


Colonial labour in French policy: A case study of the *Lính thợ* sent from Vietnam to France, 1939–1950s

Nguyen Thi Hanh and Nguyen Thi Trang 

During the Second World War, France recruited unskilled labourers, known as Lính thợ or ‘Worker-Soldiers’, from the Indochina Union (today’s Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), mainly from the Tonkin (Northern) and Northern Annam regions. This article examines French policies towards Lính thợ from 1939 to the 1950s, which aimed to recruit the most cost-effective, healthiest, hardest, skilled, and ‘compliant’ labour force. However, these policies had unintended consequences. They exacerbated existing conflicts within the Lính thợ community, and also led to their marginalisation and exclusion from French civil society. As a result, Lính thợ had to restructure their community and rethink their goals and strategies to claim their legitimate rights, especially after 1945. This article highlights the tensions and challenges faced by Lính thợ in France, and the complex relationship between colonial powers and migrant labourers imported from the colonies.

The use of labour from their colonies was a widespread practice employed by various empires, including among others those of Britain, France, Japan, the Soviet Union, and Germany. This was done to address shortages in battlefields and weapons factories. The practice began during the First World War was further streamlined and made more efficient during the Second World War. David Killingray notes that recruiting labourers from colonial territories was easier and more cost-effective than recruiting from the European continent.¹ As such, imperial powers began ramping up their recruitment efforts for military and war production purposes soon after the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.² Among these powers, Britain and France were particularly aggressive in their efforts to leverage their colonial populations to sustain their war efforts in Europe and elsewhere. While Britain extensively

Nguyen Thi Hanh is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of International Politics and Diplomacy, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam. Nguyen Thi Trang is a Doctor at the Faculty of History, Thai Nguyen University of Education, Viet Nam. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: nguyentrang91tq@gmail.com and trangnt.his@tnue.edu.vn. The authors would like to thank the Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), Viet Nam, for supporting them in this study.

1 David Killingray, ‘Africa and the Second World War’, in *Labour mobilisation in British colonial Africa for the war effort, 1939–46*, ed. David Killingray and Richard Rathbone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986).

2 Stephen Kotkin, ‘World War Two and Labor: A lost cause?’, *International Labor and Working-Class History* 58 (2000): 181–91.

exploited men and raw materials from its colonies such as India³ and Africa,⁴ France recruited primarily North African,⁵ Indochinese,⁶ and Madagascan labourers. Notably, France had integrated the idea of using colonial human resources with its civilising mission.

Colonial subjects, the thinking went, owed France a 'blood tax' in return for the privilege of living under enlightened French rule. Colonial conquest and rule have cost France dearly in treasure and lives, and now it was time to collect on the debt thus accrued. In other words, the civilising mission came at a price that Africans and Asians would now have to pay [...] [Hence] colonial subjects should contribute their fair share to the struggle [because] the fight was 'our' [the French] to be sure, but it was theirs as well.⁷

Thus, Georges Mandel, the French Minister of Colonies (1938–40), introduced a plan for labour mobilisation across the French colonies: 19,272 Vietnamese were transported to France to work from September 1939 to May 1940.⁸ From there, a new historical stage on the fate of Vietnamese labourers in France, known as *Lính thợ*, was written following the previous mobilisation of Vietnamese labour to France from 1914 to 1918.⁹ The experiences of *Lính thợ* during the Second World War, however, differed significantly from those who served during the First World War. Various factors account for these distinctions, including France's swift defeat by Germany in 1940, the Vichy government's ambiguous policies, post-Second World War political upheavals in France, and the outbreak of the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954. Consequently, the history of the *Lính thợ* who either remained in France or were sent back to their homeland have been neglected.

Many aspects of the mobilisation of colonial labourers in Morocco, Madagascar, Algeria, and the Pacific Islands to serve in Metropolitan France in the two global wars¹⁰ have been widely studied, including recruitment planning, deployment, racial

3 Kaushik Roy, 'Military loyalty in the colonial context: A case study of the Indian Army during World War II', *Journal of Military History* 73, 2 (2009): 497–529.

4 David Killingray and Martin Plaut, *Fighting for Britain: African soldiers in the Second World War* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010); Rosaleen Smyth, 'Britain's African colonies and British propaganda during the Second World War', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 14, 1 (1985): 65–82; David Killingray, 'Military and labour recruitment in the Gold Coast during the Second World War', *Journal of African History* 23, 1 (1982): 83–95.

5 Rita Headrick, 'African soldiers in World War II', *Armed Forces & Society* 4 (1978): 501–26.

6 Liêm-Khê Luguern, *Les 'travailleurs Indochinois' Étude Socio-Historique d'une Immigration Coloniale (1939–1954)* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2021).

7 Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and war in France: Colonial subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 16.

8 Tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh Đọc Trong Dịp Đón Tiếp Phái Đoàn Quốc Hội Tại Trại Việt Nam ngày 5 Tháng 5 Năm 1946' [Speech of the Delegation of Labourers – Soldiers Reads on the Meeting with the Reception of the National Assembly Delegation at the Vietnam Camp 5 May 1946], in *Đại hội Nghị Tổng ủy ban đại diện Công Binh* (1946), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4236970q/f3.item> (last accessed on 17 Aug. 2022).

9 Geoffrey C. Gunn, 'Mort pour la France: Coercion and co-option of "Indochinese" worker-soldiers in World War One', *Social Scientist* 42 (2014): 63–84; Mireille Le Van Ho, *Des Vietnamiens dans La Grande Guerre (Empires)* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2014); Kim Loan Thi Vu Hill, 'A Westward journey, and enlightened path: Vietnamese Linh Tho, 1915–1930' (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2001).

10 Éric Deroo and Antoine Champeaux, 'Panorama des troupes coloniales Françaises dans les deux guerres mondiales: An overview of French colonial troops in the two World Wars', *Revue historique*

discrimination, and classification.¹¹ Le Huu Tho, Liem Khe Luguern, Dang Van Long, and Pierre Daum are among other pioneering researchers analysing the experiences of the Vietnamese labourers in France.¹² Although previous studies have shed light on the basic features of the lives of labourers from French Indochina, insufficient attention has been given to the diversity of classes among the *Lính thợ*. Hence, this study aims to explore the factors that led to the separation and isolation of the *Lính thợ* community and the circumstances that influenced changes in their thought, awareness, organisation, and integration into Metropolitan French society. Specifically, this research examines the impact of French policies on the differentiation and classification of *Lính thợ* through colonial policies of recruitment and transportation to France. It additionally delves into the methods and practices of the French apparatuses in allocating, monitoring, and transforming the Vietnamese workers into 'docile labourers' in France. Finally, the study also explores changes in the labourers' ideological and organisational lives, and political organisations driven by French policy. The study draws on unpublished archival materials in Paris, the Vietnam National Archives, and *Cong Binh* magazine, which are accessible online on Gallica BnF.

This study contributes to current knowledge about colonial labourers, especially Vietnamese, from the policy perspective. French policies implemented between 1939 and the 1950s helped this imperial power to successfully recruit a labour force that was both healthy and obedient while remaining cost-effective, to some extent. However, these policies had some unforeseen effects. They worsened the pre-existing internal conflicts within the *Lính thợ* community and further marginalised them, leading to their exclusion from French civil society. Consequently, the *Lính thợ* had to re-organise their community and reconsider their objectives and approaches to assert their rightful entitlements.

Georges Mandel and preparations for war

*La France n'est pas seule ! Elle n'est pas seule ! Elle n'est pas seule ! Elle a un vaste Empire derrière elle.*¹³

After the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel launched a plan to mobilise about 300,000

des armées (2013): 72–88; John Horne, 'Immigrant workers in France during World War I', *French Historical Studies* 14 (1985): 57–88.

11 Chantal Antier, 'Le recrutement dans l'empire colonial Français, 1914–1918', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 2 (2008): 23–36; Laurent Dornel, 'Les usages du racialisme. le cas de la main-d'œuvre coloniale en France pendant la première guerre', *Genèses: Sciences sociales et histoire* 20 (1995): 48–72; Neil MacMaster, *Colonial migrants and racism algerians in France, 1900–62* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

12 Lê Hữu Thọ, *Hành trình của một cậu ấm tại Pháp (1940–1946)* [A journey of a mandarin's boy in France] (Hà Nội: Thanh Niên, 2003); Liêm-Khê Luguern, 'Les réquisitions pour les guerres mondiales en Europe révélatrices des dynamiques socio-spatiales de l'Indochine coloniale', in *Les migrations impériales au Vietnam: travail et colonisations dans l'Asie-Pacifique Française, XIXe–XXe siècles*, ed. Eric Guerassimoff, Andrew Hardy, Nguyen Phuong Ngoc and Emmanuel Poisson (Paris: Hémisphères, 2020), pp. 159–81; Đặng Văn Long, *Lính Thợ ONS* [Unskilled labourers] (Hà Nội: Lao động, 1996); Pierre Daum, *Lính thợ Đông Dương ở Pháp (1939–1952). Một trang sử thuộc địa bị lãng quên* [Lính Thợ in France (1939–1952). A stage of forgotten colonial history], trans. Trần Hữu Khánh (Arles: Actes sud, 2009).

