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The French Indochina War in Northern Vietnam

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The complexity of the French Indochina War is mindboggling. It was not one conflagration, but a collection of several – a war of colonial (re)conquest, an armed struggle for national liberation, a civil war among Vietnamese, a conventional showdown between professional armies, an often-vicious contest for administrative control of the countryside known as "pacification," the scene of intense urban violence at the start and, by the end, the site of class warfare of a communist kind. All of this, in turn, occurred as the Chinese and Americans stepped in to support their respective partners, the Vietnamese communists and the French colonialists, in what was, with Korea, the deadliest battlefield of the Cold War and the single most destructive war of decolonization in the twentieth century.

Nor was Vietnam a unitary state during the conflict. In late September 1945, the French attacked in the South and, in so doing, shattered the briefly unified Vietnam that Hồ Chí Minh had proclaimed earlier that month. Full-scale hostilities engulfed all of the country by late 1946. From this point, Hồ Chí Minh's state – known officially as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) – was effectively transformed into an archipelago comprised of scattered "islands" of territory. This situation persisted until 1950 when Mao Zedong's military assistance and advice allowed Hồ Chí Minh to field the modern army he needed to begin connecting these islands into a more cohesive state under communist control. It was only after that date that the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) began expanding the DRVN's territorial control, first in the Northern Highlands and then via a corridor stretching southward around the French-controlled Red River Delta linking up eventually with DRVN-governed zones in central Vietnam. This gave rise to a sickle-shaped DRVN in the upper half of Vietnam, the subject of this chapter, with its blade wrapped around the Red River plains and its handle incorporating the lowlands of central Vietnam. The creation of this long stretch of connected DRVN territory running from the Chinese border to lower

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central Vietnam was a highly consequential event that profoundly shaped the course and outcome of the war.[1]

A New Kind of War Comes to Upper Vietnam

On December 19, 1946, after more than a year of failed efforts to negotiate a peaceful decolonization, the French colonial state and Hồ Chí Minh's DRVN went to war in northern Vietnam to solve the question by force. As urban battles raged in Hanoi, Nam Định, and Huế in early 1947, the DRVN president transferred his government to rural areas to continue the struggle for national independence. Hồ Chí Minh and his entourage established their resistance capital in Thái Nguyên province located in the northern hills looking over the Red River Delta. Although the French narrowly missed capturing the DRVN senior leadership in a surprise attack there in late 1947 (Operation Léa), they contented themselves with taking control of the border with China and consolidating their hold on the Red River Delta. This allowed the Vietnamese to build a northern base area, which they referred to as the Việt Bắc zone, even though it did not cover all of the "north" as its Vietnamese name implied. At the same time, by focusing on the control of the northern and southern deltas, the French allowed their adversaries to administer vast territories in central Vietnam largely free of direct colonial interference. This included several rice-rich provinces located south of Hanoi, which the DRVN designated zones III and IV, as well as a long strip of land in lower-central Vietnam known as Zone V. A host of resistance messengers, administrators, and radio operators did their best to keep the DRVN capital at Thái Nguyên informed of what was going on in these outlying areas. While DRVN loyalists also controlled segments of territory in Cochinchina and the Mekong Delta, the lines of communication and territorial control in the South were always more tenuous. Meanwhile, the French reconstructed their colonial state in the form of an Indochinese federation. In 1949, they allowed their Vietnamese partners to establish a second Vietnam known as the Associated State of Vietnam (ASVN). It joined similar states in Laos and Cambodia as part of the Associated States of Indochina, all of which were tucked into the French Union formed in 1946.

To the very end of the French Indochina War, no side was able to impose undisputed authority over people, territory, and resources in the country.

1 For a more detailed discussion, see my *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First Vietnam War* (Princeton, 2022), chapter 10.

The French maintained control of Hanoi, Huế, and Saigon and, though it varied, much of the Mekong and Red River deltas and a handful of provincial towns and roads connecting them. But on the ground, sovereignty was always fragmented and incomplete. The war dragged on in guerrilla form precisely because no one side exercised the military force or possessed the bureaucratic infrastructure needed to control people, territory, and resources completely. Each state had to content itself with what it actually controlled on the ground. And what they controlled looked nothing like "Vietnam." If Hồ Chí Minh's DRVN operated as an archipelago state, the same was true of the Associated State of Vietnam. These island clusters, French, ASVN, and DRVN, were in a constant state of competitive flux. Each bumped up against the other, expanding and contracting like sponges being squeezed in and out as their soldiers, security officials, and civil servants moved into an area while their adversaries pulled back – and vice versa. As the head of the Communist Party, Trường Chinh, had described it as early as 1947: "This war has the characteristic of two combs whose teeth are interlocked."[2]

The communist victory in China's civil war in October 1949 and Mao Zedong's decision to support Hồ Chí Minh changed the nature of the French Indochina War. It also transformed the state the DRVN president led. Starting in early 1950, the Chinese communists, followed by the Soviet Union and the rest of the communist bloc, officially recognized the DRVN. They provided the modern military assistance and training Hồ needed to create the PAVN, a professional army consisting eventually of seven divisions. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese did not abandon guerrilla warfare, but they now used their divisions and modern weapons to take the battle to the French in the north and eventually the center.

