehumanization as part of the underdevelopment, by which I mean the destruction of literate standards — in other words, to create an illiterate mass out of a people that had had an educational system. All of which means that you have servility, so that if you take the land away from the peasantry, they will not have the capacity even to think about what went wrong or even to strike back. And also that you have, after all, a kind of docility by workers forced into all of this corvée labor. You destroy, in other words, their capacity to think, to know, to analyze their circumstance. And it's not only that, but it's actually the malnutrition of the mass. In other words, it is the destruction of their nutritional standard. And I can't think of anything that tells you more about the nexus of imperialism than the staggering fact that you increase the productivity, or you increase the amount of the rice in the export trade by over 500% between 1900 and 1937; you increase the amount of land in rice production four-fold, and the per capita rice consumption goes down 30% in that period of four decades. What you have, you see, is systemic malnutrition, systematic dehumanization.

And the second observation that I try to make about this nexus has to do, after all, with disintegration and destruction. And note it well, because again it is very, very prototypical. We're talking about the effects of colonial economy or colonial capitalism upon traditional society: the destruction of that traditional society, the development of new classes and a new class struggle, and the irony or the paradox that through the imposition of the colonial economy you get the foundation for the social and political struggle which the Vietnamese people actually will launch. And what we mean by that is, of course, the creation of two new classes in Indochina, the large land owner and the landless peasantry.

And I pointed out to you that in traditional Indochina, there were differentiations in the village of landholding and differentiations of political power, but that every peasant owned some land, and there was village cohesion. And now, you see, you get a process at work. It is, first of all, the depopulation of the villages. In other words, in the war of conquest, in the war of pacification, the peasantry is killed or it flees the village, or it flees simply to the labor recruiter who comes to make corvée labor an imposition upon the peasant. And those who leave or are killed? Fine that their land is taken from them. And along with this depopulation, the program on the part of the French authorities to give out large land tracts. In other words, they give out large land concessions so that you get 2% of the population owning — 2% of the landlords — owning 60% of the land by 1938. And you get this large mass of the landless peasant. All of which creates, you see, and keep it in mind, the basis for a class struggle in the villages.

And because that economic development is so distorted, it creates also two very peculiar truncated classes: a proletariat, but not a real proletariat; a bourgeoisie, but not a real bourgeoisie. And when you are a pseudo-proletariat and a pseudo-bourgeoisie, you may be more dangerous than the other kind. And so in Indochina was created a working-class that was a marginal working class, that was put to work in the mines or put to work in the plantations and went back

to the villages. Now think of what that means. It means that you do not get, on the part of those who pass through the work process, either the passivity of the peasant or the stability of an urban worker. You don't get the peasant simply passive and inert in the village; you don't get the worker in the city thinking that there is possibly some opportunity for him. You get, if you please, what [French historian Louis] Chevalier calls a *classe dangereuse*, a very dangerous class.

And consider what happens to the bourgeoisie, terribly interesting. In Indochina, a classic class. You do not even create a cushion: in other words, a comprador bourgeoisie, that kind of stratum of those who do have some opportunity in colonial capitalism. You get exploitation and brutality, no opportunity. You see, it's even different in India, in China, in the East Indies; there was a certain amount of indigenous middle class that developed on the basis of a small area of flexibility or opportunity. The French did not provide that. So what constitutes a middle class in Indochina on the eve of the Second World War? It is an intelligentsia, an intellectual middle class. Because in the 1920s, French policymakers had the idea of playing up a little bit to the wealthy landlords and playing up a little bit to the middle-class professionals, the doctors and the lawyers. And so they gave permission for the sons and daughters of these wealthier Indochinese to go off to France to study, to do their secondary or their advanced studies. And you get that beginning of an influx of these students into France, and they come back then, after their studies, to Indochina.

And they are a very dangerous and volatile group. Because, you see, they come back, and they have some education and suddenly they are ordered around, humiliated by those *colons* who had no such education. You know who goes out to the colonies: the dregs of society go out to the colonies, the people who are the most brutalized. You look at those damnable *pieds-noirs* who have come back to France from North Africa, booted out, and they're the worst ruffians you can possibly imagine. They are people of no cultivation at all. You get these sons and daughters, you see, from France after doing their studies, and suddenly find themselves in relationship to this kind of brutality. You find, in the second place, that their opportunity is so very limited, whether in the administration or in anything like commercial activity. And then you find that contrast. In other words, they have been in France where they can move around, where they can speak freely, where they can protest. And they come back to Indochina, and it all is, again, a terribly repressive society. And does it surprise you that they constitute the cadre of the nationalist and the revolutionary movements?