13 L'appel du 18 juin du général de Gaulle, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/partage/8708-1-appel-du-18-juin-du-general-de-gaulle> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

labourers¹⁴ to France to replenish human resources for its munitions and other military factories and serve on the battlefield. The French Empire, with a total population of approximately 111,545,000 inhabitants in the 1940s,¹⁵ soon became a massive pool from which to draw upon in wartime. Several important observations can be made about how the French government viewed colonial recruitment during the planning stages. First, this plan, in reality, resulted from long-standing preparations since the First World War and was based on a series of survey reports by the governors-general in their colonies, protectorates, and establishments on the availability of labour resources. In particular, the National Assembly and the French authorities actually accepted the policy of recruiting indigenous people in its colonies before the Second World War broke out; a 1926 Inter-ministerial Circular assigned the French Ministry of Labour to recruit, mobilise and manage the colonial workforce during any coming war.¹⁶ On 24 July 1934, the French Ministry of Labour issued the 'General guidance on the operation of agencies serving indigenous, North African and colonial labourers'.¹⁷ This Circular supplemented the 1926 Circular on the sending of colonial labourers to France. In 1939, a decree of the Minister of Labour created an Organisation of Indigenous, North African, and Colonial Workforce (Main-d'œuvre Indigène, Nord-Africaine et Colonie, MOI). Following this regulation, MOI was obliged to administer and employ indigenous labourers. Its activities involved receiving, administering, and transporting indigenous labourers. They also distributed and made this labour force available to public services and private enterprises, while supervising its usage.¹⁸

Second, although colonial women were sought after for labour recruitment to other regions within the French empire, they were not really considered for recruitment to France. For instance, at first, when recruiting Vietnamese labourers to New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, the French regulations were sex-specific, requiring five men to every one woman.¹⁹ The French authorities then also encouraged colonial labourers to bring their families and children to work because the

14 Ministère des armées, Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), France, GR 7 no. 2471, Note de l'EMA 1er Bureau No. 675, Le Ministre des Colonies à Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Ministre de la Défense nationale et de la Guerre (Etat-Major de l'Armée-Cabinet) aux utilisations des militaires indigènes coloniaux [The Minister of the Colonies to the President of the Council, Minister of National Defense to the use of the colonial indigenous soldiers], 25 Dec. 1939.

15 John Summerscales, 'The war effort of the French colonies', *Journal of the Royal African Society* 39 (1940): 125.

16 Olivia Pelletier, 'Recruter, employer, surveiller: Les travailleurs Indochinois en Métropole, 1914–1954. Du cadre administratif aux sources historiques aux archives nationales d'outre-mer', in Guerassimoff et al., *Les migrations impériales au Vietnam*, p. 313.

17 Ibid., p. 313.

18 Albert Lebrun, Décret organisant le service de la main-d'oeuvre indigène, Rapport au Président de la République Française, *Journal officiel de la République Française*, Paris, 29 Nov. 1939, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k57143378/f4.item>, pp. 13780–1 (last accessed 17 Aug. 2022).

19 Marie Casimir Joseph Guyon, 'Rapport à M. le Gouverneur Général de L'indo-Chine: La condition de la main-d'oeuvre Indochinoise dans les établissements français du pacifique austral', Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et dépendances. Commissariat général de la République française dans l'Océan Pacifique, Haut-Commissariat de la France dans l'archipel des Nouvelles-Hébrides, (Imprimerie Nationale, Nouméa, Nouvelle-Calédonie, 1928), no. 61, p. 26, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k934782b/f9.item> (last accessed 17 Aug. 2022).

colonists believed that women would be useful as domestic servants²⁰ and ‘keep the immigrant islander for a longer period in the colony’.²¹ Conversely, officials at the Ministry of Labour and members of the colonial bureaucracy made no attempts to recruit female indigenous labourers. The French authorities deemed that ‘women from Africa and Asia could not serve as a useful source of labourers’.²² Likewise, colonial theorists argued that women belonged in the home inculcating a sense of imperial servitude into their children.²³

Third, the French government’s policies at that time regarding the recruitment of labour resources were shaped by cultural and racial factors. The French believed that each race and ethnic group had its own unique physical, mental, and psychological characteristics that differentiated them as either labourers or soldiers. For instance, Moroccans were deemed more combative than Tunisians, while West Africans were believed to be more aggressive than the Vietnamese. Consequently, black labourers were used for jobs requiring violence and strength, while Vietnamese were considered to have weak bodies with physical capacities no greater than women.²⁴ A report published by Paul Giran even claimed that it took two or more Vietnamese to carry a heavy object whereas only one European was needed.²⁵ Furthermore, officials translated this alleged physical deficiency into a moral problem by accusing the Vietnamese of apathy, indolence, lies, and robbery.²⁶ Officials also feared that the Vietnamese would quickly succumb to vices such as gambling, drinking, and illicit sex if left unsupervised.

However, over time, the French changed their perception of Vietnam’s *Lính thợ* and recognised their ability to work consistently in harsh conditions. Giran’s report emphasised this change, stating that few Europeans could perform tasks such as rickshaw pulling for hours at a time with only a few minutes of rest or a cup of tea or bowl of rice.²⁷ Additionally, the Vietnamese were noted for qualities such as calm, perseverance, thrift, intelligence, attentiveness, and the ability to seize opportunities. They were easy to lead and showed loyalty to their rulers.²⁸ As a result, the Vietnamese were often assigned to jobs that required dexterity, meticulousness, and patience, rather than just physical strength.

Based on these reviews, it appears that Vietnamese labourers were no longer considered a last resort as they were during the First World War, and were in fact an

20 Nguyen Thi Trang, ‘Vietnamese indentured labourers: The intervention of the French colonial government in regulating the flow of Vietnamese labourers to the Pacific Islands in the early twentieth century’, *Labor History* 63, 5 (2022): 584–603.

21 Dorothy Shineberg, *The people trade: Pacific Island laborers and New Caledonia, 1865–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), p. 93.

22 David J. Smith, ‘“French like the Others”: Colonial migrants in wartime France, 1939–1947’ (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013), p. 55.

23 Ibid., p. 55.

24 Tyler Stovall, ‘Colour-blind France? Colonial workers during the First World War’, *Race & Class* 35 (1993): 48.

25 Paul Giran, *Psychologie du peuple annamite: Le caractère national. L’évolution historique, intellectuelle, sociale et politique* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1904), republished as Paul Giran, *Tâm lý dân tộc An Nam: Đặc điểm quốc gia, sự tiến hóa lịch sử, trí tuệ, xã hội và chính trị*, trans. Phan Tin Dung (Hoi Nha Van: Cong ty sách Mega+, 2019), p. 33.

26 Laurent, ‘Les usages du racialisme’, p. 52.

27 Giran, *Tâm lý*, p. 34.

28 Ibid., p. 34.

essential part of Mandel's plan for the Second World War. According to David Smith, the labour recruitment plan documents clearly showed a preference for North Africans and Vietnamese, with surveys indicating the availability of workers in West Africa, Central Africa, Cameroon, and Madagascar. However, Smith also noted that no efforts were made after September 1939 to bring Sub-Saharan Africans to France for employment.²⁹ On the other hand, when the Second World War broke out, Vietnamese were among the first and largest groups of colonial labourers mobilised by the French government to serve in the war effort.

In short, the Mandel plan aiming to mobilise large numbers of workers from their colonies to serve France resulted from the long-standing preparations to ensure human resources in an emergency. Vietnamese males were targeted as a priority source after changes in French perceptions of the Vietnamese character over time. The next section will discuss the recruitment methods and practices during this period.

Linh Thọ sent to work in wartime France

Upon France's entry into the Second World War, Georges Catroux, the Governor General of Indochina, spoke about the loyalty of the Vietnamese people and their destiny being intertwined with that of France.³⁰ With this in mind, he aimed to mobilise all the resources available in Indochina to achieve two goals: to increase the number of defenders of French Indochina and to make the most of its resources for Metropolitan France. This included providing manpower for French weapons factories,³¹ and for this purpose, he sent several telegrams instructing the recruitment, concentration, and transportation of labourers to Metropolitan France.³² The target number of labourers was communicated to officials in Vietnam, with 25,000 from Tonkin, 17,000 from Annam, 5,000 from Cochinchina, and 2,500 from Cambodia.³³ Catroux stressed that the recruitment, organisation, and transportation of labourers should be controlled by the heads of local government, the Inspector General of Labour, with himself as the highest authority.³⁴

Recruitment and transportation

The colonial administration fixed enlistment quotas for different areas and left it to the heads of villages and local authorities to recruit labourers.³⁵ The recruitment principle was officially stated as 'voluntary' but very few volunteered in reality.

