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The Geneva Conference of 1954

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I have concluded, as the Assembly knows, within the time limit I'd set myself and with only a few hours' discrepancy, agreements for the cessation of hostilities in Indo-China. A few days from now – and, in the principal sectors, very rapidly – blood will have stopped flowing, and we will no longer have the heart-rending thought that our young men are being decimated out there every day. The nightmare is over.[1]

So began Pierre Mendès France's July 22, 1954, speech to a packed Chamber of Deputies in Paris. The French prime minister was only five weeks into his premiership at the time. Not only that, but Mendès France had replaced his predecessor Joseph Laniel on June 13 with a dramatic pledge. He would resign in turn should he fail to negotiate peace in Indochina within a month. He just about made good on his promise, the final agreements at Geneva having been secured just two days earlier. Yet there was no triumphalism in Mendès France's parliamentary statement.[2] The war in Indochina had cost 92,797 French Union lives.[3] For the first time almost 10,000 French Union troops had become prisoners of war of an anticolonial revolutionary regime.[4] Visibly exhausted, he instead justified his signature of a ceasefire with Vietnam meticulously, almost line by line.

It was significant that Mendès France felt the need not just to explain his actions, but to defend them as well. His speech culminated with a eulogy to

1 My thanks to Christopher Goscha and Edward Miller for their comments and advice on an earlier chapter draft. Text of Pierre Mendès France's speech to the National Assembly, Paris, July 22, 1954. Official translation from the French. For an edited version of the original, see: Sabine Jansen (ed.), *Les grands discours parlementaires de la Quatrième République de Pierre Mendès France à Charles de Gaulle* (Paris, 2006), 181–2.

2 For coverage of the two-day French parliamentary debate on July 22–23, see: Pierre Mendès France, *Oeuvres Completes vol. III: Gouverner, c'est choisir* (Paris, 1986), 143–70.

3 Francis Pike, *Empires at War* (London, 2011), 155.

4 Ministère des affaires étrangères, hereafter MAE, Paris, 120QO/319, Annex to DGD memo. 14/3, "Tableau comparatif des prionniers & disparus, et les libérés," September 8, 1954; Service Historique de la Défense, hereafter SHD, Vincennes, 10H2251, no. 867/EMIFT/EGP, "Activité des commissions mixtes et de la commission internationale," September 1–15, 1954.

the French garrison lost in the battle of Điên Biên Phủ in northern Vietnam less than three months earlier. Eschewing any mention of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN), the state that had inflicted that spectactular defeat on French forces, he instead focused on the garrison's defenders, a high proportion of them colonial troops, doomed, but willing, even so, to sacrifice their lives for something beyond salvation. Mendès France's listeners were left wondering: What was this "something"? Was it the garrison itself? Or France's position in Indochina as a whole? Whichever the case, the deeper meaning conveyed was inescapable. The fight could not be won; it was time for France to leave.

Ironically, the defensiveness that Mendès France displayed regarding the Geneva Accords was echoed in the words of his adversaries. Just days earlier, senior leaders of the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP) – the organization that controlled the DRVN state – gathered for the party's 6th Plenum. Many listened with considerable skepticism as party founder Hồ Chí Minh and General Secretary Trường Chinh explained the terms of the deal that the DRVN had endorsed at Geneva. Some party officials criticized the acceptance of a temporary line of partition at the 17th parallel – a major concession that would force the DRVN to abandon large swaths of territory in central and southern Vietnam that it had controlled since the beginning of the war.[5] There was also dismay over the proposed neutralization of Cambodia, and likely also Laos. The communization of all of Indochina – a key VWP goal since its founding in the early 1930s – now seemed a more distant goal. The discontent with the Geneva Accords was also evident among the party's rank and file. Lê Duẩn, the ranking VWP leader in southern Vietnam, faced difficult questions from cadres at a meeting in the Mekong Delta. Had the strategic advantage so hard-won at Điện Biên Phủ been squandered at Geneva? Why were elections on eventual Vietnamese unification postponed for fully two years? Why partition the country meanwhile at the 17th parallel when the DRVN controlled far more territory? Had the regime's Chinese and Soviet patrons forced it to give so much away?[6]

Unloved in France and vilified in much of Vietnam, it is tempting to conclude that the agreements to emerge from the Geneva Conference in July 1954 were fatally flawed. The impression is, of course, strengthened by our knowledge of their outcome: promised unification elections that never took

5 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: Un état né de la guerre (1945–1954)* (Paris, 2011), 413–17.
6 Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 29–30.

place, a massive refugee flight, and the eventual outbreak of the "Vietnam War." But this is to spy the Geneva Conference through the looking glass of America's subsequent immersion in Vietnam. Although the Geneva Accords prefigured the eclipse of French colonialism in Southeast Asia, their decolonizing qualities have been obscured by historians' focus on the postcolonial violence of the following decades.

If we take the failure of the conference for granted, we may overlook what its participants managed to accomplish. Painstakingly negotiated over four months, the Geneva settlement had two core elements. An "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam" concerned itself with immediate issues of stopping the fighting and enabling Vietnam's people to move, either to places of safety in the short term or, in the longer term, to relocate permanently north or south of the partition line bisecting the country at the 17th parallel. The "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference" addressed the country's political future. It made provisions for national elections to be held two years hence, the victors of which would lead a national government in a unified and sovereign Vietnamese state.[7] Together these two settlements put an end to eight years of war between the French imperial state and their DRVN opponents.[8]

Much has been written about the Geneva talks (Figure 12.1), the agreements reached, and the ways they played out in practice. We now know a good deal more about those most directly involved in the negotiations, thanks to more extensive scholarship in Vietnamese sources, the release of additional Chinese and Soviet accounts of the conference, and continuing reflection on French, American, and other Western power reactions.[9] Diplomatic and social historians have also explored far beyond the conference hall to consider how Vietnam's peoples, those most imminently affected by the

7 The fullest blow-by-blow accounts of the negotiations remain James Cable, *The Geneva Conference of 1954 on Indochina* (Basingstoke, 1986), and François Joyaux, *La Chine et le règlement du premier conflit d'Indochine, Genève 1954* (Paris, 1979).

8 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016), 265–72, 278–91.