You see the irony. Warning, in case you think about imperialism. And it is that the French imperialists, like so many imperialists, finally harvested the very bitter fruits of overkill. Because, after all, it is their racism that created that tremendous and impassioned resentment on the part of Vietnamese people who saw their culture spit upon, who saw all of their traditions destroyed, who knew they had a history of two thousand years or more, and suddenly to find all

of that vanishing. It is too much to bear. And then there is the class struggle in the village, because you destroy that kind of village cohesion. And then there is the encouragement to subversion, the very brutality of the fiscal system. The very brutality of the exploitation means that you make subversives out of the peasants: they do distill alcohol on the sly, they do refuse to pay taxes, they do finally take up arms. And so imperialism plants of its own destruction.

And the third observation, which is important in terms of the rest of our story, and that is that the Vietnamese people had a history of resistance to foreign control that goes very deeply back into their tradition. And so it is that for centuries the Vietnamese people fought against Chinese suzerainty, a Chinese overlordship that was imposed in the second century BC and which the Vietnamese finally lifted in national revolt in 939 AD. And when the Ming Dynasty tried to impose it again in the fifteenth century, it lasted only twenty years and the Vietnamese drove the Chinese out again. And when the Manchus tried it at the end of the eighteenth century, it was a no-go. And so what did the French expect? And they got resistance.

And the resistance goes in tiers. And first you have that resistance by the mandarins: in other words, by the old intelligentsia, those mandarins who had occupied the governmental positions, the administrative positions in traditional Indochina, traditional Vietnam. And those mandarins, in the 1880s and '90s, lead a struggle against French control with the idea of getting back the traditional Vietnam. It is a no-go. You cannot turn the clock back; you cannot set it back so that now you still have, again, a traditional Confucian society. By the turn of the century, after about 1900, you get another set of resistance leaders. And they again are the intelligentsia. But they are those Vietnamese intellectuals who look at Japan as a model, because Japan, after all, has absorbed something of the technology and the science of the West — has superimposed modernity upon a traditional society, and consequently managed to get enough of a productive base, enough of a military base, to do the incredible: to defeat Russia in 1904 and '05. And that was tremendously impressive to Chinese, tremendously impressive to Indochinese. And so these national leaders say, "We must do like Japan: we must absorb some Western culture and some Western science and technology and get strong." But, you see, these are an elite and they have no mass appeal. And they fail.

And by 1930, all nationalist groups understood one thing in Indochina. They understood that if they were to make a successful revolt against the French, it had to be an armed revolt. In other words, they had to expel French imperialism or Western imperialism by force. But note it well, that the only group among them who had a strategy for doing that, the strategy of enrolling the mass of people in a movement, would be Indochinese Communist Party. And we can see that perfectly well by the failure of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, the variant of the Kuomintang which was established in Vietnam in 1925. We are talking about the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, or the VNQDD. And that party is founded in 1925, and it is very much a kind of shadow of the Kuomintang in China. And it's a party that is founded by that very narrow stratum of the

bourgeoisie in Vietnam: in other words, by students, by teachers, by clerks, for example, in commercial houses, by a certain kind of middle-class intelligentsia. And they are young, and they are impassioned, and they really burn with the fire of trying to get the French out. But, you see, they have no viable strategy. They don't have a mass line: in other words, a line of organizing the workers into unions and launching strikes, or of organizing the peasantry into peasant leagues and having insurrection in the rural countryside.

Their idea is a military coup, a military coup. And so the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng had largely the idea of subverting the army, because the army, after all, in Indochina was a French and a native army. You had French officers and you had that hated Foreign Legion, but the rank-and-file were Vietnamese who were recruited into that army. And so you get this Nationalist Party beginning to infiltrate into the army. And the idea in late 1920s — and with great idealism they did this — was to convert enough of those soldiers to nationalism inside the army, that they would turn against their officers, they would take over their barracks, they would move into the cities and control the cities, and they would establish then a new government, a nationalist government. And, of course, all of this reckoned without the intelligence service of the French, it reckoned without the police of the French. It was naive.