The Vietnamese victory over the French at Cao Bằng in October 1950 started the change in the island-like configuration of the DRVN in its upper two-thirds and began to give new, more consolidated territorial form to the state Hồ Chí Minh was determined to bring forth. Without modern weapons and Chinese help in creating the first PAVN divisions, the commander-in-chief, Võ Nguyên Giáp, would have never been able to force the enemy's hand at Cao Bằng. The Vietnamese also had the French to thank. Rather than counterattacking to hold the borderlands, Giáp's opposite, General Marcel Carpentier, lost his nerve in late 1950 and pulled most

2 Truong Chinh, *The Resistance Will Win* (Hanoi, 1960 [first published in 1947 as a series of party texts in Vietnamese]), 64.

of his troops back to the delta. He and other French leaders worried that the Chinese might send their own People's Army into northern Indochina as they were doing in Korea at that very moment. By the end of the year, the French had effectively ceded the strategically important provinces of Lào Cai to the west of Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn to its east, including artillery pieces and huge stocks of ammunition left behind in a chaotic withdrawal. On the far northwestern side, the French maintained a base in Lai Châu province. Supplied by air, it was capable of harassing PAVN units moving through the area, but not much more. Its main goal was to keep as much of the ethnic Tai population living there under colonial rule in the form of a federation. On the far eastern side, the French navy patrolled the Gulf of Tonkin from Hải Phòng Harbor.

The military revolution the Chinese communists had helped their Vietnamese brothers engineer in record time from 1950 was accompanied by a political one. Between 1950 and 1954, Hồ Chí Minh and his entourage borrowed a host of Sino-Soviet methods for crafting a single-party communist state. Assisted by some 200 Chinese advisors, they used these methods to secure party supremacy over the DRVN state and its bureaucracy, the army and its officers, the security service, and the peasant population and its village leaders. Specific measures included the creation of a new and streamlined Communist Party in 1951, the transformation of Hồ Chí Minh into a cult figure, the indoctrination of tens of thousands of civil servants and army officers in the communist faith (rectification), the politicization of the peasant masses through massive propaganda (emulation campaigns), and the creation of a command economy and revamped fiscal system. It did not occur overnight, but it happened progressively in upper Vietnam during the second half of the Indochinese conflict starting in 1950.

Carpentier helped again when he evacuated the hills on the southwestern side of the Red River Delta in the province of Hòa Bình. The Vietnamese immediately moved DRVN soldiers, administrators, and supplies in as resistance committees and Communist Party cells popped up. As this occurred, the shape of Hồ Chí Minh's archipelagic Vietnam began to change as the PAVN connected islands and a growing body of communist-trained civil servants and cadres took over. Military control of Hòa Bình allowed Hồ Chí Minh and his entourage to connect this expanding northern territory, the Việt Bắc, to upper-central Vietnam's Zone IV, forming the shape of a half-moon or the head of a sickle. PAVN units were soon moving through this interchange to make their way for the first time to the lowlands south of Hanoi. Chinese-supplied and -trained Vietnamese soldiers began to challenge the French and their ASVN partners for

control of rice-rich provinces in Zone III, below Hanoi and Hải Phòng. In short, the DRVN now arced around the perimeter of the entire colonial delta from Lạng Sơn in the east through the capital area of Thái Nguyên before running southward through Hòa Bình to zones III and IV. This territorial crescent was new. From there, there was nothing stopping Hồ Chí Minh from consolidating his links to Zone V below the colonial city of Huế, thus adding a handle to the sickle's head. Rivers, forest trails, roads, and canals allowed for the circulation of weapons, troops, administrators, and food from the Chinese border to Zone V. As this military expansion occurred, the fragmented political configuration of the DRVN began to disappear in its upper two-thirds. Soldiers, cadres, and administrators worked hand in hand to forge an ever more consolidated regime, with the Communist Party firmly at the helm.

Militarily, the question for the French in early 1951 was whether the PAVN would descend eastward from the Highlands to attack the Red River plains or move west into the Highlands running down Indochina's spine. The new sickle-shape allowed the PAVN to advance in either direction. The French government realized as Cao Bằng fell in October 1950 that it had to be ready to defend the northern plains if ever Giáp decided to attack in that direction. France's American allies agreed. Although they were focused on fighting the communists in Korea, they counted on the French to help them hold the line in the Red River Delta – Tonkin as they and the French called it – and accelerated their assistance to the French. Working through their own Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG), created in September 1950, the Americans provided large amounts of modern military assistance to the French and their ASVN partners.