9 Essential works include Pierre Asselin, "Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954–1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9 (2) (2007), 95–126, and Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique," *Cold War History* 11 (2) (2011), 155–95; Goscha, *Vietnam: Un état né de la guerre*, 407–19; Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy Toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Stanford, 2003), 28–52; Chen Jian, "China and the Indochina Settlement at the Geneva Conference of 1954," in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (eds.), *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 240–62; Chen Jian and Shen Zhihua, "The Geneva Conference of 1954: New Evidence from the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 16 (2008), 7–9; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1954–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), chapters 2–3.

Geneva arrangements, responded to war's aftermath, whether as supporters of the victorious DRVN, as its opponents in the army and government of the French-backed State of Vietnam (SVN), as members of other militias and movements neither consulted nor reconciled to the conference outcome, or as refugees seeking sanctuary across the partition line.[10]

Embedded in this scholarship are attempts to explain why the Geneva settlement did not stick. However sensitive one is to the danger of reading history backward, it is difficult to evaluate the 1954 negotiations and their consequences contingently. It remains hard to capture the sense of expectancy for some, as well as the feelings of dread experienced by others. Yet it is only by grappling with the contingency and uncertainty that surrounded the events of 1954–5 that we can begin to understand the conference as something more than just an abject failure to head off the calamities that lay ahead. The significance of Geneva lay not only in what it portended about the future, but also in what it revealed about past patterns and practices.

Vietnamese and French Standpoints

Why did DRVN leaders agree to negotiate at Geneva, and why would they even consider a settlement that delivered neither total victory nor immediate unification of Vietnam under VWP rule? As Pierre Asselin has shown, the Hanoi regime doubted its capacity to impose terms without, in the process, provoking US intervention or forfeiting Chinese and Soviet goodwill.[11] Asselin's astute analysis of the DRVN approach to the Geneva negotiations undermines the "standard total view" that Hồ Chí Minh and his comrades were compromised by dependency on their communist allies. Their Chinese partners, according to this view, were eager to consolidate Zhou Enlai's success in breaking down the international isolation of the People's Republic of

10 Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), especially chapters 1 and 2; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Religion, Race, and US Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham, NC, 2004), chapters 4 and 5; Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, 2021), 262–7, 273–4; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Giving Peace a Chance: National Reconciliation and a Neutral South Vietnam, 1954–1964," *Peace and Change* 38 (4) (2013), 385–97; Jessica Elkind, "'The Virgin Mary is Going South': Refugee Resettlement in South Vietnam, 1954–1956," *Diplomatic History* 38 (5) (2014), 987–1016; Philip E. Catton, "'It Would Be a Terrible Thing if We Handed These People over to the Communists': The Eisenhower Administration, Article 14(d), and the Origins of the Refugee Exodus from North Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 39 (2) (2015), 331–58.

11 Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam," 157, 172–8.

China (PRC). And Beijing remained anxious at the prospect of VWP domination of the Indochinese peninsula. The Soviets, meanwhile, needed to build bridges to Paris to help ensure that France would reject the European Defence Community (EDC) project, at the heart of which stood a possible rearmament of West Germany.[12] These external pressures were real enough, Asselin shows, but the DRVN state faced other constraints much closer to home. Domestically, popular pressure for an end to the war was mounting, with calls for negotiations having become more insistent during late 1953. The DRVN regime was also internally divided between military supporters of an expanded war and civilian proponents of a compromise peace that would free the DRVN to enact socialist reforms.[13]

As DRVN leaders estimated the optimal balance between domestic and diplomatic priorities, their rivals in the Saigon-based SVN were making their own calculations. On May 7, 1954, Bảo Đại, the former-emperor-turned-SVN-chief-of-state, signed off on a "National Salvation Front" aligning noncommunist nationalist parties with the Cao Đài, Bình Xuyên, and Hòa Hảo sects and their militias. Demonstrations in Saigon supporting a unified, noncommunist Vietnam sought to sway French and US opinion away from acceptance of partition.[14] It was to no avail. The delegation representing the SVN – soon to be rebranded the Republic of Vietnam under its newly appointed prime minister, Ngô Đình Diệm – found itself marginalized at Geneva. Never privy to the closed-session meetings between the conference's principal international players, the SVN delegation at Geneva harbored no illusions about the proceedings. Above all, the settlement enabled France to withdraw, perhaps without even consulting SVN officials. Viewed from Saigon's perspective, the accords left a vacuum that would be filled violently as Vietnam's two regimes – and the rival political and religious movements and paramilitary groups within each of them – competed over the ideological complexion of a unified state.[15] Partition at the 17th parallel merely inscribed the initial battle line for an impending struggle: first, over unification; and second, over the nature of the social system to be constructed. The Republic of Vietnam, in other words, would have to live with the consequences of Geneva, but it accepted no responsibility for the settlement itself.[16]

12 Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam," 157.
13 Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam," 163–6.
14 Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, 2013), 67–70.
15 Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 72–81.
16 MAE, 120QO/319, tel. 32171, COMIGAL Saigon, to Etats Associés, Paris, August 17, 1954.

The fault lay, in part, with Geneva's great-power players, but in larger measure with two other culprits. Between May and July 1954, Ngô Đình Diệm, both in his preparatory meetings with US diplomats in Paris and in his first public statements as SVN premier, was scathing in his criticism of the French. For Diệm, the half-baked Geneva accords were the logical outcome of France's indecent haste to be rid of its obligations in Vietnam. In private, Diệm complained that the SVN's inability to influence the negotiation process was the logical culmination of Bảo Đại's decision to collude with French colonialism, thereby compromising Vietnamese national interests.[17]

Pierre Mendès France shared Diệm's low opinion of the so-called "Bảo Đại solution" of limited Vietnamese political autonomy, but he could hardly concede that the French war effort was entirely futile. Equally difficult to admit, Bảo Đại notwithstanding, was that Franco-SVN forces had almost broken the communist resistance in Vietnam's far south. Only on the eve of withdrawal did France finally abandon its nationalist paramilitary partners, the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, and the Bình Xuyên.[18] If there was a studied ambiguity in his July 22 parliamentary comments about the value of a Franco-Vietnamese connection, there was more assertiveness in his portrayal of the Geneva Conference Accords. Here, Mendès France had placed himself at the heart of the drama. The text of the accords was "cruel" because the arrangements they consecrated were devastating, namely the division of Vietnam. But facts were facts: there was no alternative. The French Expeditionary Corps in northern Vietnam faced mounting losses. Negotiating a ceasefire, while, at the same time, rushing out the required additional troops, was not just the rational choice, it was the ethical one. Only now, with the diplomacy done, could Mendès France reveal how desperate the French military position had been.[19]