And by 1930, these nationalists got desperate, and they thought that the rest of the population must be desperate also. And so they called for a plot, a rising. And that rising takes place, and it is very abortive, and it really opens the whole scene to the Communists because it fails. They plan a coup in February of 1930. The idea is that in all of the barracks, especially of North Vietnam, of the area of Tonkin, there will be a taking over of the barracks by these nationalized soldiers. And so, on the night of the 9th and 10th of February of 1930 comes the signal for a general rising in the barracks. And only in one place is it successful, way in the north of Vietnam in Yên Bái. And in the barracks at Yên Bái, the Vietnamese actually do take over the military barracks, and they do shoot their French officers. And for two days, they hold the barracks until the French send the reserves in and obviously crush them. But the important thing to note is that that whole coup was a terrible abortion, and that it failed and that it was repressed.

And the repression is terrific. And every soldier that participated in that rising at Yên Bái, and in all of the other barracks, was executed. And eighty leaders of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, of the Nationalist Party, were first of all sentenced to death, and then that sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and forced labor, which was even worse. And then they took twelve of the real leaders of that party, and they took among those leaders Nguyễn Thái Học — and Nguyễn Thái Học is kind of a hero in Vietnamese history; a young guy, only 24, the leader of this Nationalist Party, so very idealistic — and they took in Nguyễn Thái Học and they took twelve of his comrades, who really were kind of like the executive committee or the central committee of this Nationalist Party, and on the 17th of June of 1930, they beheaded them. And that story is an important one in the whole Vietnamese nationalist struggle, because Nguyễn Thái Học and

his twelve comrades who went on the 17th of June of 1930 to be guillotined walked up with a certain kind of majesty to the guillotine: each one stopping about two yards in front of it before having the head put under the blade, and stopped for a second, raised the fist and said, "Vietnam, Vietnam." And all went to their death.

And all that makes 1930 a great turning point in the whole story. Because from 1930 on, three things happen...

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... officially in October of 1930. Now, you must remember that there had been Indochinese Communists before 1930. But the Communist movement in Southeast Asia had been divided into many sects and many factions, and it was not until a meeting in Hong Kong in October of 1930 that was called, of course, by Nguyễn Ái Quốc. And Nguyễn Ái Quốc is one of the many names, after all, that Hồ Chí Minh ultimately is going to use in his life. And Nguyễn Ái Quốc, as he is known at that time, calls a meeting in Hong Kong of the leaders of the various factions, and there is a certain unity worked out.

And all of that is the culmination of something for which Hồ Chí Minh, or Nguyễn Ái Quốc, has really worked for. Because you must remember that, by 1930, he has been militating for thirteen years. He was born in 1890, and it was in 1917 that Hồ Chí Minh got to France. And when he got to France, he made his way into revolutionary milieux. This is somebody who is the son of a mandarin, who comes out of a peasant area in Indochina, who understands something about the exploitation of his people, but who is really politized, who is really revolutionized on the basis of his contact with France. And so he goes to France in 1917, and he makes his way into all those milieux. There he is up at number 96 Quai de Jemmapes, which is where *La Vie ouvrière* is published at the time, that newspaper and those brochures that are put out by the revolutionary syndicalists, [Pierre] Monatte and [Alfred] Rosmer and people of that sort. And he learns his journalism, he learns his politics from revolutionary syndicalists in France. And then he joins the Jeunes socialistes (the Young Socialists), and he's at the Congress of Tours in 1920 where the Communist Party of France is founded, and he votes for the founding of the French Communist Party. And he joins the Third International almost at once as a member of this French Communist Party, and he launches a little newspaper called *Le Paria* in 1921. And I've seen a whole file of those issues of *Le Paria* published between '21 and '23, and they're really quite fascinating, because Hồ Chí Minh was interested in liberation along a very broad front. And he published, for example, in 1922, three articles about the liberation of Asiatic women that constitute really a masterpiece of short analysis of what women had gone through in traditional Oriental societies, and what kind of egalitarianism really was imperative if you were to have any kind of genuine human liberation.

