

## Introduction: Sovereignty, Violence, and Institutional Collapse at the Edge of France’s Empire

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After the Geneva Accords on Indochina were signed in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily broken into two parts, with the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and the non-communist State of Vietnam in the south. While many cadres and soldiers in the Resistance that fought the French regrouped to the north, Trần Bạch Đằng, a Resistance intellectual who covertly stayed behind in the south, set out for Saigon. Leaving the Resistance zone, he felt disoriented. In Đằng’s eloquent words:

After July 20, 1954, I left the liberated area of Zone Nine, where I had worked and lived for many years, to return to Saigon. I set foot in the Phụng Hiệp market one morning. On the other side of the river was the liberated zone. Facing the market was the Joint [Ceasefire Committee for the South] headquarters, flying the flag of the Land of our Ancestors. Phụng Hiệp was small, but was abuzz with activity. For me, everything was strange. The bus station was noisier, people getting off and on vehicles, bustling to and forth. From the riverbank, I had to walk past many onlookers, and as I passed them, I felt the cold stares in the back of my neck, as if prying eyes were boring into me. Climbing onto the bus, I glanced at the person next to me. He was young, wearing dark glasses – “he looks like he’s from the secret police,” I thought to myself. Who was behind me? Several times I looked around, then stopped. These mixed-up thoughts put me on edge. The bus moved quickly through more villages and markets than I could remember. When we passed over roads that had been damaged, and reached good roads and did not bounce around anymore, I felt far from Zone Nine, and felt more and more abandoned and alone.<sup>1</sup>

Trần Bạch Đằng’s remembrance of his 1954 journey from the Resistance liberated zone to that under control of the State of Vietnam underscores the experiential importance of the internal borders that had shaped the Mekong Delta during the First Indochina War. But it also emphasizes a bitter reality for the communist-led DRV: having failed to win in the South, it was forced to accept the temporary division of the country at the Seventeenth Parallel during the Geneva negotiations. Only covert

<sup>1</sup> Trần Bạch Đằng, *Kể về Gia Định* (Hanoi: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 2005), 19–20.

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operatives like Trần Bạch Đằng would stay behind to continue the revolutionary struggle.

Why did the communist-led Resistance in Vietnam win their anticolonial war against France and its Vietnamese allies (1945–54) in the rest of Vietnam, but fail in the South? This book, based on extensive archival and secondary research on three continents, eventually answers that question. I confess, however, that when I began my research, that question was not even on my mind. After all, the DRV defeated France resoundingly at the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, heralding France's exit from Vietnam. Why quibble over details about the southern third of the country? Communist historians have stated that the Resistance *won* the war in the South. Western analysts vaguely implied the same. In his canonical province study *War Comes to Long An*, Jeffrey Race explained that the Second Indochina War was lost by the South Vietnamese government even before the United States committed massive numbers of troops to Vietnam in 1965. This failure was “conceptual”: while the South Vietnamese government focused on not losing, communists had a “*comprehensive view of revolution as a step-by-step process*” with a goal of winning.<sup>2</sup> Where did this strategy come from? Apparently, from the struggle in southern Vietnam against the French and their Vietnamese allies. I beg to differ. Communists would win the Second Indochina War in the South by *recognizing their mistakes* from the First Indochina War. Failure was a learning experience.

When I began this project, and as I end it, my mind has been less focused on who “won” and who “lost,” and more about the massive transformations of the South from 1945 to 1954. Fundamental questions still beg to be addressed. How does violence shape and reshape societies? How in war do institutions shatter, and then get reassembled out of the fragments left behind? What does it mean to speak of sovereignty, and its “transfer,” in situations of tremendous upheaval and fragmented rule? How exactly did the French empire end in southern Vietnam, and how was a new State of Vietnam born?