To make sure the French could hold the line in Tonkin, Paris dispatched a new general to Vietnam and made him high commissioner at the same time: Jean de Lattre de Tassigny (Figure 10.1). There was no questioning this man's mettle. De Lattre had seen combat during World War I, run counterinsurgency operations in North Africa during the interwar period, and led Free French troops during the liberation of southern France in 1944. Having served as the general inspector for the French army in the late 1940s, de Lattre was also aware of the French Expeditionary Corps' problems in Indochina. Within weeks of his arrival in Hanoi in mid-December 1950, he visited troops in the field, organized parades in the capital, and gave speeches to reverse declining morale. He got rid of defeatist-minded officers in his ranks and recruited a team of officers who shared his ideas. He made Raoul Salan, an officer with extensive experience in northern Indochina, his second-in-command and together they went to work.

Figure 10.1 General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, French Commander during the French Indochina War.
Source: ullstein bild Dtl. / ullstein bild / Getty Images.

De Lattre agreed to take over in Indochina on the understanding that there would be no more debacles, no more withdrawals, and no more humiliations. He swatted away suggestions that French forces should withdraw from the north in order to hold the southern pearl of the Indochinese empire – "Cochinchina" or the Mekong Delta. To withdraw from the north would send the wrong message to the Americans and jeopardize the military assistance Washington had agreed to provide as the French went up against an energized Vietnamese army backed by the communist bloc. Second, de Lattre pointed out, if Hồ Chí Minh were to gain full control of the northern plains, he would have the food, manpower, resources, and territorial traction to turn the PAVN into a formidable fighting machine. Lastly, abandoning the north would alienate the Vietnamese who had rallied to the French-backed ASVN. Indeed, de Lattre counted on using his dual authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and high commissioner for Indochina to enlist the Vietnamese in the French war effort like never before. It was no accident that

a second Vietnamese army – the Vietnam National Army (VNA), the armed forces of the ASVN – truly came to life in 1951 with the full approval of the Americans.[3]

Backed by his government, de Lattre lost no time reinforcing his hold over the plains surrounding Hanoi and Hải Phòng. He presided over the creation of a new string of concrete fortifications to protect the capital against any possible attack. The ASVN's Army helped with pacification in the lowlands. De Lattre transferred regular troops from other parts of Indochina regardless of any grumbling it caused. He stepped up the naval surveillance of the Gulf of Tonkin and Vietnam's long coastline. He improved existing air bases, built a few new ones, and extended runways to receive American fighter-bombers. Barbed wire sprouted up across the northern lowlands. De Lattre welcomed American artillery, shells, napalm, bombers, tanks, trucks, fuel, amphibious landing crafts, radios, and fuel. The Americans also helped the French finance and equip the VNA. Without American aid, de Lattre and his successors in Indochina would have never been able to fight the war they did after 1950.

A parallel transformation was taking place on the DRVN side. Emboldened by their victory at Cao Bằng and flush with Chinese military assistance and advice, the Vietnamese communists set their sights on the Red River Delta. De Lattre's opposite, General Giáp, was aware of recent Chinese advances in northern Korea. Convinced that he could take the Tonkin lowlands by force in similar fashion, he lost no time in making his move. In early January 1951, he ordered regiments of the PAVN's 308th and 312th divisions to attack the north side of the colonial delta head-on in the area of Vĩnh Yên. But de Lattre was waiting for his opponent. When PAVN troops charged his positions head-on in mid-January 1951, the French general lit up the sky with artillery blasts and balls of fire in the form of napalm explosions. Vietnamese troops fought ferociously to take enemy positions, but a hail of machine-gun fire met each wave of young men sent over the top. Giáp had few anti-aircraft guns if any at this time, not enough to stop enemy bombers from wreaking mayhem on his troops. De Lattre and his men held their ground.

Vĩnh Yên was the baptism by fire for the PAVN. Wave attacks on entrenched positions left thousands of regulars killed and wounded, hit by the very things the guerrilla soldier had always avoided – artillery shells,

3 On the Associated State of Vietnam's army, see Nguyen Van Phu, "L'Armée vietnamienne (1949–1957): contribution à l'étude d'un cas de formation d'armée nationale," Ph.D. dissertation (Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier, 1980), and Georges Spillman, *Souvenirs d'un colonialiste* (Paris, 1968).

direct machine-gun fire, and aerial strafing. As many as six thousand soldiers may have perished during the battle of Vĩnh Yên before Giáp called it off. A PAVN officer, Ngô Văn Chiêu, provides us with a horrifying account of what napalm looked like as it fell from the sky on him and his brothers-in-arms in early 1951:

> Be careful of the planes. They are going to drop bombs and open fire – hit the ground, hide under the bamboo. The planes dived and all hell broke loose before my eyes. Hell came in the form of a big unwieldy egg falling from the first plane … then a second one dropped on my right near the road where there were two machine gunners. An enormous flame expanding over hundreds of meters, it seemed, spread terror throughout the ranks of the soldiers. Napalm: Fire that falls from the sky. Another plane advanced to spray more of this fire. The bomb dropped behind us and I felt a burning wind hit my entire body. My men ran; I couldn't stop them. There was no way you could remain under this storm cloud of fire that burned everything in its path. Everywhere the flames were leaping. Then they (the French) let loose their artillery, mortars, and machine guns, creating a tomb of fire from what had been only ten minutes earlier been a small forest.[4]

"What was that," a stunned soldier emerging from the mayhem asked his commanding officer, "the atom bomb?" "No," Chiêu told him, "napalm."