29 Smith, 'French like the others', p. 56.

30 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, no. 1110, Discours prononcé par M. le Général d'Armée Catroux Gouverneur Général P. I de L'Indochine. A 'occasion de l'ouverture de la session du grand conseil des intérêts Économiques et Financiers', 11 Dec. 1939.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Liêm-Khê Luguern, Les 'Travailleurs Indochinois', p. 79.

34 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, no. 248, Le Gouverneur Général P.I. de l'Indochine à Messieurs les Chefs d'administration locale les chefs des services Generaux aux Instruction sur le recrutement, la concentration et l'embaquement de la main-d'oeuvre à diriger sur la Métropole en temps de guerre, no. 635-APA, 15 Dec. 1939.

35 Christian Koller, 'The recruitment of colonial troops in Africa and Asia and their deployment in Europe during the First World War', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26 (2008): 111–33.

Most of those approached tried to evade or resist this recruitment drive. Coercion was, therefore, an integral part of recruitment methods. For example, to encourage peasants to register, the Residents Superior in Annam (Central Vietnam today) distributed posters about labour recruitment to each village. This initiative was encouraged by the Inspector General of Labour and Social Welfare. He sent a letter to the Governor-General of Indochina on 31 January 1940, requesting an immediate order for 15,000 posters for distribution in each village to speed up *Lính thợ* recruitment for Metropolitan France.³⁶ Still, the numbers who volunteered fell far short of the targets. Thus, village leaders and local authorities had to either coerce or persuade young men in order to get the required number of labourers. In *Lính thợ* ONS, Dang Van Long, a former *Lính thợ*, claimed that to meet the target number of labourers, local authorities such as *tuần đinh* (village guards in feudal or French colonial times) and *lính lệ* (soldiers who served mandarins in provinces, districts and villages of the Nguyen Dynasty before 1945) broke into houses at night, arrested men, tied their hands, cut their hair and forcibly brought them to the provincial capitals like robbers.³⁷ Likewise, they required every family with more than one son above the age of 20 to send one male to serve in Metropolitan France.³⁸ Failure to do so would result in the arrest of their father.

To decrease tensions and conflicts between the French government and Vietnamese families over the labour recruitment policy and harsh methods used, the former cut the poll tax³⁹ and introduced a bonus payment for the labourers. In October 1939, the Labour Inspector in Tonkin specified that each labourer would be paid an amount of ten piastres upon enlistment. The authorities would disburse the funds after the recruiter had left the village and was received by the regional feeder camp. However, if 'a labourer failed to turn up on the day of departure, his family would be taxed twenty sous per day until the recruit had reemerged from hiding'.⁴⁰ They also promised that labourers would be paid when working in France, which gave them enough money to buy a piece of land or improve their lives after the war. The government pledged to support their families if a worker was injured or died. As a result, from September 1939 to May 1940, up to 19,272 *Lính thợ* were recruited, mostly from poor farming families in Tonkin and Annam.⁴¹

Besides, around 10 per cent of total *Lính thợ* workforce still consisted of volunteers, driven by various reasons such as escaping the oppressive colonial society that denied their citizenship rights, seeking new opportunities, or simply being curious about France. Thieu Van Muu, an interpreter, left Vietnam with mixed emotions, feeling sad to be away from family but happy to see France.⁴² Another volunteer, Le Ngoc Ngoi, aspired to become a secretary and interpreter for ONS in France,

36 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Direction des Finance de L'Indochine, no. 5744, Inspection Générale du travail et de la prévoyance sociale, no. 504- IGT, 31 Jan. 1940.

37 Đặng Văn Long, *Lính Thợ ONS*, p. 31.

38 Ibid., p. 15.

39 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine, no. 618, Exemption d'impôt personnel en faveur des Ouvriers non spécialisés, no. 1819, 23 Feb. 1940.

40 Smith, 'French like the others', p. 64.

41 Liêm-Khê Luguern, 'Les réquisitions', p. 161.

42 Liêm-Khê Luguern, 'Ni civil ni militaire: Le travailleur Indochinois inconnu de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale', *Le Mouvement social* 219–220 (2007): 187.

hoping to improve his life as he had previously worked as a secretary at the Railway Store in Ha Noi. These individuals had a higher status than most of the workers sent due to their fluency in French, and were employed as surveillance staff, group leaders, and interpreters.⁴³ Generally, the diversity in the classification of *Lính thợ* led to differences and divisions in this community, and under the French government's policies, these contradictions became even more marked.

Although the authorities were intensely concerned about fulfilling the recruitment quotas requested by the Governor-General of Indochina, this did not stop them from attempting to select the most 'physically capable labourers' to serve in France through medical examinations and vaccinations. The labourers would undergo a medical examination in their province. They then were vaccinated and handed the medicines. For example, in a telegram dated 31 January 1940, the Financial Director of Indochina reported paying for 72 parcels containing vaccines for *Lính thợ*.⁴⁴ Similarly, in a telegram on 26 January 1940 that the Inspector General of Sanitation and Public Health sent to the Governor General, it showed that he had ordered 25,000 tablets of 'Septoplax' from a company named 'Speciua' in Saigon to the local Health Director in Hue. This medicine was used for *Lính thợ* to prevent them from getting meningitis.⁴⁵

After that, these labourers were brought to the nearest port city. The embarkation camps in Haiphong, Tourane, and Saigon recruited labourers from various regional camps and then organised the passage to France. They would be given one beret, one backpack, 10 French Indochinese piastres⁴⁶ and became acquainted with French military rules at these embarkation camps. These camps were designed as isolated places with high walls and iron gates and were monitored by guards. In other words, they lived in prisons with guard posts and were not allowed to see their relatives.⁴⁷

They were transported to France by private shipping companies such as the Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes and the Compagnie Maritime des Chargeurs Réunis. When the war broke out, the French authorities mobilised these companies to bring these labourers to France. According to Roger Carour, the Messageries Maritimes served France without restriction, in particular the entire fleet and staff were requisitioned for the French government.⁴⁸ These ships sometimes departed from Japan or Hong Kong and arrived at Hai Phong, Da Nang (Tourane), and Saigon. Each passage would take a month or more to reach Marseille after passing

43 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Inspection Général des travaux Public de l'Indochine, no. 632, Inspection Général des travaux Public de l'Indochine, demande des renseignements sur les conditions demgagement comme interprété des O.N.S. formulé par Le Ngoc Ngoi, secrétaire journalier au service des Chemins de Fer à Hanoi, no. 1035 P/I, Hanoi, 21 Apr. 1940.

44 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Direction des Finance de L'Indochine, no. 5744, Inspection Générale du Travail et de la Prévoyance sociale, 31 Jan. 1940.

45 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Direction des Finance de L'Indochine, no. 5744, Inspection Générale du Travail et de la Prévoyance sociale, 106/S, 26 Jan. 1940.

46 Đặng Văn Long, *Lính Thợ ONS*, p. 63.

47 Ibid., p. 88.

48 Roger Carour, 'La compagnie des Messageries Maritimes: son passé, son avenir', *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* 50 (1972): 409.

through the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and the Mediterranean and docking at Saigon, Singapore, Colombo, Djibouti Suez, Port Said, and Marseille.

During this trip, the French authorities had to ensure security and prevent potential violent conflicts on ships between Vietnamese labourers, Chinese labourers, and Europeans on board. Thus, the Vietnamese were divided into isolated groups on the ship. For example, during a trip, Captain Armand Duguéy's diary recorded that

When I arrived at Hai Phong port, I was asked to arrange ships of compartments I, II, III, IV, and V to bring 1,500 Vietnamese from Tonkin to Marseille. Compartments I, II, IV, and V were used as accommodation for Vietnamese labourers, a clinic, a discipline workshop in compartment III, and a food warehouse in compartment IV.⁴⁹

On another ship, Thieu Van Muu, a Vietnamese labourer, noted that the French lived in the best section of the ship with a swimming pool, while the 600 Vietnamese stayed in a narrow and dirty section and were not allowed to go to the best areas, or approach or talk to the French.⁵⁰

The large number of Vietnamese labourers being transported on ships to France during the Second World War created issues with overcrowding, which in turn led to problems with maritime safety, such as a lack of lifeboats and lifebuoys. Consequently, if any of these ships were to sink, the vast majority of people on board would likely not survive. Furthermore, 'during the journey, Vietnamese labourers were treated like slaves and punished almost every day'.⁵¹ In a report about the Si Kiang ship sent by Emmanuel Beauville to the Ministry of Labour, it was written that

more than 1,000 *Lính thợ* were locked in the ship, next to the livestock area, adjacent to the latrine. There was no air vent nor a ray of light, days like nights, indescribably filthy. It was an animal wagon, not a ship bringing people.⁵²

Thus, 86 Vietnamese died en route of diseases before even arriving in Marseille.⁵³

In short, the execution of Mandel's plan shows the harsh conditions suffered by the *Lính thợ* and how the French treated the labourers in general, and Vietnamese in particular. News of this treatment led to a lower number of recruits than the Mandel plan required. The Governor-General of Indochina mentioned this issue in a telegram dated 29 March 1940.⁵⁴ In total, 16,867 labourers had been on board the ships, but the transportation of *Lính thợ* to France was difficult due to the wartime shortage of ships and the priorities for military transport. Therefore, the

49 Daum, *Lính Thợ Đông Dương Ở Pháp (1939–1952)*, p. 80.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

52 Tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh'.

53 According to Pierre Angeli, through trips, it is possible to calculate the official number: 23 dead, 1 missing, 29 deserters and 33 hospitalised when the ships called at many different ports. Pierre Daum, *Lính Thợ Đông Dương Ở Pháp (1939–1952)*, p. 80. This figure of 23 deaths is similar to that reported in the speech given by the Labourers–Soldiers Delegation during the reception of the National Assembly Delegation at the Vietnamese camp on 5 May 1946. Tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh'.