During military talks in early June with DRVN commanders over prisoner-of-war exchanges, it had become apparent that Hồ Chí Minh's government was receptive to a more general peace agreement. Jean Chauvel, personal envoy to Mendès France, was immediately instructed to seek clarification from the DRVN's lead negotiator, Phạm Văn Đồng. In Mendès France's retelling, it was then a matter of standing firm against excessive Việt Minh demands. Identical agreements, not just for Vietnam, but for Laos and

17 Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS, 2002), 8–9, 26–7.
18 McHale, *The First Vietnam War*, 262–71.
19 Pierre Mendès France speech, Paris, July 22, 1954, in Sabine Jansen, *Les grands discours parlementaires de la Quatrième République: De Pierre Mendès à Charles de Gaulle* (Paris, 2006), 183–7.

Cambodia as well, were rejected. Such an arrangement would have seen all three countries temporarily partitioned, their northern sectors placed under Việt Minh or pro-Việt Minh administrations, an obvious precursor to communization of all of Indochina. Proposals for an immediate French evacuation followed by national elections only six months after a ceasefire were also turned down. In their place, Mendès France's team secured a manageable 300-day deadline for reciprocal troop evacuations and a two-year timetable for Vietnam-wide elections.

The result was a workable peace accord and a symmetrical one. For every Franco-South Vietnamese concession, there was a DRVN quid pro quo. The embodiment of this reciprocity was the free movement for all Vietnamese across the partition line. French negotiators, Mendès France suggested, had dug in hard over matters of genuine human consequence. France could depart Vietnam with a clear conscience, focusing instead on matters of more proximate interest: the EDC talks and, above all, the export drive needed to secure future French prosperity.[20] Mendès France's underlying message was obvious. He had salvaged meaningful concessions from a weak military position. He had saved France from a crippling economic and military burden. And he had ensured that noncommunist Vietnamese living in the North could escape direct rule by Hanoi. It was a judgment echoed by René Moreau, French envoy to Saigon, who declared that Mendès France's Geneva diplomacy had "saved the Expeditionary Force from complete disaster."[21] Another month of fighting and Hanoi might have fallen, triggering civil war among southern anticommunist forces.[22] By implication, Phạm Văn Đồng's team had frittered away their strategic advantage.

Heralded by some signatories as a remarkable peace negotiation, the Geneva Conference Accords remained highly provisional. Their fulfillment remained a matter of doubt, uncertain in the turbulent local and international climates of July 1954. Implementation of everything, from French military evacuation and refugee resettlement in the first instance, to peaceful elections and eventual Vietnamese reunification in the second, hinged on the American

20 Ibid.

21 We should note, however, that Pierre Grosser suggests that French military commanders painted the strategic position post–Điện Biên Phủ in the worst possible light in order to force Mendès France's hand; see: Pierre Grosser, "La France et la défense de l'Indochine après les accords de Genève," in Christopher E. Goscha and Karine Laplante (eds.), *L'échec de la paix en Indochine – The Failure of Peace in Indochina 1954–1962* (Paris, 2010), 149–58.

22 MAE, 120QO/178, R. Moreau, Saigon, memo to Foreign Ministry, September 22, 1954. Moreau went on to blame unnamed "bastards" in Bảo Đại's government for trying to prevent an orderly French departure from Vietnam.

response, whether that be reluctant acquiescence or active sabotage. Walter Bedell Smith, Under-Secretary of State and official US delegate at Geneva, signaled that Washington "took note" of the accords, but most recognized even this as merely contingent. Much would rest on the complexion of Ngô Đình Diệm's regime, still more on its effectiveness in channeling American anticommunism.[23] This is neither to impose a crude model of US hegemony on the Southeast Asian situation nor to deny agency or signal importance to the actions of the Vietnamese and others. It is simply to state the obvious: of all the conference participants, it was Eisenhower's administration that was the most poorly reconciled to the outcome.

Certainly, French negotiators had extracted more than they thought possible when the conference opened in late April.[24] At that point the Điện Biên Phủ garrison, ravaged by successive DRVN assaults since March 13, was close to surrender. Daily media coverage, punctuated by stirring accounts of heroism and sacrifice in the press, increased the pressure on Mendès France's negotiating team to secure an honorable peace – but a peace nonetheless. The domestic public was tired of the war. Some were traumatized by it; many more were bored with it. The French Union seemed set to disappear anyway, so why persist with the fiction that it might yet endure in Vietnam? A protracted conflict as manifestly colonial as it was remote, the French Indochina War failed to stir the public passions of the looming confrontation in Algeria. Settlers to Vietnam were few in number, too few to constitute a discrete political constituency or a powerful cultural symbol.[25] Their ability to sway distant compatriots, whether through literary and other artistic production or by direct political appeal, was commensurately limited. Conscripts and celebrated Metropolitan Army regiments played no part in the fighting, much of which fell to colonial and, increasingly, to SVN forces.[26] But the anxiety persisted that an unending war might yet require the blood of national servicemen.

Among the major French political parties, the Gaullist Rassemblement du Peuple Francais (RPF) had argued most fervently for a greater military effort. But even de Gaulle's fervent supporters stopped short of suggesting the use of conscripts. De Gaulle himself made no secret of his contempt for

23 Miller, *Misalliance*, 87–108; Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 7–13, 28–34.
24 MAE, 120QO/319, Pourparlers de paix en Indochine, "Fiche concernant un 'cessez le feu' en Indochine," April 16, 1954.
25 Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944–1958* (Cambridge, 1987), 210.
26 Nikki Cooper, "Dien Bien Phu – Fifty Years On," *Modern & Contemporary France* 12 (4) (2004), 446–7; François Guillemot, "'Be Men!': Fighting and Dying for the State of Vietnam (1951–54)," *War & Society* 31 (2) (2012), 184–210.