Despite the staggering toll inflicted on DRVN troops, communist leaders were undeterred. Within weeks, Hồ Chí Minh, Giáp, and their Chinese advisors sent Vietnamese boys back into this Franco-American inferno. When the PAVN troops went into battle on the night of March 23–24, 1951, in the areas of Mạo Khê and Đông Triều near Hải Phòng, they were met by a massive barrage delivered by French artillery, American-supplied B-26 aircraft loaded with napalm, and two battleships lying off the coast. Giáp used his artillery as best he could, but he was badly outgunned. Without an air force and an effective anti-air defense system, the PAVN remained woefully vulnerable to superior enemy firepower. Over and again, French artillery and bombers pounded his men as they assailed fortified positions in pitched battle. In mid-1951, Giáp would attempt a third time to seize a piece of the southern Red River Delta in the rice-rich provinces of Ninh Bình and Nam Định, but to no avail. In June 1951, the communists terminated their plans to seize the delta through conventional attacks for the time being. If Giáp continued like this, he would run his newly created army into the ground.[5]

4 Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un combattant Viet-Minh* (Paris, 1955), 154–5.

5 The best military history of the French Indochina War remains Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris, 1979).

The failure of Giáp's 1951 offensive did not mean that DRVN strategists turned their attention away from the delta in favor of going westward into the Highlands. Although Giáp and his Chinese advisors would redirect the PAVN's main force attacks that way from 1952 and eventually toward Điện Biên Phủ, all parties remained focused on the northern delta until the end of the French Indochina War for several reasons. First, clandestine trade with colonial zones allowed DRVN authorities to continue importing essential products they could not get from communist China in sufficient quantities (pharmaceuticals, paper, chemical products, and machine parts). Second, lowland paddy fields produced the rice the Vietnamese communists needed to feed their rapidly expanding regular army, human logistics, and civil service circulating throughout this upland corridor between the Việt Bắc on the one hand and zones III, IV, and V on the other. Third, Giáp needed rice and young people from the heavily populated delta to replenish his badly mauled regiments and to work in his human transport service and work teams. In short, the DRVN "sickle," though based in the Highlands, needed continued access to enemy zones in the lowlands if it was going to survive and prevail. It needed rice and recruits above all.

Unable to seize the northern delta in one fell swoop, DRVN leaders changed their tactics. They decided to go back in slowly – bit by bit, day by day, village by village. Methodically, they expanded government control into the lowlands by dispatching administrators, security and intelligence officials, and well-armed guerrillas. Pacification was not a colonial monopoly. This second, indirect offensive against the Tonkin Delta worked for another reason. No sooner had Giáp called off his conventional attacks on the delta in June 1951 than he and his party began breaking down their PAVN divisions into smaller, mobile combat teams to conduct guerrilla operations inside French-administered zones. Giáp could recombine these teams into their parent units when needed. From mid-1951, these PAVN teams operated in guerrilla formations and carried out a second, sustained assault on the northern delta. They expanded the DRVN's territorial hold village by village, collected rice wherever they could, and inducted young men into the army and both sexes into the government's human-powered transport and work teams. At least half-a-dozen PAVN battalions operated clandestinely in the delta around Hanoi in late 1951, a total of around 4,000 well-armed and trained troops. Thus, communist leaders never abandoned their strategic interest in the Red River Delta.[6]

6 See Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine*, 417–28, 446–62.

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De Lattre and Salan realized that defensive measures and colonial pacification alone were not going to win the war for the French. Having served in the Highlands in the 1930s, Salan knew how important the enemy's control of the city of Hòa Bình was for Hồ Chí Minh's plans to consolidate his control in northern Vietnam. French intelligence officers referred to this enemy interchange in the Black River Valley west of Hanoi as the "Hòa Bình Corridor." The French concluded that severing this supply line was crucial. If the PAVN dared to counterattack French forces there, so much the better. In mid-November 1951, the French occupied Hòa Bình and secured the route connecting it to the colonial capital. The Vietnamese riposte was immediate. The territorial integrity of Hồ Chí Minh's communist-driven war state depended on recovering that interchange. Giáp sent his best divisions against the colonial forces hunkered down in Hòa Bình while the 316th and the 320th battalions continued to expand pacification in the delta. In so doing, the Vietnamese aimed to remind the French that what they did up in the Highlands would cost them down below in the war for the delta's villages. Over a three-month period, Giáp mobilized more than three hundred thousand men and women porters to supply his troops going into Hòa Bình. Most came from the populous lower delta (zones III and IV), as did the food supply. In mid-November, Giáp sent his regulars directly into the line of fire in an attempt to overrun the enemy camp in Hòa Bình. Fighting was ferocious, especially during the wave attacks that came in the dark of night. But each time PAVN regulars rushed enemy positions, they ran into heavy machine-gun fire, artillery, napalm, and aerial bombing.