54 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Direction des Finance de L'Indochine, no. 5744, Dépenses affectées au recrutement des travailleurs pour la Métropole, no. 1387-IGT, 29 Mar. 1940.

Governor-General requested reserving a large number of ships to send to France 10,000 ONS each month.⁵⁵ However, the swift defeat of France in June 1940 abruptly changed Mandel's plan. At the same time, the Allied forces blocked the seas to French shipping that severed this link after the French defeat, and the transport of labourers from Vietnam to France was stopped.

Lính thợ in France

The French government's recruitment of labourers of various races in its colonial system to Metropolitan France did not deter its pursuit of a policy of dividing and isolating each race. Specifically, each race would be allocated to work and live in separate locations within France. This policy enabled the French government to effectively use, manage, and monitor each race, while also preventing any potential intercolonial collaboration or conflict among the races against the French government. Essentially, this policy of 'divide and rule' allowed the French to maintain control over the diverse colonial labour force. By keeping each group separate, the French were able to prevent any form of organised resistance against them.

As MOI reported in 1939 in a Circular on employment regulations, in which they highlighted one of their categorisations about the Indochinese labourers:

Indochinese labourers were neither equated with European labourers nor other races because they had their own typical characteristics suitable for jobs. They were intelligent, active, agile, and flexible but could not stand the cold. Thus, they were only forced to work in heavy employment in case of reluctance.⁵⁶

Lính Thợ would be managed by MOI. Although termed civilian labourers, they were to be managed military-style.⁵⁷ Vietnamese labourers gathered at the Baumettes camp in Marseille, where MOI distributed them into legions and companies. Each of the labour companies in the French colonial system comprised 200 to 250 labourers and was subdivided into eight or ten battalions. The original company was followed by an additional 73 companies, resulting in a total of 74 companies. Eventually, these companies merged to form five legions, from the original legion and additional four ones, with French managers. As supervisors and interpreters, the Vietnamese only had insignificant positions such as looking after a battalion of about 25 labourers.

After being organised into companies and legions, *Lính thợ* were deployed anywhere depending on the needs of the weapon companies. For example, in a letter dated 20 November 1939, from the Minister of Labour to the Ministers of Defence and War, Navy, Army, Aviation, Navy Merchants, Public Works, Postal Main, Telegraph, and Telephone, Agriculture, Commerce, and Industry, the Minister of Labour suggested that ministries, war factories, and service companies determine local needs for labourers with their agencies and send them to his office for labour

55 Ibid.

56 SHD, Circulaire du M.O.I., Service central de la Main d'œuvre indigène Nord Africaine et coloniale, no. 278, Paris, 20 Nov. 1939.

57 Ibid.

arrangements.⁵⁸ As a result, some *Lính thợ* were assigned to Angoulême, Bergerac, Saint Chames, and Sorgues to make gunpowder while others were scattered from the Dunkerque Strait to La Rochelle; from Bordeaux to Montpellier, from Roanne, Lyon down to Montauban, while those in Toulouse worked mostly in gunpowder-and shell casing manufacture. Some others also worked in transportation, portering, tunnelling, mine-laying and several other dangerous jobs.⁵⁹ In addition, some companies were responsible for chopping wood, making firewood, or agriculture.⁶⁰

MOI's policy also allowed French private and public service companies to hire indigenous labourers only after signing contracts and ensuring the required payments. In particular, MOI offered maximum opportunities for companies hiring colonial labourers to be exempted from many French employment laws, such as work-related accident compensation for labourers, social insurance contributions, and compulsory subsidies for labourers' families. The salary of Vietnamese workers was calculated below the minimum wage of European labourers. This discrimination was justified by the argument that the wages were calculated according to 'the labour productivity of Vietnamese labourers'.⁶¹ These contractual wages did not change regardless of inflation or wartime trends, so colonial labourers gradually became the lowest paid in France.

Last but not least, employers also did not pay their Vietnamese labourers directly but instead, to the MOI, which retained labourers' salaries and only gave them a small amount to meet their daily necessities. Thus, the MOI effectively traded in colonial labourers for profit itself. However, French policy towards this labour force later changed after its defeat in 1940. This forced France to stop recruiting labourers in the colony and start organising their repatriation.

For example, the sick and disabled and the skilled labourers (85 in total) in the Ha Noi Technical School of Hanoi were all to be repatriated.⁶² However, similar to the transportation to France, returning labourers faced many difficulties, and many were not able to return to their homeland. A letter written by Bui Ai on the *Eridan* back to Vietnam in 1941 highlighted the human conditions about the vessel: 'the conditions are deplorable, with the sick and healthy passengers cramped together in unsanitary compartments without proper ventilation or lighting. To make matters worse, hunger is widespread, forcing some passengers to carry their own bowls'.⁶³ Out of all the ships that were sent back to Indochina, one trip carrying 102 labourers was diverted to Dakar, Senegal, but was later forced to return to France. Another vessel carrying 488 labourers was captured by British forces in Durban, South Africa. Additionally, 102 sick labourers were landed in Oran, but unfortunately 20 of them had passed away. Upon their return to Vietnam, the surviving labourers were detained by the

58 SHD, Circulaire du M.O.I., Service central de la Main d'œuvre indigène Nord Africaine et coloniale, no. 278, Paris, le 20 Nov. 1939.

59 Đặng Văn Long, *Người Việt ở Pháp 1940–1954* [The Vietnamese in France 1940–1954], (Paris: Tủ sách nghiên cứu, 1997), p. 13.

60 'Tin tức các Đạo' [The information of Legions], *Công Binh Tạp Chí—Revue mensuelle des soldats et travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Nov. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936397w/f11.item>, (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022), pp. 11–12.

61 ANOM, INF, D 3314 Note du Ministère des Colonies sur la M.O.I., 2 Feb. 1944.

62 Tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh diện Công Binh'.

63 Ibid.

French government in detention camps before being allowed to return to their villages.⁶⁴ However, the repatriation process was eventually halted due to the British blockade policy, a shortage of ships, and France's political instability. As a result, out of 19,000 *Lính thợ*, only about 4,426 successfully returned to Vietnam at that time.⁶⁵

As for *Lính thợ* stuck in France, neither the French government nor MOI offered any policies and solutions to manage, support, guarantee their livelihoods, or save them from being captured by the Germans. The Vichy government considered negotiating with Germany to assist and release prisoners as an effective means of strengthening government legitimacy and public acceptance. Still, they were only interested in white prisoners and not colonial prisoners in their negotiations with the Germans.⁶⁶ Thus, in the report on the *Lính thợ* in 1946, labourers accused the MOI of abandoning them during detention by the Nazi army. For example, team 69 of *Lính thợ* were detained for more than 15 months without anyone even bothering to look for them.⁶⁷

When the Germans occupied southern France in November 1942, they also utilised the *Lính thợ* under MOI's jurisdiction and immediately requested their use for construction projects. Eventually, the French Armistice Commission instructed the Secretaries of State for War and Labour that the Wehrmacht would have access to colonial labourers stationed in southern France.⁶⁸ These labourers were assigned to build 'fortifications along the Mediterranean coast near Antibes, Toulon, La Ciotat, Port de Bouc, and Sète, but some were sent to powder and cartridge factories in Toulouse, Bergerac, Bordeaux, and Salbris'.⁶⁹ They lived in camps that were former barracks or military depots.⁷⁰ During the day, they were marched to work sites in the town and had to return to camp in the evening. It was estimated that at least 6,000 *Lính thợ* were forced to work for the German army directly or indirectly.⁷¹

For those who were not controlled by the German authorities, only a few were called back to work in factories, while most of them were unemployed.⁷² Therefore, the MOI's budget decreased significantly, and these *Lính thợ* fell into a very difficult and deadlocked situation. On the one hand, MOI encouraged private labour establishments to hire these *Lính thợ*; on the other hand, it cut the wages and necessities of these colonial labourers, forcing them to find their own means of subsistence in France. Therefore, between 1943 and 1944, a significant amount of Vietnamese labourers in the barracks lost their lives due to a combination of factors such as overwork, harsh treatment, inadequate living conditions, and insufficient access to food

64 Đại hội nghị tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh'.