Bảo Đại's administration, a fading regime that, in Gaullist eyes, mirrored the ineffectiveness of the Fourth Republic.[27] Other senior RPF figures viewed any additional military commitment as a diplomatic lever, as a means to negotiate from strength. Indeed, the eponymous military plan of General Henri Navarre, commander of French forces in Indochina, had by 1954 been reinvented as a tool of defensive attrition that would ensure the DRVN paid the highest price possible for any strategic gains.[28]

It had all been rather different four years earlier, when US aid deliveries began to flow over the spring of 1950. At that point, French policymakers concluded that there was simply no alternative to fighting on with the United States' backing. The recently signed Hạ Long Bay Accords committed France to do so. Many Vietnamese would feel justifiably betrayed should France abandon them. And Southeast Asia would be left so chronically exposed to communist incursion that a wider conflagration was probable. The conclusion reached was peculiar. France, it was argued, should prosecute its limited war in Vietnam to prevent a bigger one.[29]

By late 1953 every element in this bizarre logic had been reversed. Both the Fourth Republic's most virulent internal critics and its senior strategic planners were, by then, convinced that peace talks made sense.[30] During a National Assembly debate on Indochina in late October, Socialist Party figures baited Joseph Laniel's center-right coalition with the accusation that the government had surrendered France's strategic independence to the United States. With the Korean War now concluded, what was to stop Washington from demanding a larger French commitment in Vietnam? If, as Laniel insisted, the war was still worth fighting, then surely more soldiers would be required? For what? Ostensibly, the French war effort was meant to induce the DRVN to seek terms – in which case the French would probably negotiate much the same peace arrangements as if they had sought negotiations first. Laniel's refusal to parley with the DRVN was not the result of careful strategic evaluation; it was partisan stubbornness. For the socialists there was no reason to disbar Vietnamese independence anyway, as long as fair elections were held after a ceasefire.[31]

27 Frédéric Turpin, "Le RPF et la guerre d'Indochine (1947–1954)," in *De Gaulle et le RPF (1947–1955)* (Paris, 1998), 534–5.
28 Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris, 1992), 499–513.
29 MAE, 217PAAP1, Henri Bonnet papers, correspondence file, 1947–53, Jean Chauvel, New York, to Bonnet, February 14, 1950: relays Alexandre Parodi Indochina memo.
30 Turpin, "Le RPF et la guerre d'Indochine," 537–9.
31 Gaston Defferre speech October 27, 1953: "L'intérêt supérieur de la France commande de mettre un terme à la guerre d'Indochine," in Jansen, *Les grands discours parlementaires*, 170–2.

The calculus of French lives at stake formed part of a broader equation in which monetary investments had also depreciated.[32] French business owners and investors began transferring south or relocating offices and funds to other, safer francophone territories long before the Geneva talks began.[33] Ironically, the gathering perception that, ultimately, the war in Indochina was not essential to France was, if anything, reinforced by the depth of the United States' pockets. Washington's commitment to provide money and materiel for the expeditionary force added to the impression of a war dislocated from other, more proximate French concerns. An important side-effect of France's loss of unilateral control over the war's direction was to relegate the conflict from the stature of a national emergency to that of a peripheral conflict: devastating certainly, but not above the fray of interparty dispute and the vitriolic debate over the Fourth Republic's system of coalition government. The war in Indochina, in other words, was something it was okay to question, to criticize, and, ironically, to ignore.

But even if the war was increasingly something that metropolitan French politicians were prepared to set aside, the peace agreement negotiated at Geneva was something else entirely. For the French officials who still wielded considerable power over Indochinese affairs, as well as for their Vietnamese counterparts, the difficulties associated with making peace in Indochina would be at least as daunting as those associated with waging war. The most immediate challenges lay in securing and monitoring the proposed ceasefire, as well as the authorized movements of military personnel and civilians in both directions across the 17th parallel. Following suggestions from Soviet and Chinese officials, the negotiators had assigned these crucial duties to a tripartite International Control Commission (ICC) headed by India in partnership with Canada and Poland.[34] Everyone expected that the new commission had its work cut out for it. But almost no one anticipated the controversy that would almost instantly envelop the ICC – or how the implementation of the accords would provide new opportunities for critics to attack it.

32 MAE, 120QO/319, Pourparlers de paix en Indochine, Foreign Ministry note, "Règlement de la question indochinoise par voie de négociation," January 20, 1954; Saigon tel. 84, February 18, 1954.

33 Hugues Tertrais, *La piastre et le fusil: le coût de la guerre d'Indochine, 1945–1954* (Paris, 2002), 419; Laurent Cesari, "The Declining Value of Indochina: France and the Economics of Empire, 1950–1955," in Lawrence and Logevall (eds.), *The First Vietnam War*, 276.

34 SHD, 10H246: Accords de Genève, Activités des commissions franco-vietnamiennes, conventions et accords militaires, conventions internationales, 1952–4.

Monitoring Geneva: The International Control Commission and Refugees

Among the many issues left hanging by the Geneva Accords, the means to enable the promised free movement of people across the partition line aroused the fiercest international criticism. This was especially true in the United States, where the plight of more than 800,000 Vietnamese refugees seeking to leave the Việt Minh-controlled North became emblematic of all that was allegedly wrong with the settlement. The fact that most of these northern refugees were Roman Catholics, plus the apparent need for US naval and air transport to ensure their safe passage, lent weight to the image of an American mission of mercy to save the largest postwar tide of refugee humanity in Southeast Asia from death or persecution at the hands of a ruthless and godless communist regime. Garish, sensationalist accounts in the American Catholic press of Catholic villages destroyed and defenseless refugees mown down by communist machine-guns were, in turn, encouraged by a CIA campaign of misinformation and propaganda. In the hands of Colonel Edward Lansdale's notorious psychological warfare operation designed to delegitimize the Hanoi regime ahead of the planned elections on Vietnamese unification in July 1956, the Vietnamese refugee crisis was instrumentalized to confirm the moral bankruptcy of the Geneva settlement.[35]

Less well known to Western publics were the DRVN regime's persistent accusations that the departing French authorities were forcing populations to move southward whether through direct coercion, forcible transfer, or intense psychological pressure. Central to this last were misleading threats about the VWP's elimination of alleged traitors and dire warnings of imminent US atomic bombing of North Vietnam.[36] The DRVN government also accused the French government of complicity in the US propaganda campaign, notably in regard to systematic killings of Catholic villagers and their priests. One such case was that of Ba Làng, a fishing community in Hải Thanh district, where initial accounts of a massacre in March 1955 were soon exposed as a fabrication.[37]

The doomsaying may have been overblown but there is no disputing the fact that the bulk of refugees' petitions submitted to the ICC came from

35 Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 129–38.