The DRVN eventually recovered Hòa Bình, but not because they had defeated their adversary on the battlefield. Salan's men pushed back every PAVN assault. But Salan's success in the Highlands was coming at the cost of losing ground on the connected front in the Tonkin Delta. After assuming command upon de Lattre's death in January 1952, Salan realized that if he continued to hold Hòa Bình, it would endanger French control over the plains, a politically unacceptable scenario. In February 1952, Salan withdrew his troops from Hòa Bình to send them after the PAVN-powered mobile units in the delta.[7]

What happened at Hòa Bình had big implications for what French and DRVN leaders would do next. Salan may have held off his attackers in this clash, but he had not destroyed the PAVN. Second, by returning Hòa Bình to the adversary, he allowed his adversaries to re-establish the territorial and

7 See Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine*, 429–62.

military integrity of their sickle-shaped war state running from the Chinese border to Zone V. Lastly, Salan's decision to withdraw validated Giáp's calibrated strategy of engaging his PAVN regulars in the Highlands while deploying his mobile task forces in the northern delta. This symbiotic relationship between the Highlands and the plains did not guarantee military victory, but it diluted the French ability to claim it and bogged down Salan's men. Hòa Bình was a French victory, but it was a pyrrhic one.

But whatever the spin Hồ Chí Minh's propaganda machine put on it, French commanders had bested Giáp in pitched battle, again. DRVN leaders and their Chinese advisors drew at least four lessons from this: First, they realized that the French would not give up the Red River Delta, the defense of which remained their top political and military priority. Second, the extended duration of the Hòa Bình battle – almost three months – had come dangerously close to depleting the food supplies needed to keep the PAVN soldier in the field. Access to and delivery of rice had emerged as a major concern. Third, the communists realized that winning the war required them to put their party in complete control of the DRVN state, army, logistics, and mass organizations. Finally, Hòa Bình may have offered more favorable terrain for attacking the French than fighting in the open delta, but its proximity to colonial bases in the delta allowed the adversary to supply their men by road and air and to deploy overwhelming air power. Vietnamese communist leaders decided that if they wanted to *actually win* in pitched battle against the enemy, they had to move their conventional operations into areas more favorable to them. There was only one way for the PAVN to go: westward, deeper into the Indochinese Highlands. But again, the Vietnamese never lost sight of the lowlands. This was the strategic advantage of this sickle-shaped Vietnam running from the Việt Bắc to Zone V. It allowed the Vietnamese to operate in the lowlands at their feet or to go deep into the Highlands – or both. The DRVN had multiple strategic options available, and they were determined to use them (Map 10.1).

Of Rice and War

Although the French Indochina War in northern Vietnam featured many bloody battlefield clashes, it was also a struggle for food.[8] This struggle occurred almost everywhere along the edges of the DRVN's sickle shape. Nowhere was this more evident than in the sustained economic offensive

8 This section is based in large part on my *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, chapters 7 and 9.

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Map 10.1 The strategic zones as defined by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Redrawn by Jeff Edwards. Used with permission.

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the French operated between 1950 and 1954 to stop their adversaries from procuring the food – above all, the rice – they needed to continue their war effort. In April 1951, as Giáp and de Lattre faced off in the delta, the head of the Communist Party, Trường Chinh, warned his readers that a third general was stalking the land. This officer had no nationality. He needed no army or conscription laws to fight. Trường Chinh referred to him as the "Rice General" (Tướng Gạo). While no one could actually see him, everyone knew he was out there. And all feared the weapon he carried at his side: hunger.[9]

The French saw in this "Rice General" an ally who could help them stop the DRVN from feeding the soldiers and civil servants of its expanding war state. French officers referred to their emerging project interchangeably as the "economic war" or "the rice war" – *la bataille du riz*. Starting in early 1951, de Lattre and Salan systematized this economic offensive and connected it to their pacification efforts in the Tonkin paddy fields. The goal was no longer simply to build up a loyal local administration. The idea was also to prevent rice from getting through to DRVN zones. As one of the architects of the economic offensive put it: "Both sides are agreed on one thing. The battle for rice is equal in importance to the one between armies. Victory will go to those who know how to control the delta's rice granaries."[10] An already brutal conflagration, the French Indochina War was about to get even worse.