65 Ibid.

66 Raffael Scheck, 'The colonial prisoners in Franco-German diplomacy', in *French colonial soldiers in German captivity during World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 61.

67 Đại hội nghị tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh'.

68 Smith, 'French like the others', p. 205.

69 Ibid., p. 206.

70 Tù Binh Đức [I am a prisoner of Germany], *Công Binh Tạp Chí—Revue mensuelle des soldats et travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Jan. 1945; <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936403k/f4.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

71 Liêm-Khê Luguern, 'Ni civil ni militaire', pp. 185–99.

72 Pierre Angeli, 'Les travailleurs Indochinois en France pendant la Seconde guerre mondiale' (1939–1945)' (Thesis, University of Paris, 1946).

and clothing, accounting for approximately 18 per cent of the total number of labourers in the barracks.⁷³

Besides, the *Lính thợ* also suffered emotional shocks. Colonial labourers, who were ‘sons of the protectorats’, became illegal immigrants or ‘unwelcome people’ in France during the years of the Second World War and after. The French government held the belief that the Vietnamese were perpetually subjects of their rule, rather than citizens of France.⁷⁴ As such, they made every effort to distance Vietnamese labourers from French society. This was evident in how they arranged housing, employment, and implemented a strict surveillance system to monitor their movements. Specifically, in *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault described the art of spatial distribution as an art of surveillance. A military camp is a temporary and artificial centre constructed and modified according to the military’s needs. The layout of the camp, including the arrangement of paths, tents, and files, is precisely defined, and the supervision of the occupants is meticulously planned. The goal of the camp is to exert power through constant observation, with every gaze contributing to the functioning of power. The ideal camp is one in which power is exercised solely through observation and control.⁷⁵

Individuals were carefully allocated to their own areas within the military camp, while being discreetly monitored by commanders. This model of monitoring was also applied to the Vietnamese labourers, who were segregated into separate areas known as MOI villages. These villages were enclosed by barbed wire or high walls with gatekeepers to monitor the entry of labourers. Interestingly, these camps were designed and decorated in a style that reflected Vietnamese culture. For instance, the camp gate of the 1st Legion in Lodève resembled a typical Vietnamese village gate, with a three-arched entrance gate, a vertical pillar gate, and symbols of Vietnamese architecture such as couplets, dragons, and cloud patterns.⁷⁶ However, the village gate was ironically used as a space convention between villages, whereas the camp gate was symbolic of the separation between French and Vietnamese spaces. This made the French hesitant to approach the space, while the Vietnamese saw it as their own and were reluctant to leave.

The Vietnamese labourers of the 67th Legion in Auzat (Ariège) lived in villages that consisted of various areas, including common areas for entertainment and physical activities, suites for bedrooms, kitchens, medical rooms, and administrative rooms. These villages were designed to provide basic living facilities for the labourers while also facilitating the management and monitoring of their activities by French supervisors. Reports published in *Công Binh* magazine by Ho Van Thong provide a detailed description of these living arrangements:

73 ASOM, INF, 397/3314, Note du ministère des Colonies, 22 Nov. 1944.

74 Edwige Liliane Lefebvre, ‘Republicanism and universalism: Factors of inclusion or exclusion in the French concept of citizenship’, *Citizenship Studies* 7, 1 (2003): 32.

75 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 171.

76 Công trại đạo Nhất [The camp’s gate of 1st Legion], *Công Binh Tạp Chí- Revue Mensuelle Des Soldats et Travailleurs Indochinois*, 20 Mar. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9363954/f1.image> (last accessed on 30 Aug. 2022).

Auzat was a small village hidden on the slopes of the Pyrenees. *Lính thợ* lived in camps and were isolated from the locals. Their living camps were built of bricks and divided into small, adjacent compartments with bedrooms, a medicine room, a dining room, and a water kitchen. In addition, they converted one room into a classroom and entertainment area.⁷⁷

In these camps, the MOI created a ‘special world’ where colonial labourers were isolated and controlled by a closed civil organisation. Unfortunately, the living conditions in these camps were bleak, leaving *Lính thợ* with no means of entertainment. As a result, some turned to vices such as gambling, alcohol, fighting, and theft.⁷⁸ The lack of opportunities for personal growth, combined with a culture of selfishness and self-centredness, led to more divisions among the labourers. This discrimination caused hatred and division among labourers from different provinces and villages, further deepening and expanding on a daily basis.

Despite sharing the same ethnic background as the labourers, the Vietnamese supervisors and interpreters held a privileged position in the camps due to their collaboration with the French colonists. As noted by Dang Van Long, at the end of 1941, one such individual was Cap Van Sen, who served as Deputy Administrator of the Third Legion in the Vaucluse district. Cap Van Sen rewarded those who showed loyalty to France and served his interests, often at the expense of the labourers under their supervision. This created a hierarchical system within the camps where Vietnamese supervisors and interpreters had power over the labourers, perpetuating the cycle of exploitation and abuse.⁷⁹

During their time in the labour camps, the French authorities allowed *Lính thợ* to have their own Vietnamese-language magazines, which served as a means of communication and information-sharing among the labourers across France such as *Công Binh* magazine, *Tiếng chuông công đoàn* [the voice of trade union], and *Thông tin của Thanh niên* [the information of the youth].⁸⁰ These magazines featured news updates on current events in France and Indochina, as well as updates on the work of *Lính thợ* across the country. Additionally, these magazines also introduced new forms of entertainment such as soccer, chess, basketball, and dance. Those who had the ability to read, write, draw, compose music, or write poetry were encouraged to submit their work to these magazines. However, the individuals responsible for writing and publishing the news were often interpreters and supervisors.

Moreover, as these magazines were under the management and supervision of the French authorities, news in these magazines not only supported the French government’s policy but also encouraged the *Lính thợ* to serve France. For instance, despite France’s defeat to the German army during the Second World War, *Công Binh*

77 Vo Van Thong, ‘Một Cơ Lính Thợ Được Ban Khen [a Group of Lính Thợ is praised by the organization]’, *Công Binh Tạp Chí-Revue Mensuelle Des Soldats et Travailleurs Indochinois*, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936404z/f8.item>, 1 Jan. 1945 (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

78 Tooc-Sinh, ‘Cờ bạc và ái quốc’ [Gamble and patriotism], *Công Binh Tạp Chí – Revue Mensuelle Des Soldats et Travailleurs Indochinois*, 5 Mar. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936394r/f4.item> (last accessed 30 Aug 2022).

79 Đặng Văn Long, *Người Việt ở Pháp 1940–1954*, p. 8.

80 *Công Binh: bulletin bimensuel [‘puis’ journal] des travailleurs indochinois*, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936391m/fl.item> (last accessed 10 May 2023).

magazine continued to emphasise France's superiority and civilisation, urging the Vietnamese to remain loyal to their 'mother country'. The magazine also included works that warned against desertion or joining the communist movement, with threats of severe punishment or even the death penalty. In one example from *Bức thư Đông Dương* (Letter from Indochina), a mother implores her children to serve France and not to flee because they 'would be severely fined or shot, or not receive the blessing of their ancestors'. While the magazine provided a means of communication for *Lính thợ*, it was also a means of control and indoctrination by the French authorities. The content reflected the government's desire to maintain power over the Vietnamese and to prevent them from seeking independence or aligning with other anti-colonial movements.⁸¹

The French government allowed the Vietnamese to keep their traditional costumes, hats, cuisine, and games. In some large camps, such as *Tinh Gia*, the Vietnamese set up a temple to perform their spiritual practices. They organised their own traditional ceremonies and festivals, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival and Lunar New Year. On the first days of the new year, according to the lunar calendar, *Công Binh* magazine often published essays and pictures about cultural matters, such as Chung cake, peach blossoms, or apricot blossoms, to announce the New Year to the *Lính thợ* in France. In particular, *Công Binh* reported on Philippe Pétain, the president of the French government, who visited *Tinh Gia* camp—Bellerive on the occasion of Tet in 1944.⁸² Vietnamese's *Lính thợ* held a welcoming ceremony with flags and flowers. They also performed incense-offering ceremonies, sacrifices to Gods, and Vietnamese folk games, such as wrestling, to show the French people Vietnamese culture and customs. This policy was not only implemented to respect the traditional Vietnam culture but it also reminded *Lính thợ* that they were Vietnamese and different from the French.

French media not only highlighted differences but also propagated negative stereotypes about the Vietnamese. Many French believed that the Vietnamese were dependent on France for their survival.⁸³ Until as late as 1972, Montpellier's newspaper *L'Echo du Vidourle* published articles describing Vietnamese labourers as consuming cats and dogs. In the French imagination, *Lính thợ* were viewed as 'insolent, liars, and petty thieves', and even 'uncivilised' and 'wild' with unacceptable habits of eating cats and dogs.⁸⁴ This negative portrayal of *Lính thợ* perpetuated a sense of alienation and prejudice against the Vietnamese, urging the French to stay away from them.