36 SHD, 10H2553: Incidents après les accords de Genève, 1955 et déclarations des réfugiés, 1954.

37 MAE, 174QONT/356, Sous-dossier: Incident de Ba-Lang, VP Spécial Vietnam Presse, "La vérité sur la tragédie de Ba-Lang," de Mme Nguyen Thi Yen et Mr Tran Van Phi, March 28, 1955.

practicing Catholics, Buddhists, and other minority groups who faced victimization under the communist regime.[38] In addition to reports of village massacres, police shootings, and mass arrests were more prosaic but no less revealing accounts of punitive DRVN taxation and regime discrimination against smallholders fearful of imminent collectivization.[39]

Logically enough, the ICC remit was extended to cover supervision of refugee exchanges. Here, though, we get to the nub of things. For the ICC was not armed with any peace enforcement powers. Aside from adverse publicity and moral sanction, it had no means to ensure compliance with the Geneva Accords.[40] ICC monitors quickly became embroiled in investigating, not just minor ceasefire breaches but alleged massacres of civilians and other major human rights violations.[41] ICC personnel were also intimately involved in evacuation arrangements, including the final French withdrawal from Hanoi.[42] For all that, the effectiveness of this oversight regime rested on the self-restraint of the major parties involved rather than any threat of sanction were the Geneva Accords to be violated.[43] There were some promising signs. The departing French and the victorious Việt Minh seemed genuinely eager to mend fences. Talks on prisoner of war releases and other war-related disputes were well underway by September 1954.[44]

Remarkably, on November 5 General Giáp told France's ICC liaison that the two countries shared equal responsibility for the violence of the preceding war.[45] Hồ Chí Minh echoed the sentiment, albeit in less mathematical terms,

38 For details of Armistice violations during 1954–5, see SHD, 10H2251. Petitions are collected in SHD, 10H2897 Sous-dossier: CHRONO "depart."

39 SHD, 10H2553: Incidents après les accords de Genève, 1955 et déclarations des réfugiés, 1954; MAE, 174QONT/356, 1962/AP4, J. Aurillac, Affaires politiques, to Chef de l'Etat-Major Particulier, June 4, 1955: "La situation des réfugiés du Nord Vietnam."

40 MAE, 120QO/319, International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, Secretary-General's press statement, September 2, 1954.

41 SHD, 10H2251, no. 404/FTNV/EG, Note de service, "Relations avec la commission internationale de contrôle, Haiphong, 2 December 1954"; Ramesh Thakur, *Peacekeeping in Vietnam: Canada, India, Poland and the International Commission* (Edmonton, 1984), 58–77, 116–40.

42 MAE, 120QO/178, André Valls, Saigon Conseiller économique et financière, letter reporting Hanoi evacuation, October 15, 1954.

43 MAE, 120QO/178, COMIGAL, déplacement Dalat, to Ministère des états associés, Paris, September 2, 1954.

44 MAE, 174QONT/356, no. 1413/DGD, Lieutenant-Colonel Vitry, Direction général de la documentation (DGD), "Note de renseignement: Attitude des Vietminh vis-à-vis les prisonniers," September 8, 1954.

45 MAE, 120QO/178, No. 625/MFLCI/AV, General de Beaufort, Chef de la mission française de liaison auprès de la commission internationale, "Message postalisé," November 5, 1954.

in an interview with Agence France Presse five days later. Eager to bury the hatchet, the Vietnamese leader spoke effusively about a rapid resumption of Franco-Vietnamese commerce, deeper cultural exchanges, and the normalization of diplomatic relations, all of which, he admitted, would help offset domineering Chinese influence in northern Vietnam.[46] Phạm Văn Đồng told French envoy Jean Sainteny much the same on November 13, focusing in particular on the need for French economic aid.[47] This soothing rhetoric also had substance. The DRVN's nationalization of key French industrial assets notwithstanding, there was a reciprocal willingness to see economic activity resumed, ambassadors exchanged, and other transitional arrangements made.[48] Unfortunately, this bilateral reconciliation was soon overshadowed by the deepening animosity between the two Vietnamese states.[49]

Here was the ICC's Achilles heel. The peacekeeping apparatus of the Geneva Conference was stretched beyond its tensile capacity because Vietnam's two competing regimes viewed the ceasefire accords and consequent monitoring arrangements as functional preludes to the resumption of conflict over the country's unification. This struggle might be pursued politically at first, but the readiness to use force was obvious. Indeed, Diệm's SVN government pointedly refused to endorse the Geneva Accords at all.

Central to Diệm's eagerness to transform the erstwhile SVN into a postcolonial republic was the desire to break any vestigial ties with France, clearing a path to closer strategic alignment with Washington.[50] Noncooperation in Saigon might have been less damaging had there been stronger unity among Geneva's external sponsors. But the Geneva powers lacked both the unity and the political volition to see the accords through to their conclusion. The Soviets and British had other European and imperial priorities. And the French, as we have seen, were desperate to focus their strategic efforts and budgetary spending closer to home. Conscious of Washington's frustration at France's recent definitive rejection of the EDC, no government in Paris was likely to insist on by-the-letter adherence to the Geneva Accords. The Chinese seemed more committed. Their 200-strong delegation to Geneva that took

46 MAE, 120QO/178, no. 165/4, Direction Générale des Affaires Politiques, Asie-Océanie, "Note: A.S. Haiphong," November 12, 1954; no. 40031/037, Jean Sainteny, Hanoi, to Commissaire général, Saigon/Etats Associés, November 13, 1954.
47 MAE, 120QO/178, secret doc. "Représentation Française à Hanoi," November 12, 1954.
48 MAE, 120QO/319, tel. 40059, Sainteny, Hanoi, to Etats Associés, November 25, 1954.
49 Marianna P. Sullivan, "France and the Vietnam Peace Settlement," *Political Science Quarterly* 89 (2) (1974), 320–2.
50 Thanks to Christopher Goscha for advice on this point.