In trying to answer such questions, I examine the genesis, unfolding, and conclusion of the First Indochina War, usually called (in Vietnam) the War of Resistance against the French. Specifically, while the book discusses events in Saigon, and touches on Cambodia and the broader French empire, the heart of the book focuses on the Mekong Delta in today's southern Vietnam. This was a war in which the empire played a key role. A slight majority of the regular soldiers and sailors who

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), xvi, 141.

served in French Indochina (256,093 out of 489,560) were not French nationals. These numbers do not even include paramilitary and self-defense forces, who were overwhelmingly non-French. And the estimated 400,000 military and civilian dead? Of the regular and irregular soldiers on the French side who died, five-sixths were not French. If we cast our net wider to look at all the estimated civilian and military dead, the picture is starker. I estimate that those who were not French nationals probably made up approximately nineteen out of twenty of the dead in this conflict. These dead came from over sixty different political units and countries.

Before laying out my argument in depth, it helps to understand the foil against which it has been written. In modern Vietnamese history, the First Indochina War (1945–54), inaugurated with the so-called “August Revolution” of 1945, occupies a privileged place. At a global level, it forms a key part of the struggles for independence that marked the end of European empires in Asia and Africa. In the standard narrative of this war, a resolute, initially outmatched, and broad-based Vietnamese revolutionary nationalist Resistance fights against a powerful French military, ultimately triumphing against great odds. The story always begins with the Việt Minh seizure of power during the “August Revolution” of 1945, in the north, an act whose effects ripple southwards all the way to the Mekong Delta, and culminates, back in the north, with Hồ Chí Minh’s proclamation of independence on September 2, 1945, at Ba Đình Square, Hanoi. Communist historians (and many others) often insist that the war broke out, in the north, on December 19, 1946, after diplomatic negotiations between the DRV and France broke down. The war effectively concluded with the 1954 battle of Điện Biên Phủ in the north. With this defeat, France was forced to end the war and depart from Indochina. This is a very ‘northern’ story, one in which a northern template frames our understanding of what turns out to be a messy whole.

One of the problems of much writing on the First Indochina War is that it locates the ultimate victory of the Vietnamese in 1954 in either the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) itself, or in the events of the communist-led August Revolution of 1945, which are seen, in some way, to serve as the template for future victory. But was it? What if we centered our account of the First Indochina War on the plural South, with its own particular history, overlooked in the northern-centered narrative mentioned above? This book tries to avoid inventing new “chimeras of the origin.” After all, as Foucault has penetratingly observed, the inherited past is “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers” that play out across

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time.<sup>3</sup> The search for an “originary moment,” such as the August Revolution of 1945, encapsulating in embryo the promise of the future victory, is doomed to failure. Not only did the war have multiple strands that do not easily weave together, but its character cannot be defined by one master strand that links beginning to end.

In the South, the Resistance lost the first phase of the thirty-year military and political struggle for the South. But who “won”? Ironically, none of the contestants who actually fought. The war actually began in the South in September 1945, and over 3,000 French, British, and Japanese (now under Allied command) died fighting the Việt Minh before December, 1946 – the “official” month of the beginning of the war.<sup>4</sup> The great majority of these casualties occurred in Cochinchina. I roughly estimate that at least 10,000 civilians and armed members of the Việt Minh, and probably more, were killed in this initial period. “It is in Cochinchina and southern Annam,” General Valluy stated in 1946, “that the future of the French in Indochina and the Far East is playing out,”<sup>5</sup> a view echoed that same year by Admiral Thierry d’Argenlieu, High Commissioner for Indochina. It was in the South that the French had the greatest success at turning back the communist-led Việt Minh after 1947 and in transferring power to a non-communist regime. Overlooked in the literature is that the Resistance had failed to win the war for the South by 1953, paving the way for a series of anti-communist states to rule the South until 1975. But this history is rushed over, and the reader can be forgiven for believing that nothing fundamentally important happened in the South from September 1945 to July 1954, when Ngô Đình Diệm became prime minister, opening a new chapter in southern Vietnamese history.

Looking at the war from the South underlines the extent to which the standard approach to the war curiously tends to ignore both empire and local history and frames modern Vietnamese history in terms of

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012), 144, 146.