Similarly, although *Lính thợ* were civilian labourers, their movements were restricted. The MOI was even instructed to further limit colonial labourers' mobility to prevent contact, harassment, violence, or conflict with local people. As a result, this

81 Thị Ba, *Bức thư Đông Dương* [Letter from Indochina], *Công Binh tạp chí – Bulletin bi-mensuel des travailleurs Indochinois*, 25 Jan. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9363920/f4.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

82 Quan Thống chế Pétain tới thăm trại Tinh Gia Bellerive [Marsal Pétain visits Tinh Gia camp], *Công Binh Tạp Chí – Bulletin bi-mensuel des Travailleurs Indochinois*, 20 Feb. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936393c/fl.image> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

83 Lê Hữu Thọ, *Hành trình của một cậu ấm tại Pháp (1940–1946)*, p. 24.

84 *Echo du Vidourle*, no. 62, 11–17 Mar. 1972.

organisation enacted a March 1943 decree that specifically targeted ‘foreigners’ in southern France. Under this newly enacted policy, *Lính thợ* were not only required to carry their identification document with them at all times, but they also had to have a document that confirmed they were allowed to leave their work camps from MOI. At the same time, this new policy sought to criminalise any unauthorised movement among Vietnamese colonial labourers living in France.⁸⁵

In addition, the French government enforced measures to prevent *Lính thợ* from getting married and staying in France because of a fear that racial mixing would weaken the French race. The French media regularly propagated the ideas that Frenchwomen should not marry colonial men because ‘most Vietnamese people were married in their homeland before going to France’.⁸⁶ They even suggested that French girls could not stand the squalid living conditions in Vietnam. Likewise, the reports recommended that Vietnamese could not find jobs in France because they were physically unsuitable. Only a very small number of labourers (around 5 per cent), and most of them interpreters and supervisors, were able to settle down or marry a French spouse because they could speak French or find a job. In contrast, most of the labourers lived from day to day waiting for their repatriation.

In summary, the discriminatory policies of the French authorities resulted in a significant cultural and social divide between the French and Vietnamese, and even within the Vietnamese *Lính thợ* community. These labourers were given a ‘sacred mission’ to contribute to the defence of their ‘mother country’, yet they faced rejection from the French.

Postwar French dilemmas

Following France’s liberation, the repatriation of *Lính thợ* became a dilemma for the French government due to its contradictory policies. On the one hand, it did not want to keep these labourers on French territory, fearing that their patriotic struggle would disturb French society and that contact between Vietnamese men and local women would be socially unacceptable.⁸⁷ On the other hand, repatriating almost 15,000 people to Vietnam immediately would pose a threat to the French government because these forces might join the resistance movement against the French in Vietnam. The French government eventually decided to repatriate *Lính thợ* in groups, starting in 1946, after negotiations with the Vietnamese government.⁸⁸ However, repatriation did not mean that *Lính thợ* could return to their homeland and live peacefully. Instead, many of them were arrested, imprisoned, or even executed by the French authorities, who considered them a potential threat to their colonial rule in Vietnam. This brutal treatment of *Lính thợ* led to strong resentment and opposition towards the French, contributing to the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1946.

These considerations led to many changes in French policies toward Vietnamese labourers from 1945 to the 1950s. In 1945, the Ministry of Colonies and Interior decided to repatriate *Lính thợ*. In mid-December, the Indochina Section at the

85 Smith, ‘French like the others’, p. 229.

86 *L’Avenir agathois*, 29 Mar. 1941.

87 Pierre Daum, *Lính Thợ Đông Dương Ở Pháp (1939–1952)*.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 274.

Ministry of Colonies began public discussions about the repatriation plan, prioritising sick and injured labourers to send back first and establishing an organisation in Vietnam to facilitate their reintegration into colonial society. The government also created a camp at Cap Saint-Jacques (Vũng Tàu) to help intelligence agencies in Vietnamese identify labourers considered a security risk after their time in France.⁸⁹

Essentially, owing to deteriorating relations between the French colonies and the government in the late 1940s, plans for the repatriation of *Lính thợ* were interrupted by the outbreak of war between France and Vietnam in 1946. As a result, the French government opted to relocate the Vietnamese workforce to rural areas instead of repatriating them to Vietnam.

The lack of a viable solution from the French government for the Vietnamese labourers, coupled with witnessing the fierce struggle of French workers to demand their rights, motivated Vietnamese workers to fight for their legitimate rights. Facing discrimination, isolation, injustice and, in particular, the influence of French policies during wartime, the labourers were united in their quest for education, vocational training, union membership, integration into French society, the dismantling of the MOI, and repatriation. They formed a collective voice and overcame their individualistic tendencies to become a strong force in French society. They also engaged in political and social activities and pushed for independence.

The initial step towards the labourers' unity was breaking down the barriers of inferiority among them. Due to their diversity, only a few were literate and understood French, whereas the majority were illiterate farmers. As a result, they addressed each other according to feudal order, using terms such as '*thầy sếp*' (master/boss), '*ông cai*' (sir guardian), '*cụ đội*' (sir captain) with prefixes showing the lower position in the society such as '*thua*', '*bâm*' or suffixes '*đạ*', '*vâng ạ*',⁹⁰ which created a superficial politeness and alienation among them. However, as the war drew to a close and the labourers became more exposed to French culture and education, they realised that such terms were no longer appropriate. They were also more intimate and natural with each other, their status was also equal, so they did not use the phrases '*thua*', '*bâm*', '*vâng đạ*' but communicated more equally.⁹¹ They started to communicate by addressing each other as brothers, sisters, friends, or by their positions or names if intimate. This helped to break down the wall of guilt and inferiority among the labourers and facilitated their unity.

In addition to overcoming their inferiority complex, the Vietnamese in France also supported each other in improving their education levels, specifically by tackling illiteracy. Since the majority of *Lính thợ* were uneducated farmers, few could read or write when they arrived in France.⁹² In the past, *Lính thợ* had to rely on interpreters or supervisors to write and read their letters. Therefore, as soon as they arrived, many interpreters and literate people mobilised the labourers-soldiers to study. Especially at the end of the war, an anti-illiteracy movement erupted strongly in the worker camps. Every *Lính thợ*, regardless of age, was required to attend classes. The academic programme was divided into several levels, with the minimum requirement being to

89 Smith, 'French like the others', p. 316.

90 Đặng Văn Long, *Người Việt ở Pháp 1940–1954*, p. 201.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

92 *Ibid.*

learn how to read and write. A *Ban giáo khoa Công binh học vụ* (Didactics Department of Literacy for *Lính thợ*) was established, and lessons were provided. As a result, within three to four months, 95 per cent of the *Lính thợ* were able to read and write.⁹³

The gap between the interpreters, supervisors, and other *Lính thợ* was dramatically reduced through mutual interaction and support. Some interpreters and supervisors criticised the selfish practices that only benefit those in power or the indifference of their colleagues towards the conditions of the *Lính thợ*. They urged everyone to fulfil their duties and responsibilities, and work towards creating a just and humane society, as well as fighting for common goals such as establishing political organisations, participating in vocational training, and integrating into French civil society.

The Vietnamese labourers also demonstrated solidarity and unity by communicating and helping each other within and between legions all over France. First, they started a movement *Tượng binh Tương tế* (the mutual aid club), and then *Hội quán Chức việc* (the general work management Club). Although they had different names, these organisations all had the same purpose of promoting solidarity and cooperation between *Lính thợ*. They often organised fund-raising events to send money to *Lính thợ* in difficulty in France or back in Vietnam. For example, in 1943, upon hearing that some Vietnamese labourers were being held in Germany, some *Lính thợ* of the 50th Company in Salin De Giraud performed the Vietnamese opera about *Trung Trắc, Trưng Nhị* (two women heroes in Vietnam history), raising 2,039 francs for these prisoners.⁹⁴ At the same time, these organisations arranged meetings between labourers and authorities to claim benefits for *Lính thợ*. In 1944, some *Lính thợ* founded their own labourers' committees, starting in their legions in Marseille and then spreading to numerous regions in France. These committees organised strikes to demand their rights, such as controlling clothing and food distribution and removing exploitative managers.