Economics had always been part of the struggle between the French and the Vietnamese. No one knew this better than Salan. He had personally accompanied Hồ Chí Minh to France during the summer of 1946 as the Vietnamese president tried desperately to negotiate the prickly questions of trade, finance, and monetary policy. Salan was there, too, in November 1946 when differences over sovereignty led to the violent clash in Hải Phòng Harbor over who had the right to collect customs duties. And he was still there after the outbreak of full-scale war in Hanoi a month later. In 1947, he presided over Operation Léa, the large-scale offensive designed to destroy Hồ Chí Minh's government and sever its commercial ties to China. As he recognized, he had failed to achieve either objective. The Vietnamese continued to trade clandestinely with the French colonial cities and nearby Asian markets in southern China and Southeast Asia.

9 On hunger and famine during the French Indochina War, see Christian Lentz, *Contesting Territory: Dien Bien Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (New Haven, 2019) and Alec Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960* (Honolulu, 2020).

10 Quoted in my *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, 301.

Colonial authorities and their Vietnamese partners did their best to stop their enemies from forging economic ties between the DRVN "islands" and Saigon, Hanoi, and other Asian commercial hubs in Guangzhou and Bangkok. From the early years of the war, they attacked the DRVN's communications, transport, cottage industries, and natural resources. The French went to great lengths to block the DRVN's trade in medicines, chemicals, and paper. And they attacked Hồ Chí Minh's food supplies, rice and salt in particular. Success, however, depended on finding officers who could untangle all the moving parts in the enemy's economic activities. Progress also depended on the cooperation of Vietnamese partners with the intimate knowledge of the land, its languages, and local administration. As a result, colonial operations on the economic front tended to be sporadic and inconsistent. An important exception to this rule occurred in the late 1940s when the French Army effectively blocked the DRVN's ability to move rice from large stockpiles on the western side of the tip of southern Vietnam to troops fighting in eastern areas in the South.[11]

The sustained economic assault on the DRVN from Zone V northward only really began in 1950 – in the wake of Mao's decision to help Hồ Chí Minh field a professional army and build a revolutionary state to run it. Inspired by the success of the southern blockade, French military officers, colonial administrators, and their Vietnamese partners devised an elaborate food denial program for central and northern Vietnam. The pressure for action in this area increased as the communists attacked the delta during the first half of 1951. The French may have defeated Giáp's offensive, but they realized that the DRVN's top priority in the delta was not to capture Hanoi, but to secure the nearby rice fields that could feed its hungry divisions.

The French economic offensive evolved in three overlapping phases between 1950 and 1954. The first wave began in early 1950 when military authorities began dividing ASVN territory into three sectors. Zone A referred to spaces located deep within the core territories of French Indochina, where goods and services could circulate freely. Less secure areas were designated Zone B, in which moderate restrictions on activity were enforced. The borderlands adjacent to DRVN territory became Zone C, where all economic activity was strictly controlled, or simply suppressed. These economic measures went hand in hand with new military steps, such as the reinforcement and construction of new posts, watchtowers, and blockhouses. "When

11 On the South during the French Indochina War, see Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, 2021).

it comes to economic warfare," the French general in charge of central Vietnam's rice war wrote to his Vietnamese counterpart in 1952, "it is the perfect combination of administrative action and military action that leads to success."[12] Colonial authorities approved legislation allowing the army to control the circulation of foodstuffs (rice, salt, fish) and industrial inputs that the enemy used for making weapons and explosives (machine parts, gasoline, chemicals). This first wave of controls applied to all of Indochina, including the blockaded areas in the south.

As the center of gravity of the fighting moved northward from late 1950 so, too, did the French economic counteroffensive. And as it did, a second phase emerged in the French military's plans to cut off the DRVN's access to the rice stocks of the northern delta. Salan issued more orders to fight a "rice war" in the delta against the enemy using his own methods if necessary. Specific measures included: (1) the rapid deployment of troops and officials into delta villages during harvest times to protect fields from enemy penetration; (2) assisting villagers to get their paddy out of the fields and into carefully guarded silos or nearby blockhouses as rapidly as possible; (3) carefully measuring and inventorying harvest yields for every village to determine how much rice remained for families to meet subsistence needs; (4) guaranteeing that the colonial government would purchase surplus rice at a favorable price in colonial piasters and then store it in safe locations so that none would be left for the enemy; and (5) avoidance of harsh methods that could drive villagers into enemy hands (though this was not always observed by French forces, as Vietnamese testimony demonstrates). Although French troops served in the paddy fields, de Lattre and Salan increasingly relied on the VNA and local authorities to fight the rice war on the ground where it counted most.