You see, I'll tell you something about Hồ Chí Minh that is very interesting. He is, of course, a Moscow guy; that is, he is somebody who is in the Third International, is very devoted and very loyal to the Soviet Union. But there always is something a little bit original about Hồ Chí Minh. And that, it seems to me, the crucial plus or minus X-factor in the entire revolutionary leadership that he is going to give this movement. And the way in which I can illustrate that best is by the intervention that Hồ Chí Minh makes in 1924 at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International, the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, June and July of 1924. Now, you have to understand that the Comintern is Europeanocentric. The people who run the Comintern are Europeans, and they have very little interest in the colonial problem, and they certainly don't think that a revolution can begin in the colonial areas.

And here is Hồ Chí Minh speaking before this Fifth Congress of 1924, first of all, to tell the members of the Comintern that they had better watch the colonies. And so, in the translation of this intervention which [Austrian historian] Helmut Gruber makes in his collection of documents on the Third International, we find this: "I am here in order to continuously remind the International of the existence of the colonies." Now, you know there's something extraordinary that a colonial has to stand to presumably revolutionary delegates and tell them that the colonies exist:

"It seems to me that the comrades do not entirely comprehend that the fate of the world proletariat, and especially that of the proletariat in the colonies, is closely tied to the fate of the oppressed peoples of the colonies. You all know that today the poison and life energy of the capitalist snake is concentrated more in the colonies than in the mother countries. The colonies supply the raw materials for industry; the colonies supply soldiers for the army. In the future, the colonies will be the bastions of the counterrevolution. Yet, in your discussions of the revolution, you neglect to talk about the colonies. If one wants to break an egg or a stone, one will be careful to find an instrument whose strength corresponds to the object one wishes to break. Why is it that you are not equally careful when you want to destroy capitalism? Why is it that where the revolution is concerned, you do not wish to make your strength, your propaganda, equal to the enemy whom you wish to fight and defeat? Why do you neglect the colonies while capitalism uses them to support itself, defend itself, and fight you?"

And you see what he is saying? What he is saying is, "Why are you racists? Why do you ignore, after all, what the colored peoples in your empire are putting up with and struggling against?" And he goes on in his second intervention, which is really quite magnificent — better than the one Helmut Gruber translates — and he goes on, and he attacks the French Communists. And he said, you see, "I read [French Communist Party newspaper] *L'Humanité* every day, and they had this story in there about this great Senegalese prize fighter named Siki, and they make a big thing out of it. And they say, you see, there's a Senegalese who came, and he took our Georges

Carpentier, our great heavyweight fighter, and he defeated him. And they make three articles about that." And Hồ Chí Minh says, "But there is no article about the proletariat of Dakar." In other words, to glorify, for example, the fact that colored peoples can make feats, that that doesn't tell you anything, and that really is not the propaganda that prepares French workers to understand what their brotherhood and their internationalism with the colonies has to be.

And Hồ Chí Minh goes on to make a great arraignment of what colonialism does to the peasantry. And then the point: the point is that there is an original hypothesis that is pre-Maoist Maoism that comes out of this intervention in 1924. Listen to this, after talking about how the peasants are exploited in Indochina and elsewhere, Hồ Chí Minh ends the intervention by saying: "The rising of the colonial peasantry is imminent. It is the poor, the center of a revolutionary strategy. The Communists International must recognize and help the peasant revolution." And you see what he is saying? "We come from peasant areas, from rural areas. We will not wait until we have that urban proletariat, which you consider to be the engine or instrument of revolution. We can make a strategy of revolution in those peasant countries" — which is the heterodoxy, after all, of Mao.

And so there it is 1930, in October, and they found this Indochinese Communist Party. And it is founded in a year which is called the Red Year, because it is founded in a year when there is tremendous insurrectionary disturbance in the countryside of Indochina, especially in the central and northern provinces, in Annam and in Tonkin. Annam is really in insurrection. And why? Because there has been a terrific famine and the peasants are really starving. And the Communists get in there and they begin mass organizing. And I want you to listen to this fairly carefully, because it tells you something about what it takes ultimately to prepare a revolution. Because what happened was that the Communists recognized that an insurgency — in other words, just a jacquerie of peasants — simply will not do; that it has to be systematic, it has to be organized. And what they began to do was to take these peasants — who really were out in the villages protesting against taxes, protesting about the fact that they hadn't enough to eat — and they took them into the provincial capitals. They organized these mass demonstrations of peasants in the provincial capitals of Annam and Tonkin in order to protest against the high rate of taxation, to demand that taxes be lowered upon the peasantry.