Additionally, *Lính thợ* fought for the right to learn vocational skills. Especially when France was liberated, direct discussions took place in the *Lính thợ* camps about the issue of vocational training and job choices when returning to Vietnam. These discussions focused on the following matters: first, the responsibility of Vietnamese interpreters and supervisors in the new era (post-liberation France) to eradicate illiteracy in *Lính thợ* camps and guide the labourers in vocational training.⁹⁵ Second, they criticised the old Vietnamese thinking, which promoted only leadership positions and disregarded practical professions.⁹⁶ Third, they encouraged the *Lính thợ*

93 Ibid.

94 *Công Binh tạp chí- Bulletin bi-mensuel des travailleurs Indochinois*, 20 Oct. 1943, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936391m/f1.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

95 Vũ Ngân, 'Thông ngôn và giám thị, các anh đã làm hết bốn phận chưa?' [Interpreters and Supervisors, have you done your duty?], *Công Binh tạp chí-Journal des travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Nov. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936397w/f3.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022); Đào Trung, 'Thanh niên Newspaper các anh đã sẵn sàng chưa?' [Are the young ready?], *Công Binh tạp chí- Bulletin bi-mensuel des travailleurs Indochinois*, 20 Mar. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9363954/f1.image> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

96 Vấn đề đi học nghề [Vocational training problem], *Công Binh tạp chí - Journal des travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Jan. 1945, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936399n/f8.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

to choose occupations suitable to their circumstances as well as to the economic needs in Vietnam, such as forging and casting, the manufacture of chemicals (for soap, oil, shoes, medicines, dyes, etc.), food processing, printing, and leather tanning.⁹⁷ Fourth, the group called on the *Lính thợ* to exercise and stay healthy, maintain hygiene, and eliminate bad habits such as gambling and drinking. The extensive discussions quickly turned into demonstrations and parades to submit petitions to and pressure the French authorities.

To decrease the tensions between the *Lính thợ* and French authorities, the government agreed for *Lính thợ* to attend vocational training. However, they had to undergo a rigorous selection process because of the limited numbers of training positions available. The selection process was based on health, talents and preference, and colonial demand. Only 1,500 *Lính thợ* received vocational training after passing very difficult tests. Once selected, these *Lính thợ* would begin an apprenticeship in a workshop for about a year, in ‘*pre-apprentissage*’. After that year, they started working as adjunct workers in factories. They needed to attend school for two or three years to qualify as professionals.⁹⁸ However, those participating in these courses were mainly selected from the team of interpreters and supervisors. For example, Pham Ngoc Toan, an interpreter and secretary in the office of Cazenave, who managed the Fourth Legion, graduated in Social Studies (Etudes Sociales); and Nguyen Van Dam, the interpreter of 40th Company, was admitted to the second year at the National School of Agronomics of Toulouse. Le Ba Dang, a supervisor, was accepted at the Toulouse Art School (he would later become a famous painter).⁹⁹

Along with the fight for vocational training, these *Lính thợ* were increasing awareness of the political struggles in France and in Vietnam. They joined unions and connected with the leftist movements in France, including the Marxists, and Vietnamese student organisations. In particular, many joined the French Communist Party’s (Parti communiste français, PCF) and the French General Confederation of Labour (Confédération générale du travail, CGT) — whose power and prestige increasingly grew after the end of the war. To keep in contact with the French General Confederation of Labour and protect the claims of *Lính thợ*, the CGT sent a delegation led by Comrade André Tollet to work with the *Lính thợ* representative and established a branch of the Vietnamese Union in France. As early as 1944, MOI faced the fact that many Vietnamese labourers had become members of CGT. With support from CGT, *Lính thợ* united with French labourers, participated in their struggles, strictly adhered to the union’s rules, and had a clear political orientation.¹⁰⁰ During protest marches, they carried slogans such ‘France-Vietnamese Labour Solidarity’, ‘French military force withdraws from Vietnam’, and ‘Vietnam is completely independent’.¹⁰¹

97 Ibid., esp. pp. 8–9.

98 Nguyễn Vũ Ngân, ‘Việc lựa chọn và dạy nghề’ [The selection of learners and vocational training], *Công Binh tạp chí, Journal des Travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Dec. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9363988/f1.image> (last accessed 30 Aug., 2022).

99 Tin Đạo Tư [News of the 4th Legion], *Công Binh tạp chí – Journal des travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Oct. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936396h/f12.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022), *Công Binh tạp chí – Journal des travailleurs Indochinois*, 1 Nov. 1944, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k936397w/f12.item> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

100 Tổng uỷ ban đại diện công binh, ‘Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh’.

101 Ibid.

In addition, *Lính thợ* established information units, relief funds, cultural committees, and education committees to eliminate illiteracy in their camps. According to Le Huu Tho, the meetings in the camps became political.¹⁰² They also connected with Vietnamese intellectuals and students in France to form large movements and set up their political organisation to protect their rights and express their political attitudes toward Vietnam. Thus, a series of political organisations were formed from 1944 until the 1950s. On 16 September 1944, *Ban Đại diện lâm thời* (the Provisional General Delegation) was established with the goal of fighting to improve Vietnamese labourers' lives, rights, and social and professional benefits.¹⁰³ After three months, in December 1944, the Congress of Vietnamese Delegates across France was held in Avignon.¹⁰⁴ The Congress marked a step forward in connecting Vietnamese intellectuals and labourers. News of political developments and the independence movement in Vietnam excited *Lính thợ* and made them protest against French moves to reassert colonial power over Vietnam. In response, the French authorities banned the General Representative of Vietnamese from operating and detained many members of the Committee, including Tran Duc Thao (a famous philosopher), the spokesman.¹⁰⁵ Faced with oppression by the authorities, many protests, strikes, and hunger strikes were held in the *Lính thợ* community and Vietnamese patriots in major cities in Marseille, Lyon, Bordeaux, and even Paris. The General Representative of Vietnamese leaders also called for action in the entire Vietnamese community but asked for non-violence. At the same time, they contacted the press and the French people, distributed leaflets, and sent letters to the embassies of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the USSR to explain their aspirations for independence for Vietnam.

On 11 November 1945, 105 Vietnamese delegates attended the Congress at the *Lính thợ* camp in Marseille. They elected a leadership committee, named Việt Kiều Liên Minh (Vietnam Overseas Alliance), intending to 'communicate and negotiate with the authorities about rights of Vietnamese labourers'. The organisation disbanded on 5 June 1946.¹⁰⁶

After the Việt Kiều Liên Minh self-disbanded to make room for its own organisations, such as the soldiers, students, engineers, and labourers, on 14 April 1946, *Lính thợ* representatives held a congress in Marseille to elect the Tổng Ủy Ban Đại diện Công Binh (*Lính thợ* General Representation Committee) in France.¹⁰⁷ This organisation clearly expressed its stance of supporting the Ho Chi Minh government in its struggle for independence, against colonialism, against establishing a separate government in the South of Vietnam, and opposing French return.¹⁰⁸ Its view was demonstrated in the reception of the Vietnamese Delegation to negotiate with the French

102 Lê Hữu Thọ, *Hành Trình Của Một Cựu Ấm Tại Pháp*, p. 176.

103 Vũ Dương Ninh, 'Vài Nét Về Phong Trào Lính Thợ (O.N.S.) Ở Pháp Năm 1944–1946 [Some aspects about the (O.N.S.) unskilled labourers' Movement in France in 1944–1946]', *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* (1995): 11–18.

104 Ibid.

105 ASOM, INF, Dossier 979.

106 Vũ Dương Ninh, 'Vài Nét Về Phong Trào Lính Thợ'.

107 Tổng ủy ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh'.

108 Alain Ruscio, *Les Communistes Français et la Guerre d'Indochine, 1944–1954* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985), p. 422.

Government in May 1946. Many *Lính thợ* gathered at the Marseille camp to welcome the Vietnamese Delegation with banners and slogans about freedom, peace, and support for an independent Vietnam. In other words, the movement of Vietnamese labourers in France became Viet Minh's hand in France.

However, there were still different opinions about the revolutionary situation in Vietnam and the movement in France within the *Lính thợ* community. Before Vietnam gained independence, some *Lính thợ* still believed that it was necessary to ask the French army to liberate the Vietnamese nation (controlled by a Franco-Japanese government during the Second World War) and borrow money from France to develop its economy. Another group advocated founding a republican regime but supported Vietnam as a French colony. The leader of this group also had a close relationship with General Leclerc and Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, who led the French to return to Vietnam after 1945. On the other hand, some *Lính thợ* were indifferent, apathetic, and doubted the strength of the Viet Minh.¹⁰⁹ These contradictions decreased when the Vietnamese Revolution succeeded in August 1945. Still, the complicated international situation and Vietnam's Revolution led to increased divisions among the *Lính thợ*. These increased, especially when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government signed the Ho-Sainteny Agreement on 6 March 1946, and then Franco-Vietnam Modus Vivendi on 14 September 1946, which caused intense controversy among the *Lính thợ*. While most of them expressed their trust and support for the Vietnamese government's decisions, some opposed the content of the Agreement and voiced doubts about the capacity and purpose of the DRV government. Conflict arose among the opposing parties, the most serious of which were the bloody clashes on 15 May 1948, at the Marseille camp, between opponents and supporters of the DRV, resulting in six dead and many injured, which shook France.¹¹⁰ As a result, the French people's aversion to the Vietnamese increased, in a spread of moral panic. On 20 May 1948, the *Provençal Daily* reported, 'Vietnamese have to be taken away from the Mazargues!' The newspaper also described that after hearing about the violence, the people of Mazargues no longer worried about their chickens being stolen, but they feared for the lives of their wives and children. Although it was hot, no one dared to open the window at night. Hence, 'Vietnamese labourers must not live in the suburbs of a big centre like this'.¹¹¹

Due to such fear-mongering, the French government had to apply strict measures such as arresting and imprisoning the *Lính thợ* movement's leaders. On the other hand, it speeded up repatriation. On 9 September 1948, 700 *Lính thợ* were arrested and taken off the ship. In 1949, the *Lính thợ* camps were closed down one by one. The French authorities repatriated the rest, a process that lasted until 1952.¹¹²

After 1952, only two or three thousand Vietnamese labourers remained in France; among them, around one thousand Vietnamese who married French women (5 per cent).¹¹³ These were also the founders and core of the

109 Tổng uỷ ban đại diện công binh, 'Diễn Văn Của Đại Biểu Công Binh'.

110 Daum, *Lính Thợ Đông Dương Ở Pháp (1939-1952)*, p. 258.

111 Ibid., p. 258.

112 Liêm-Khê Luguern, 'Les "Travailleurs Indochinois"', p. 523.

113 Ibid., p. 453.

Franco-Vietnamese Friendship Association.¹¹⁴ As for the other *Lính thợ*, their repatriation' process and lives were quite complicated by the Indochina war and the opposing parties' views.