Village life during the Indochina War had never been easy in the northern delta or central Vietnam. But now it became much worse. The violence of the conventional battles during the first half of 1951 had spilled over into scores of Red River villages. The escalation of economic warfare meant that the suffering of civilians was now compounded. To stop enemy assaults on rice-rich areas surrounding Hanoi and Hải Phòng, the French unrolled barbed-wire and installed bamboo-piked barricades in and around hundreds of northern villages. Battles over rice occurred mainly during the two harvest seasons (roughly in April–May, the fifth lunar month, and October–November, the tenth). Attacks usually occurred at night when Vietnamese

12 Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, 303.

commandos tried to storm barricaded villages and overwhelm the handful of Franco-Vietnamese troops defending them and their food stockpiles. As soon as the peasants had finished the harvest, "the rice war" exploded, French journalist Lucien Bodard recalled, "with Việt Minh and French troops coming out of nowhere to take it from them."[13] When the French did not have sufficient defenders in place, they opened up their artillery in order to stop their adversaries from taking the rice in the dark of night. And when one side could not get its rice out, commanders on all sides often burned it rather than leave anything behind. Watching from the sidelines, peasants wondered where they were going to get their next meal. Civilians suffered the most in the rice wars, caught "between the hammer and the anvil" as a French intelligence officer described it.[14]

A third and final wave took the economic war to a higher level from mid-1952 as the April–May harvest apparently came in short for the French. Several things distinguish this final phase from the earlier ones. First, Salan's entourage concluded that the lack of enforcement in the earlier phases had allowed Hồ Chí Minh's officials to continue importing much of what they needed from the colonial zones, rice above all. This, in turn, had allowed the Vietnamese to feed their PAVN divisions despite the fact that the Chinese communists were not providing food aid. Second, to remedy this problem, Salan's team concluded that they had to do everything in their power to *systematize* – the new buzzword – the organization, the administration, and the enforcement of the economic blockade throughout "all of Indochina." The air force, navy, and special forces would help the army and their Vietnamese allies to do this. Third, having failed to hold Hòa Bình in early 1952, Salan pushed hard to drive a wedge between the rice-rich delta and this enemy corridor hugging its perimeter. Finally, Salan obtained the authorization to attack the DRVN's economic infrastructure in a stepped-up attempt to bring the enemy to his knees. In June 1952, he declared a systematic economic war on the Vietnamese. What was new in this third phase of the economic offensive was the mobilization of the navy and especially the French Air Force. Salan also received authorization to bomb systematically the DRVN's agricultural infrastructure.

Reworking the blockade to make it airtight was the first step in this direction. Starting in June, the French Army began reinforcing the protective wrapping around the core areas of the Red River Delta. This meant, in Salan's words,

13 Lucien Bodard, *La guerre d'Indochine* (Paris, 1997), 483.
14 Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, 305.

turning it into a "no man's land." Soldiers and administrators poured into the border zones, backed up by the French Navy and Air Force. This buffer zone fanned out from the Franco-Vietnamese border 6 miles (10 kilometers) or so before touching up against DRVN territory. Nothing was permitted to transit this band – no rice, salt, medicines, paper, or chemicals. For Salan, "nothing" also meant no human beings living in this strip. To this end, the commander-in-chief forcibly evacuated twenty thousand Vietnamese from the northern and northwestern sides of the perimeter and eighty-thousand souls from the southwestern side. According to Salan, anyone caught in this no man's land could be killed as a presumed enemy supporter – a directive that anticipated the "free fire zones" later used by the French in Algeria and the United States and South Vietnamese forces in the Vietnam War. Writing in late 1952, Salan did not mince his words: "The blockade of the delta begun in June of this year has delivered a real blow to the Viet Minh war economy. It has turned out to be an effective weapon in drying up in very important proportions his food supplies in paddy. It is thus necessary to continue this experience and to render it even more vigorous by fixing any minor problems which may have been detected."[15]

Strategic bombing became an essential part of the French economic assault. To choose targets, operational officers sought out detailed information on enemy industries, natural resources, mines, dikes, and irrigation systems. Once the maps had been prepared, the coordinates fixed, and the weather permitting, pilots attacked Hồ Chí Minh's economic infrastructure from the air while the navy and special forces moved up rivers and canals to strike. The French targeted three main rice producing areas in particular: Thanh Hóa province in Zone IV, Bắc Giang province located southeast of the DRVN capital at Thái Nguyên, and a wide strip of DRVN-controlled rice fields located in the foothills west of Hanoi. From his experience in interwar Indochina, Salan knew that colonial officials had built hydraulic complexes to feed the growing northern population through double cropping. Starting in 1952, the French Air Force began bombing these irrigation targets. Encouraged by the preliminary results, the campaign was expanded to hit canals, dikes, and granaries elsewhere in central and northern Vietnam. As one internal note explained the goal: "to destroy any hope of obtaining a harvest in rebel zones."[16] Food production throughout the DRVN sickle rapidly plummeted.

15 Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, 307.
16 Quoted in my *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, 308.

The list of targets in this economic war was not limited to irrigation systems. In 1952, the French Air Force received authorization to attack the water buffalo and cattle population in DRVN zones. The goal was to deprive the enemy of another source of food and deny its farmers an important means of tilling their fields. The air force struck deeper into people's lives by bombing more aggressively the DRVN's outdoor markets, transport system (roads, bridges, ports, and a tattered railway), industrial capacity (weapons workshops, paper mills, textile factories), and any remaining dams, dikes, and canals not taken out in 1952 or rebuilt thereafter. Sluices and sliding lock-gates used to control the flow of water came under systematic attack. Even stocks of salt could be tainted by petrol dropped from planes.