Now, these peasants were almost always unarmed and, of course, there was almost always a bloodbath. And that bloodbath reached an awful height on the 12th of September of 1930 in the city of Vinh. Now, the city of Vinh is the provincial capital of northern Annam. And in the city of Vinh, on the 12th of September of 1930, there was one of these demonstrations. And you had literally thousands of peasants, led by Communists, demonstrating outside administrative headquarters, demanding a lowering of taxes. Whereupon the French authorities flew airplanes over the crowd, dropped bombs, and killed 214 unarmed peasants. Now, the peasants, startled, struck by this kind of action, returned in the evening to pick up their dead. And when they

returned to pick up their dead, the French authorities ordered the second raid. They were bombarded again, and another 74 were killed.

Now, the point is that this insurrection of 1930 goes very far. It goes so far that in central and northern Annam, you actually have soviets established; you have local French authorities driven out. The peasants do establish soviets. They even raise, at times, the Communist flag. And it takes the French about a year, until the end of 1931, before they really have pacified the entire area. And the pacification is terrific. You see, the Vietnamese didn't have to wait for the Americans. They were inured to that kind of treatment. Now, the Americans, of course, were much more efficient, and consequently the range of weaponry and so forth is much greater. But, you see, it got so bad in 1931 in Indochina that in a newspaper that was put out by the *colons* in French, *Le Petit populaire du Tonkin*, the newspaper of the *colons* in the area of the north of Indochina, on the 15th of March of 1931, here you get a *colon* writer: "The behavior of the troops, and in particular of the brutal legionnaires, is one of unbroken savagery. An unashamed soldiery, free to indulge all of their instincts, now terrorizes the entire country. They steal, rape, condemn, and execute as they please."

In the year 1931, there were about 10,000 Vietnamese who were killed by the French, about 50,000 who were deported, and there were more than 10,000 political prisoners who were taken either to be put into prison or to be put in a terrible concentration camp on the island of Poulo Condor. And during that period of time, thousands — literally thousands of Vietnamese, peasants and others — were simply dragged before what were called criminal commissions on all kinds of trumped up charges and sent off to prison. And there was only one instance — and I looked for this in the documentation on 1931 that was put together by [French anarchist intellectual] Daniel Guérin — and there was only one instance in which the brutality of the French legionnaires was ever circumscribed to be punished. In other words, there was only one Mỹ Lai episode, and that involved a group of legionnaires who had taken a crowd of Vietnamese peasants, put them in a truck to take them to a criminal commission, and those Vietnamese peasants never got before this criminal tribunal, because every few miles they stopped the truck and took out a few of the peasants and simply shot them dead. And there was one who tried to escape, and consequently, in order to punish him, they decided that they would cut his hair with a saw. And so they began to cut his hair with a saw and they cut off an ear. And when the judge freed these legionnaires, one of the mitigating circumstances was, in the judge's words, that once they had done that thing by accident, of cutting off the ear, they at least had the decency to cut off the other one for symmetry. And those legionnaires, then dismissed from the tribunal. Well, you see what that's all about. And you see that the Vietnamese had had an experience to prepare them for American civilization.

So it was that 1931 was a turning point in terms of the fact that it was a year of repression. And a terrific repression then ensued for the Communists. The Communists were driven either into

exile or put into prison. And by December of 1931, you get the Governor-General of Indochina, General [Pierre] Pasquier, saying communism has disappeared from Vietnam forever. What happened, of course, in this period of repression was simply that the Communists went underground and would resurface at the proper time.

And the third point to note is the Japanese occupation. The Japanese occupation really becomes very crucial. The Japanese occupy Indochina in 1940, and they are there until 1945. And during most of that period of time there is still a Vichy administration in Indochina, that the Japanese strike an accord on the 22nd September of 1940. They got what they wanted; in other words, they got access to all of the economic resources of Indochina. They got access to the communications system, and they got military bases. They kept troops there. They had no interest in simply administering the whole area itself. And consequently, they struck that accord. It's not until the 9th of March of 1945, that the Japanese take over the entire area of Indochina and put it under Japanese administration. That's really at the eleventh hour when they think that the French are going to turn against them and try to drive them out, because they are on the ropes, at that time, militarily. For most of that period of time the Japanese are there as the effective rulers in Indochina, though there is nominally the sovereignty of the Vichy regime.