From 1946 to the 1950s, the *Lính thợ* were brought back to Cap Saint-Jacques. From here, they would have a medical examination and be sent back to their villages of origin. However, the process usually took a few months, partly because the French High Commissioner wanted to requisition them to join the war against the Viet Minh, and partly because of differences between the French government and the local government as to who should foot the transportation costs for *Lính thợ*. And partly because it was feared that the repatriated workers would join the DRV against them. Nguyen Khac Ve, Minister of Justice in Bao Dai's government, expressed concern that a few thousand *Lính thợ* returning to North Vietnam would increase the DRV's capacity. Therefore, he asked the regional authorities to take responsibility for helping this labour force and providing them with jobs. However, he had to admit that the task was not easy because many returnees had chronic illnesses and were invalids. Many others were also unable to return to their old life. Finding employment for them in the commercial and industrial sectors was not easy.¹¹⁵

Furthermore, the *Lính thợ* strongly opposed the mobilisation plan; many of them fled from Cap Saint-Jacques and found their own way back to their villages, while others made contact with the Viet Minh and joined it. Hoang Cong Can's repatriation journey is a valuable example of that. After being imprisoned in Cap Saint-Jacques, he and 50 others were brought to Hue when the French took control of the city. After that, his group established contact with the Viet Minh, more than twenty of them joined the Chiên Khu (the free zone controlled by the Viet Minh) and participated in the war of resistance against the French.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Chu Van Ngan, Hoang Cong Can, Nguyen Dinh Duyet, Trinh Xuan Khau, Dao Van Thinh, and Tran Ngoc Tien also announced that they had joined the Viet Minh.¹¹⁷ After 1952, *Lính thợ* continued to return and contribute to building and rebuilding the country after the war. There are cases in which *Lính thợ* brought their wives and children back to Vietnam. For example, Nguyen Thanh Duc brought his wife, Marthe Schaffer, and his child to Vietnam in 1960.¹¹⁸ He was a former *Lính thợ*, went to France in 1940, and then trained as a professional radiotelegrapher; his French wife was a doctor. Given his expertise, Nguyen Thanh Duc was employed by the Ministry of Transport and Posts.¹¹⁹

114 ASOM, INF, D 3314 Rapport de J. de Raymond pour le ministère des Colonies, 8 Nov. 1944.

115 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia (Vietnam National Archive I), Cabinet du chef de l' Bao Dai du Vietnam no. 508, 1-C-SG-Cir, Saigon, 30 June 1950.

116 Liêm-Khê Luguern, *Les 'Travailleurs Indochinois' Étude socio-historique d'une immigration coloniale (1939-1954)* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2021), p. 544.

117 Ibid., p. 548.

118 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia III (Vietnam National Archive III), Vụ Cán Bộ- Bộ Nội Vụ (Ministry of Interior Affairs), Công văn của Vụ Cán Bộ gửi Bộ trưởng Bộ Y tế, Bộ trưởng Bộ giao thông bưu điện về bố trí công tác cho 2 Việt kiều ở Pháp về nước cùng với vợ là người Pháp, no. 4136, no. 1242 CB/PCB, ngày 2/2/1960 [An official dispatch from the Department of Personnel was sent to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Transport and Posts regarding job arrangements for two overseas Vietnamese in France, who are returning home with their French wives], no. 4136, no. 1242, CB/PCB, 2 Feb. 1960.

119 Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia III (Vietnam National Archive III), Vụ Cán Bộ - Bộ Nội Vụ (Ministry of Interior Affairs), Công văn Bộ Giao thông bưu điện gửi Bộ Nội vụ về việc đồng ý nhận ông Nguyen

In short, French policies on *Lính thợ* put not only Vietnamese in a difficult situation but also entailed many consequences for French society and the colonial system. Due to France's wartime rapid defeat and difficulties, divided French policies and practices on the Vietnamese in France were full of contradictions. Furthermore, post-war social and political upheavals, the communist movement, and national liberation movements in the colonies, including in Indochina, meant that the French government faced a revolutionary backlash from those they had exploited. The *Lính thợ* in France gradually eliminated the influence of village ideology, selfishness, and isolation to gather into a force in French society with a common voice about their legitimate interests, such as the right to study and repatriation. They participated in the sociopolitical fight for national independence. They inevitably became a force in the movement against colonialism: 'The way to France is also the way to fight against the French colonialism'.¹²⁰ In French history, this period is considered a dark one, which may help explain, in part, the 'forgetfulness' of the French government for a long time afterward about the fate and history of these Vietnamese labourers.

Conclusion

Looking back at the *Lính thợ* in France and especially their repatriation process, some paradoxes can be seen. Many of the *Lính thợ* were coerced into or forced to leave their fatherland to labour in France, and suffered the heavy consequences of a defeated France under Germany occupation and the Vichy government. They were heavily exploited and subjected to discrimination and mismanagement. They were neither 'welcomed' in France nor freely repatriated. Many participated in the growing patriotic movement, fought for Vietnam's independence, and were arrested, imprisoned, and even deported. Still, when returning, they were also put in a difficult situation when the French government and Bao Dai's government continued to take advantage of postwar conditions to fight the Viet Minh or participate in the 'resistance war' against the French. After all this, the repatriated *Lính thợ* lived a closed life, with guilt and low self-esteem, like former prisoners. They were silent and did not want to reveal or share their story with their children.¹²¹ Hence, they suffered from the callousness and indifference of not only the French but also of some in their own land.

For various reasons, the fate of the *Lính thợ* in France was forgotten for many decades. Researchers, many of whom were children of *Lính thợ*, told the stories of Vietnamese colonial labourers and reawakened an interest in these people. Then, a series of articles, research projects, exhibitions, and various activities awakened the public's genuine interest in this issue. This movement has influenced many local authorities in France and national activities to commemorate and honour the

Thanh Duc, Việt Kiều ở Pháp về, no. 4136, no. 4154 CB, ngày 22/3/1960 [Dispatch from the Ministry of Transport and Post to the Ministry of Interior Affairs on agreeing to receive Mr Nguyen Thanh Duc, Viet Kieu from France], no. 4136, 4154 CB, 22 Mar. 1960.

120 D. Hemery, 'Du patriotisme au Marxisme: l'immigration Vietnamienne en France de 1926 à 1930', *Le Mouvement social*, 90 (1975): 3–54.

121 Khánh Phương, Hành trình tìm kiếm *Lính thợ* Đông Dương trên đất Pháp [The journey to find Vietnamese labourers in France], HTV Đài Truyền hình Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 30 Mar. 2020, <https://www.htv.com.vn/hanh-trinh-tim-kiem-linh-tho-dong-duong-tren-dat-phap> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2022).

Vietnamese labourers. Many such events have taken place: On 5 October 2014, a monument was built in Camargue — in southern France, in memory of Vietnamese colonial labourers working there. In 1942, about 500 *Lính thợ* were brought to Camargue to restore rice farming, and they succeeded in renovating this saline land into a famous rice-growing area. In November 2014, Montpellier, also in the south, inaugurated a stele commemorating 19 Vietnamese labourers who died there in 1947. This is also a mark of recognition for what the *Lính thợ* contributed to France during the Second World War.

Each human destiny is associated with the national destiny into which they were born. In a certain context, Vietnamese colonial labourers were the victims and consequences of upheavals in two countries, France and Vietnam. Their fate is one of the clearest proofs of the tumultuous history of the two countries. More than that, recognition by the French government for what the Vietnamese labourers contributed to France is a clear manifestation of the development of a higher level of Vietnam–France relations. However, more transparency is needed between Vietnam and France to conduct more comprehensive research on *Lính Thợ ONS*.