Figure 12.1 Peace talks that led to the signing of the Geneva Accords (July 1954). Source: Bettmann / Contributor / Bettmann / Getty Images.

up residence at Versoix's Grand Mont-Fleury estate in late April 1954 underlined the PRC's commitment to an agreement on Indochina.[51] Yet, for all its advocacy of "peaceful coexistence," the Chinese government still sought to exploit division between the United States and its Western allies.[52] The resulting double-edged strategy would be evidenced in 1954–5 by confrontation over Taiwan versus conciliation at Bandung.[53] Next to this, ensuring that the Geneva terms were upheld was a secondary concern. Meanwhile, closer US strategic alignment with Chiang Kai-shek's regime in Taipei further reified the Washington orthodoxy that Geneva was a rotten deal.[54] In simple

51 Shu Guang Zhang, "Constructing 'Peaceful Coexistence': China's Diplomacy toward the Geneva and Bandung Conferences, 1954–55," *Cold War History* 7 (4) (2007), 515–16.

52 Kuisong Yang and Sheng Ma, "Unafraid of the Ghost: The Victim Mentality of Mao Zedong and the Two Taiwan Strait Crises in the 1950s," *China Review* 16 (1) (2015), 2–3, 6–13.

53 Zhang, "Constructing 'Peaceful Coexistence,'" 512, 518–21; Chen Jian, "Bridging Revolution and Decolonization: The 'Bandung Discourse' in China's Early Cold War Experience," *The Chinese Historical Review* 15 (2) (2008), 154–7.

54 Hsiao-Ting Lin, "US–Taiwan Military Diplomacy Revisited: Chiang Kai-shek, Baituan, and the 1954 Mutual Defense Pact," *Diplomatic History* 37 (5) (2013), 981–90.

terms, from London to Beijing consensus was lacking over enforcement of the Geneva Accords – and over the making of peace.[55]

A Failed Settlement?

From this lack of consensus, historians have deduced two underlying reasons for the ultimate collapse of the Geneva settlement: Cold War friction and US hostility. Analytically, however, neither of these takes us very far. The East–West divisions were present before the conference as well as after it. Geneva, if anything, is usually depicted as a brief moment when dialogue trumped confrontation. Numerous studies highlight the effective working relationships nurtured across ideological lines during the conference. Admittedly, much of this bonhomie concealed ulterior motives, such as Soviet efforts to ensure French rejection of the EDC or Chinese attempts to secure wider diplomatic recognition. But so what? Conference diplomacy, whether stimulated by crisis as in Geneva's case or part of a cycle of transactional foreign policy, enables nation-states to pursue their interests alongside more lofty goals of peacemaking or norm-setting.[56] The formal agreements that such conferences produce may thus be only a part of the multiple diplomatic purposes served.

The peculiar circumstances of spring 1954 were indisputably conducive to diplomatic bargaining. Moscow's leaders seemed anxious to build bridges to the West in the aftermath of Stalin's death a year earlier.[57] Meanwhile, Geneva offered Beijing the opportunity to cement its putative, if conflicted, role as both the leading power in Asia and an authentic voice of radical anticolonialism.[58] More generally, multiple participants were anxious for the meetings to conclude on a positive note. The Geneva Conference, it should be remembered, began months before the matter of peace in Indochina took center stage. And it had not been going well.

55 Williamson Murray, "Searching for Peace," in Williamson Murray and Jim Lacey (eds.), *The Making of Peace: Rulers, States, and the Aftermath of War* (Cambridge, 2009), 4–5.

56 Christopher J. Lee, "The Rise of Third World Diplomacy: Success and its Meanings at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia," in Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri (eds.), *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy* (New York, 2015), 49–52.

57 The feasibility of bridge-building is discussed in Klaus Larres and Kenneth J. Osgood (eds.), *The Cold War after Stalin's Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* (Lanham, MD, 2006); see also the forum in *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10 (2) (2008), 131–8.

58 For background, see: Yang Huei Pang, "Helpful Allies, Interfering Neighbours: World Opinion and China in the 1950s," *Modern Asian Studies* 49 (1) (2015), 205–25.

The absence of any definitive agreement over Korea's long-term political future created pressure to achieve something definitive over Indochina. The British, the Soviets, and the Americans, albeit for different reasons, did not want France to leave the conference humiliated and resentful. Indeed, in the short term at least, resentment was perhaps most keenly felt in Washington, not Paris or Hanoi.

Turning to US hostility: here we must consider the agreement's normative implications in the mid-1950s. The principal victors of World War II, each represented at Geneva, had by 1954 arrived at a form of political peace that, in the aftermath of the Korean Armistice, looked more stable than previously. While certainly not predicated on mutual affinity or lasting geopolitical stability, this fragile peace had thus far prevented another global conflagration. In place of devastating and potentially atomic direct confrontation, proxy conflict was becoming the norm.[59] Such wars would be fought mostly in what Mao Zedong identified as the vast "intermediate zones" of Asia and Africa, amidst the remnants of European colonial collapse.[60] The PRC, according to Mao, should play a decisive role in this decolonizing world.[61] But the normative standard intrinsic to proxy war was that rival sponsors should not directly come to blows.[62] In this respect, Korea had been a near miss. It is worth remembering that most of Korea's war dead were civilians, counted in the hundreds of thousands. A large portion of these were the victims of US aerial bombardment.[63] And yet, barely a year later, elements within the Eisenhower administration seemed ready to do it all again, to intervene not just as proxy backers but as direct combatants in Indochina. John Foster Dulles, Admiral Arthur Radford, and their fellow hardliners, in other words, were prepared to contemplate

59 Odd Arne Westad, "The Wars after the War, 1945–1954," in Roger Chickering, Denis Showalter, and Hans van de Ven (eds.), *The Cambridge History of War, vol. IV: War and the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2012), 462–71.