Now, all of that is a context for a resistance movement. And that resistance movement is the basis for the Vietnamese struggle that finally crests in 1945. Now, the party, as I say, had been decimated in the early '30s. And it had kept itself alive, in a sense, underground, and it had kept itself alive in the exile. And then something happens, and it is that the party begins to regroup in 1940 on the northern frontier of Indochina in southern China. And that's a fascinating part of the story.

You see, Hồ Chí Minh had never gone back to Indochina. In 1931, there was a death penalty placed upon his head by the French police inside Indochina. He didn't dare go from Hong Kong into the country itself. And in 1931, the British police in Hong Kong arrested him to turn him over to the French police, but there was intervention by certain Labourites, by [left-wing British politician] Stafford Cripps. He was kept inside Hong Kong. And there, because he became very ill, he was finally released in 1932 and made his way to the Soviet Union. He was in the Soviet Union between 1933 and '38, and then left and went to China and went to Yunnan, in the north there, to make contact with Chinese Communists.

Now, at the end of 1939, when the Indochinese Communists were really being oppressed — after the French Communist Party was suppressed in France, after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, when the French authorities inside Indochina really began an open season on whatever Communists they found — certain Communist militants fled Indochina and made their way also to China. Among them Phạm Văn Đồng, who became the prime minister, of course, of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam, and, of course, [Võ Nguyên] Giáp. General Giáp, who was at that particular time

in 1939 a history teacher, a bit interested in strategy. Well, they don't make history teachers like that anymore. And General Giáp, at any rate, made his way also up into Yunnan, and there is a regrouping of these Communist forces. Well, you see what they do? They go down in 1940 to the frontier of northern Indochina and of southern China, the frontier along Quảng Ninh and Yunnan. And they began there to kind of regroup their cadre, and to look at what the new situation is that is created by the occupation of the Japanese. And it's Hồ Chí Minh's idea that the struggle has reached a new stage: that the Japanese occupation has fantastically weakened French imperialism inside Indochina, but also that the presence of the Japanese has given a terrific example of oppression to all of the Indochinese people, and consequently, it's time really to mount a struggle.

But what kind of a struggle? And Hồ Chí Minh decides that what is really needed is a very broad-based struggle to try to combine all of the Indochinese people, all of the people certainly of Vietnam: not a Communist struggle *per se*, but a broad patriotic front to oust the Japanese fascists, to oust the French imperialists. And consequently, there is a meeting held in May of 1941, and here the Indochinese Communists cross the frontier into the very northern tier of North Vietnam, into Tonkin. It's the first time in thirty years that Hồ Chí Minh has been back in his country. And there's a little strip of that north where there has been guerrilla activity, and which is like a liberated zone. And they move across the Chinese frontier in January of 1941 into that liberated zone, and they move then into a little village where there is a mountain. And in the mountain is a grotto, and they finally call that mountain Karl Marx Mountain. And they go into the grotto, and there, between the 9th and 18th of May of 1941, they found a movement which will be the liberation movement.

It is the Việt Minh, and the Việt Minh means the "Patriotic Front" — the movement of the patriotic front, dominated by the Communists but encompassing as many people as will fight within that particular front. Because the program of Việt Minh, as it is founded in May of '41, reads: "The union of all patriots without distinction of means, of age, of sex, religion or political opinion, to work together for the liberation of our people and for the welfare of our nation." The goal: to drive out the Japanese, to drive out the French. The goal: to establish a democratic republic. The goal: to make certain social reforms. Not to install communism. Don't drive off the patriotic landlords, because the line of the Việt Minh runs: "Confiscation of the land owned by traitors for distribution to the landless." In other words, the only expropriation that is noted, in this founding program, is the land of those who collaborate with the French or collaborate with the Japanese and are not among the patriotic landlords. 1941, May.