The French destruction of DRVN infrastructure forced Hồ Chí Minh to further mobilize his population to repair dikes, dams, terraces, and canals; to fix roads and bridges; and to clean the rice and salt that the French had contaminated. Between 1950 and 1954, Vietnamese laborers repaired 2,280 miles (3,670 kilometers) of road and 72,000 feet (22,000 meters) of bridges with little or no mechanical help. To avoid colonial detection and bombers, villagers tended to their fields at night. Peasants turned hiding animals, gardens, and granaries into an art form. Protecting animals from enemy assaults was important as hiding rice. A child of the countryside during the war, Nguyễn Công Luận remembered vividly the strange symbiosis that developed between villagers and animals united in their desire to survive enemy patrols passing through their villages:

> Even the animals knew how to get out the way of French-led patrols. Whenever the French [Union] soldiers came, all kinds of sounds subsided. Even domestic animals – beasts of burden, pigs, and dogs – seemed to try to make the least noise. All kept quiet and acted frantically as if they could apprehend [the] fear conveyed by the behavior of panic-stricken villagers. Most dogs ran about to find a nook of safety in dense bamboo groves. Some pigs sneaked into concealed holes when their owners yelled, "French coming!" Two of the dozen buffaloes in my village would act accordingly to the shout "Lie down!" when they were under fire while fleeing the village. When the French soldiers were gone and the villagers returned to their normal activities, all those animals became lively again and made their usual noises and sounds.[17]

War demanded as much of women as it did men. Women and girls took over in the fields when their husbands and fathers left to fight. They also

17 Nguyen Cong Luan, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars* (Bloomington, 2012), 79.

served as human porters, road workers, and nurses. Of the estimated 1.7 million people who served as porters during 1950–4, half were women. Children toiled in the fields as never before in their short lives. This increased level of physical activity across all of upper Vietnam meant the burning of unprecedented amounts of calories. Fatigue spread throughout the countryside as undernourished bodies became increasingly susceptible to disease.

By mid-1952, the French economic war was moving into high gear. According to one Vietnamese study, the French Air Force bombed twelve hydraulic systems (dams, dikes, and canals) between June and August 1952. French planes burst the dams of water reservoirs in Zone IV – in the same places the US Air Force would bomb during Operation Rolling Thunder in the mid-1960s. Between 1952 and 1954, the Colonial Air Force killed "tens of thousands" of beasts of burden. In the run-up to the battle of Điện Biên Phủ alone, this included the killing of 3,594 water buffalo. A French after-action report confirms that in a single attack on September 15, 1953, bombers dropped four napalm bombs killing 152 buffaloes. The use of napalm as an economic weapon reveals the importance that the French placed on this aspect of the war. By April 1953, the French army had expanded its economic offensive southward into Zone V, including the rice-rich areas around Huế and Đà Nẵng that had fed the DRVN's troops clandestinely for years.

By blockading the enemy's economy and trade, by bombing Hồ Chí Minh's agricultural infrastructure, and by targeting livestock, the French expanded the war deeper into Vietnamese society, sending pangs of hunger into the bellies of hundreds of thousands of people. In the process, the French eliminated the traditional distinctions between combatants and civilians and between the homefront and the battlefield – erasures that scholars recognize as the defining features of "total war."[18] In 1956, one of the strongest defenders of "economic warfare," General Lionel-Max Chassin, commander-in-chief of the air force in Indochina in the early 1950s, provided a bone-chilling assessment of what this form of total war was and should remain, in his view, in a colonial war:

> One must starve people to death (*Il faut faire crever les gens de faim*). I am convinced that had we killed all of the water buffaloes, destroyed all of Indochina's rice, we would have had the Vietnamese at our mercy

18 On the notion of total war, its uses and abuses, see Hew Strachan, "Essay and Reflection: On Total War and Modern War," *The International History Review* 22 (2) (June 2000), 341–70, especially 353–5, and Talbot Imlay, "Total War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30 (3) (2007), 547–70.

> whenever we wanted. It took us a long time to understand and to obtain the authorization to destroy the enemy's dams. We destroyed them in the end and, when we asked the Vietnamese during the first conference meeting on the armistice negotiations (in 1954) what had caused them the most problems, they responded "that what hurt them the most was when you destroyed the dams" … It's the lesson of economic warfare: you must starve people to death.[19]

The Indochina conflict was a brutal war of decolonization. This was particularly true in the upper two-thirds of the DRVN, where hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, including untold numbers of civilians, died in almost a decade of violence, hunger, and fear.

19 "Chassin au Conseil supérieur des forces armées," January 20, 1956, AI 02 E2753, Service historique de la Défense: https://cgoscha.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2022/07/general-chassin-pdf-edit.pdf.

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