60 Zhang, "Constructing 'Peaceful Coexistence,'" 510–11.

61 Jian, "Bridging Revolution," 141–2, 154–8.

62 Jeffrey James Byrne, "Africa's Cold War," in Robert McMahon (ed.), *The Cold War in the Third World* (New York, 2013), 103, 112–13; editors' introduction in Philip E. Muehlenbeck and Natalia Telepneva (eds.), *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World: Aid and Influence in the Cold War* (London, 2018), 6–8.

63 Alexander B. Downes, "Creating a Cordon Sanitaire: US Strategic Bombing and Civilians in the Korean War," in Andrew Barros and Martin Thomas (eds.), *The Civilianization of Warfare: Perspectives on a Collapsing Divide* (New York, 2018); see also Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, 2002), chapter 1; and Christopher Goscha, "Bringing Asia into Focus: Civilians and Combatants in the line of fire in China and Indochina," *War & Society* 31 (2) (2012), 90–2, 101–4.

conflict escalation.[64] This was a potential normative breach of what would become the unwritten code, not just of Cold War peacemaking but of war-making in the Global South as well.[65] From this perspective, the fact that the agreements were concluded and that Washington felt obliged to stand down and "take note" of the results can be counted a significant success, even in hindsight.

Decolonization and Geneva

Instead of treating the conference solely as an event in East–West relations (or as an episode in US Cold War foreign policy) we would do better to place it within broader transnational currents. The Geneva Conference laid bare influential markers of North–South divisions including racial discrimination, Western incomprehension of the cultural economies of peasant society, and insensitivity to the acute economic hardships that nurtured support for the Việt Minh. Mention of these structural forces places the Geneva settlement in a subtler light as part of a larger Asian decolonization.[66] Viewed from this perspective, the motivations of key actors seem rather different. The DRVN's burning desire to be rid of their colonial occupiers mirrored the sentiments uppermost among rural cultivators desperate to see meaningful land redistribution enacted.[67] The resultant compromises made at Geneva also evoked the regime's readiness eight years earlier to do all that was necessary to hasten the evacuation of Chinese Nationalist occupation forces from northern Vietnam.[68] The close attention paid to the conference proceedings among other decolonizing Asian nations and India's pivotal arbitral role at Geneva also prefigured the articulation of the doctrine of nonalignment by these same countries one year hence at the May 1955 Bandung conference.[69] The

64 The literature on US policymaking in 1954 is enormous. For excellent summaries across the past thirty years, see Lloyd Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu, 1941–1954* (New York, 1988); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, 2012), 463–71.

65 Colin Gray, "Mission Improbable, Fear, Culture and Interest: Peace-making, 1943–1949," in Murray and Lacy, *The Making of Peace*, 271–2, 287–90.

66 Jason Parker, *Hearts, Minds, Voices: US Cold War Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World* (New York, 2016), 62–4, 79–82.

67 Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy, and Revolution, 1860–1960* (Madison, WI, 1995), 200–4.

68 Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley, 2010), 55–62.

69 Christopher J. Lee, "Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung," in Christopher J. Lee (ed.), *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010), 3–4, 10–12; Lee, "The Rise of Third World Diplomacy," 57–61.

Five *Pancha shila* Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, a statement of the core ideas of nonaligned international politics enunciated by Jawaharlal Nehru and endorsed by Zhou Enlai on April 29, 1954, lent force to what the Indian premier had previously described as the two "strongest urges" in the new diplomacy of South and East Asia: a nationalist rejection of foreign intervention and an anticolonial loathing of racial discrimination.[70] In Jason Parker's tidy formulation, during 1954–5 the interrelatedness between decolonization and Cold War altered fundamentally. Decades of race repression gave way to a new era, post–Geneva and post–Bandung, of race liberation.[71] The United States' determination to build a broader Southeast Asian anticommunist alliance, although crowned by the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954, exposed its deeper ideational divide from Asia's anticolonial, nonaligned states.[72]

Perhaps, then, it was little wonder that French and British representatives at Geneva proved more willing than their American ally to parley deals with the Chinese, Soviet, and, ultimately, the DRVN delegations. If the Eisenhower administration was struggling to adjust to the nonaligned, anticolonial turns of Asian geopolitics, its Western partners were confronted with a different transition of power. Although reluctant to acknowledge matters in these terms, the old European colonialists had already ceded regional hegemonic imperial power to the United States.[73] Geneva, in other words, was a facet of a longer-term process of European decolonization in Asia.

For France, leaving Vietnam was the culmination of a phased withdrawal that began in earnest with the Hạ Long Bay Accords. These arrangements conceded limited sovereign rights to Indochina's Associated States, albeit within the confines of the French Union. The ministry set up in July 1950 to handle

70 Matthew Jones, "A 'Segregated' Asia? Race, the Bandung Conference, and Pan-Asianist Fears in American Thought and Policy, 1954–1955," *Diplomatic History* 29 (5) (2005), 845, 851, 860–1; Jian, "Bridging Revolution," 137–8; MAE, 120QO/319, Prime Minister Nehru's statement on Indochina, April 24, 1954.

71 Jason Parker, "Cold War II: The Eisenhower Administration, the Bandung Conference and the Reperiodization of the Postwar Era," *Diplomatic History* 30 (5) (2006), 870; Christoph Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonisation and the Rise of the New Left in France c. 1950–1976* (Cambridge, 2016), 35–6.

72 Parker, "Cold War II," 872–3, 878; for the Anglo-American dimensions to this conservative multilateralism in Southeast Asia, see Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, 2019).

73 The concept of this imperial shift, if not the term itself, was first mapped out regarding Anglo-American imperial relations by William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson in "The Imperialism of Decolonization," *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History* 22 (3) (1994), 462–511; for the prehistory, see also B. J. C. McKercher, *Transition of Power: Britain's Loss of Global Preeminence to the United States, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, 1999).

relations with the Associated States anticipated an eventual transfer of institutional control. Arguably, the ministry had other purposes entirely. For one thing, it was guided by Jean Letourneau, a colonial hardliner determined to maintain the connection between the Associated States and their French political masters. His ministry pursued this objective both as an end in itself and as a means to sustain the wider French Union project. If Indochina's Associated States severed ties with France, then why shouldn't Morocco, Tunisia, even Algeria, follow suit? The Ministry also aimed to improve civil–military coordination over the war's conduct in the aftermath of the 1950 French defeat at Cao Bằng.[74] Nevertheless, it was inarguable that France, whether by accident or design, was loosening its grip on Indochina. Indeed, when framed as instruments of French decolonization and a device for colonial extrication, the Geneva Accords emerge not as a failure but as a striking success.