What do you do then? Hồ Chí Minh was very, very careful about adventurism. You don't make an insurrection with the Japanese there and with the French still in pretty good shape. And so he sets down the conditions for insurrection. First, the enemy must be in an untenable position. Second, the people must clearly feel their oppression. Third, enough revolutionary propaganda

must have been diffused to assure unity of action and unity of purpose. You see what this will mean? It will mean a period of guerrilla activity. It's terrific. 1942, 1943, 1944.

It is General Giáp, one of the great organizers of guerrilla warfare, operating in the north of Vietnam — organizing those political groups to ensure supply, to ensure communication, to ensure propaganda — organized with fighting guerrillas, until finally, by the end of 1943, several provinces of northern Vietnam are in the hands of the guerrillas. By the end of 1944, you have the first contingent organized by the Vietnamese People's Army. By June of 1945, you have, after all, six provinces between the Chinese frontier and Hanoi that are now in the hands of the liberation movement.

But it's not easy, because there are the French, and there are the Chinese under the Kuomintang, and there are the Americans. And the French? Well, we're not talking essentially, after all, about Vichy. Vichy will be finished. It wants to keep the empire; it will fight to the last ditch. But Vichy will be finished. What we're talking about is the Resistance: we're talking about De Gaulle. And General de Gaulle is very categorical. He's not interested in emancipation of the Indochinese people. He is not interested in the emancipation of any people. He's interested in France. And consequently, says General de Gaulle on the 8th of December of 1943 at Algiers, stating what the goals for Indochina, for his movement, will be: "We will extend liberty if the Indochinese people are faithful to the French Union." In other words, what he is saying is we will make certain reforms, but Indochina will remain a colony.

He said much the same thing about Africa in that famous Brazzaville speech of 30th of January of 1944. Listen to it: "Our will to grant reforms in our Africa is tied to the reaffirmation of French sovereignty." And then he formalizes the position on Indochina on the 24th of March of 1945, when he is the head of the government, and he says: "The Indochinese Federation will be part of the French Union on terms which the French Constituent Assembly" — not the Vietnamese — "which the French Constituent Assembly will fix. The government of that Indochinese Federation will be presided over by a governor, named by France, but assisted by an elected Council of State." The election, of course, by very limited franchise, generally of the *colons*. And the Council of State, anyway, with very limited powers. You see, in the attitude of Gaullism is already the seed of a war, because the Việt Minh, in a tract of June of 1944, answering these pretensions of De Gaulle, wrote this: "So, the French who are struggling against German domination think that they can restore their dominion over other people? To say that we will sacrifice our national independence to the pretension of the Gaullists is sheer sophistry." And so the French are one obstacle.

The second obstacle: the Kuomintang and Chiang Kai-shek, because the Chinese have their eye upon Indochina also. And by the Agreements of Potsdam of July of 1945, because the Kuomintang and the Chinese are the clients and the allies of Americans, the Chinese are given

the right to occupy northern Vietnam — in other words, the area north of the 16th parallel, in order to disarm the Japanese. But in order to disarm the Japanese, who are already fleeing the country, the Kuomintang sent in, at the end of August of 1945, 180,000 men north of the 16th parallel under General Lu Han, who began dismantling French fortifications as though the Chinese were there to stay. And they wanted to. And their idea was not to annex Indochina but to put in a puppet government, and they brought back puppets with them in order to try to install their influence there.

And then the Americans. And the Americans had never had any interest in Vietnam, no interest in Southeast Asia. There never had been a policy, but there was a global view. And consequently, there was a vacuum in these empires being destroyed. And there was Japan about to surrender, and there was an Asia to be integrated into that new economic order. And Roosevelt had the idea in 1943: all during 1943, Roosevelt, with that tremendous ingenuity, played with the idea that, "Well, the French should not go back to Indochina. They'd been collaborationist, hey'd been very fascist, and they should not go back to Indochina. But then Indochina should not go to the Indochinese. They're not ready for that." He talked about independence in thirty or forty years. And so, what he suggested was what he called a four-power trusteeship over Indochina. The four powers, of course, France and Great Britain because they were both old colonial powers, and then the United States and nationalist China, which is two votes for America. And consequently, it has a good influence there. Well, he suggests that at Tehran, in December of 1943, to Stalin. And Stalin says, "Yes, that's okay." Stalin was not interested. The British didn't like it. The British wanted to restore the French there: first of all because they had this policy of trying to buttress French strength, but secondly, they didn't like the idea of pushing colonial powers out of colonies. Bad precedent, that. And consequently, they objected and finally it was all worked out in 1945, wasn't it? And that was the setting within which the Vietnamese would have to operate in their insurrection, because two things happen in 1945.

First of all, the Potsdam Accords. And the Potsdam Accords, essentially, about Indochina, really meant a French restoration. Because it was decided at Potsdam that, in order to disarm the Japanese at the end of the war, that the Chinese Kuomintang should occupy the area north of the 16th parallel and the British occupy the area of the south, of Cochinchina — which meant, effectively, that the British would turn Indochina back to the French.

What did that mean about the Americans? Well, they buttressed themselves and covered all cases in Truman's famous proclamation of the 14th of August of 1945. And I want you to know that some things in history are breathtaking. And Truman's order, prepared by the War Department on the 14th of August, just four scant days after the traumatized Japanese surrender, is called General Order No. 1. And General Order No. 1 is an attempt to organize order in Asia with the collapse of the Japanese. The two problems were very clear. One was the problem of the fact that the Japanese had really dislodged the old colonial empires; they had destroyed the roots of

colonial rule in the Dutch East Indies, in Burma, in Malaya, in Indochina, and consequently, all of those areas suddenly were in a vacuum. And the second problem was that there were very radical movements led by the Chinese Communists, especially in China. And consequently, to fill that vacuum, to make such that there was not political loss after military victory, came General Order No. 1.

And General Order No. 1, when it was drawn up and promulgated by Truman, was shown to both the British and the Russians. It wasn't shown to them with the idea that they should approve or disapprove, it was just shown to them. And Stalin made very, very few objections. And his objections were rather petty ones, which indicated how much he was really dismissing and writing off Asia. And this is the General Order. The General Order is that the Allied Supreme Commander for Asia, General Douglas MacArthur, has the sole and exclusive right to accept surrender from the Japanese anywhere in Asia and to set the terms of that surrender. Which means that it is General MacArthur who will determine to which military groups the Japanese make their surrender, and consequently determine the political complexion of those areas. A great umbrella for Asia, and with that the Americans were in the game. And they sent General Philip Gallagher immediately to Indochina to make sure that the turnover went to the French.

And it's in that context that Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese Communists had to operate. And they operated as soon as the surrender of the Japanese came, 10th of August. By the 13th of August, the Indochinese Communist Party meets and decides on a general insurrection. The 16th of August, it is the Việt Minh, that popular front, that organizes a People's Congress and establishes a Liberation Committee which will serve as a provisional government. August 19th begins the national insurrection. And it is a national insurrection. It's before there are any real Allied armies in Indochina; within six days, all of Indochina has fallen to the Việt Minh. On the 29th of August is established a provisional government. And then think about it: on the 2nd of September of 1945 in Hanoi, in front of 500,000 people who have fought in this Việt Minh liberation struggle, Hồ Chí Minh proclaims the Democratic Republic of Vietnam...

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... [Trần] Văn Chương as head of all the political forces in Indochina. And by the beginning of September, the French are already there. And the question is: Can this Democratic Republic, just proclaimed, survive? And, you see, for Hồ Chí Minh the problem was very clear. And the Trotskyists who were in Indochina at the time didn't like his decision, because for Hồ Chí Minh there was only one of two possible alternatives: either to fight at once for the total liberation or to give up the South, where there was a weak implantation of the revolution, and go north and hold back. And that was the choice that was made. Between September and February of 1946, French armies oust the Democratic Republic from the south of Vietnam. Cochinchina and part of

Annam are recovered, and Hồ Chí Minh is up in the north, in Tonkin. And the question is: Can he hold there?

And he holds there on the basis of certain accords in March of 1946, as we will see, but the French aren't satisfied. A very long struggle to get to March of '46 with a Democratic Republic in the north. The French are not satisfied with that. And Hồ Chí Minh's accords with [French envoy Jean] Sainteny in March of 1946 will be broken. The war will begin. But you see what the war is about? It's about something that doesn't end. And because it doesn't end, the French ultimately discover that they can't win it. And that takes them only eight years. [*applause*]