Geneva, then, was part of a decolonization process that would take decades more to complete. The totality of that decolonization is not our primary concern here, but the nature of the process profoundly impacted Vietnam's transition from one conflict to another. Two points bear emphasis. The first is that Indochina's colonial constitutional architecture, formally dismantled after Geneva, was a hybrid construction. It was, in part, a semiautonomous confederation with the two outlying polities of Laos and Cambodia uncomfortably welded to a warring Vietnamese colonial center. Yet it was also a more instrumental device, colonially designed with a specific ulterior motive: to block Vietnamese communist domination of the Indochinese peninsula. Hardly surprising, then, that separate peace agreements would be signed at Geneva for Laos and Cambodia, the relative straightforwardness of which underlined the artificiality of their juridical connections with Vietnam. The Indochina Federation, its constitutional sophistry notwithstanding, was also a classic late colonial state, one whose eventual demise was anticipated, even planned for, by its architects.[75] Yet, this point requires further nuance. There is a big difference between anticipating decolonization and hoping that Indochina's Associated States would still agree to remain affiliated with the French Union. Here, French planners would be quickly disappointed, as Geneva ushered in full independence for Cambodia and Laos and a postcolonial republic in South Vietnam.

74 MAE, 174QONT/150, Ministère de la France Outre-Mer Jean Letourneau, list of instructions, 1949–50.

75 SHD, 10H160, no. 108/CAB-CE/DC/TS, Commandant en Chef des Forces Terrestres, Navales et Aériennes en Indochine, "Note relative au but et au fonctionnement du Comité de Guerre," Saigon, October 11, 1953.

The second point has to do with the politics of imperial exit. A negotiated settlement to end a colonial conflict, to permit a more or less orderly imperial withdrawal, and to impose a partition supposedly as a temporary expedient, but potentially as a lasting barrier to peace, was far from unusual. The British had done something similar in Ireland, securing a partial peace in 1921 that facilitated their withdrawal, but hardened the Ulster partition and left the messy details of a final treaty settlement to unravel amidst an Irish civil war. The violence and displacement of partition serving as a prelude to wider war was an unhappy sequence that was repeated twice in the late 1940s, first in the Indian subcontinent, months later in Mandate Palestine.

Taking a longer historical view, other premonitions and echoes of Geneva might be found. Dwell for an instant on the conditional arrangements made at Potsdam for transitional military administrations within a partitioned Vietnam. Recall the United States' decisive influence, first in promoting decolonization talks in Indonesia, then in turning against the Dutch hard-liners who resisted Washington's preferred outcome. Or telescope twenty years forward to the pullouts from Lusophone Africa negotiated by Portugal amidst its Carnation Revolution of April 1974. A sclerotic Lisbon regime overwhelmed by Cold War internationalization of its contested decolonization was replaced by an infant democracy desperate to be rid of colonial conflicts that were spiraling into calamitous civil wars in Angola and Mozambique. Each of these cases was circumstantially contingent and historically unique. But certain familiar features – a febrile metropolitan regime, decisive external pressure, and proxy war – can be glimpsed in each.

Digging a little into the defining characteristics of late colonial states helps unearth the colonial dynamics played to their conclusion at Geneva in 1954. Founded on the notion of a phased French withdrawal and political, economic, and cultural partnerships with the metropole, the Associated States of Indochina were, in French parlance at least, no longer a colonial domain but rather a field of experimentation. In simple terms, the late colonial state would no longer be required once its political offspring were deemed capable of surviving alone. French forces were fighting to clear a path for Indochina's component polities to build their independence on the foundations laid by the late colonial state: limited monarchy, gradual democratization, the embrace of French values and administrative practices. Herein lay the essential contradiction at the heart of such arrangements. For the judgments involved were entirely subjective: a reflection of abiding imperialist thinking about societies at differing developmental stages rather than any definitive recognition that empire had had its day. In this conceptual schema – perhaps more like an

absurd parallel universe to those living through the everyday violence of the Indochina conflict – the war was being fought, not to prolong the French presence but for a new politics to keep Southeast Asia within a Western orbit, free of communist influence. Intrinsic to this worldview was an insistence upon the unrepresentative nature and consequent illegitimacy of the Hanoi regime. Coming to terms at Geneva thereby marked a fundamental ideational departure for France. The country's rulers at last acknowledged the DRVN as the authentic voice, not just of Vietnamese socialism, but of Vietnamese national aspirations as well.[76]

Conclusion

Seen from the vantage point of decolonization, Geneva was of a piece with adaptations made by late colonial states unable to mitigate their declining position. Although determined to cling on in Algeria and elsewhere, few French decision-makers could dispute the logic of Mendès France's pursuit of negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam. In these more fluid circumstances multilateral diplomacy provided the necessary cover for exhausted imperial powers to quit. For all that, the Geneva Conference could be viewed very differently: as a logical compromise for a DRVN regime anxious to rebuild at home, as a victory of pragmatism for French negotiators playing a losing hand, and, more broadly, as a curtain-raiser for radical nonalignment and the rejection of rigid Cold War loyalties by the decolonizing Global South.

In hindsight, France's generals were proved right: seizing Điện Biên Phủ was a superlative achievement for the DRVN, but it was still less than outright victory. This returns us to the question of why DRVN leaders chose to negotiate at Geneva in the first place. In part, the conference heralded the emergence of a new type of diplomacy, one in which the transnational mobilization of anticolonialist sentiment would cut across the neat dividing lines of Cold War ideology. But in other respects, the Geneva settlement was more familiar: a classic holding action in which the dominant external actors agreed to disagree in an effort to contain the regional fallout from another contested decolonization. In this respect, the Geneva Accords accomplished their short-term task. Few doubted that the settlement was unsustainable in the longer term. But that was a tragedy yet to unfold.

76 MAE, 120QO/319, 1598/AP4, "Représentation vietminh à Paris," March 12, 1955.