<sup>4</sup> For an articulate argument over the December 1946 beginning of the war, see Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). French losses from September 1945 through November 1946 of 2896 are based on Commandant Gilbert Bodinier, *Le retour de la France en Indochine (1945–1946): textes et documents* (Château de Vincennes, SHAT, 1987), 81–82. I include here the statistic for “disappeared,” which seems to mean not confirmed dead. I do not include the statistic for deserters in my calculation. A further 108 Japanese died while fighting under British or French forces from September 26, 1945 to December 4, 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Général Valluy, Commandant supérieur par intérim les troupes françaises en Extrême-Orient, October 29, 1946, in Bodinier, *Le retour de la France en Indochine (1945–1946)*, 274.

nationalism, revolution, and the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> Frederick Logevall has modified this standard view: he argues that “the Franco-Viet Minh war was simultaneously an East-West and North-South conflict, pitting European imperialism in its autumn phase against the two main competitors that gained momentum by mid-century – Communist-inspired revolutionary nationalism and U.S.-backed liberal internationalism.”<sup>7</sup> Yet even this elegant modification has its downsides. Logevall invokes nationalism as a political *deus ex machina* to explain communist Vietnamese success. Take Logevall’s statement that by 1954, the side opposing the French, “led by the venerable ‘Uncle Ho,’ had opposed the Japanese and driven out the French and thereby secured a nationalist legitimacy that was, in a fundamental way, fixed for all time.”<sup>8</sup> This is hyperbole. It assumes that from the level of the village to the state, from rural areas to urban, a shared “nationalism” is the glue that binds the inhabitants of Vietnam together, drawing together disparate people into a terminal community of allegiance, the nation. Rather than take nationalism and the nation for granted, shouldn’t the task of historians be to *substantiate* how, exactly, the inhabitants of Vietnam belonged to larger groups? The inhabitants of the South, after all, belonged to all sorts of communities after 1945.

These short comments on the standard narratives and their drawbacks raise the question: how should we understand this contentious conflict, particularly when it has become so iconic? As Shahid Amin astutely observes, “when historical significance is attached to an occurrence independent of the event, the facts of the case cease to matter.”<sup>9</sup> This insight amply fits Vietnam, where official histories of the “Resistance War” pile facts upon facts to narrate key moments in the triumph of the communist-led Resistance. Historians praise righteous “revolutionaries” and “martyrs” (*liệt sĩ*) and condemn “reactionaries” (*phản tu phản động*) who engage in “deceptive ploys” (*thủ đoạn*) or “plots” (*ám mưu*), aided by “lackeys” (*tay sai*) and “hooligans” (*lưu manh*). This language “at the service of judgment”<sup>10</sup> pervades Vietnamese accounts of the war. It is also

<sup>6</sup> For examples of major exceptions to my comments, see Christopher Goscha, *Un État né de la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); François Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, indépendance et révolution au Viêt-Nam. L'échec de la troisième voie, 1938–1955* (Paris: Indes Savantes, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2014), xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Logevall, *Embers of War*, xxii.

<sup>9</sup> Shahid Amin, *Event Metaphor Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Berkeley: California, 1995), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” quoted in Amin, *Event Metaphor Memory*, 85.

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the language of exculpation, the attempt to skip over unsettling details of what happened long ago. The most troubling events of the war are treated elliptically, passed over in silence, or not placed against contradictory evidence.<sup>11</sup> Analogous issues shape most French narratives, dominated by an impulse to explain why France “lost” Indochina. French studies tend to pass over in silence the war crimes that were an integral part of this conflict, as well as the central contribution to the war effort of those who were not French nationals.

### The Argument of This Book

The war for the Mekong Delta was both a civil war and a war pitting Vietnamese against the French. It was not, in other words, a simple two-sided conflict. To understand this complexity and its dynamics, the book focuses on arguments over sovereignty, violence, and institutions in a regional context – the Mekong Delta. By looking at issues regionally, it contrasts with single-province studies, which offer great depth but can be unrepresentative of a larger region, or national-level studies, which show some variation across space, but by their design, tend to homogenize. The book is organized into two sections and a conclusion. The first section (Chapters 1 through 4), entitled “Fracture,” focuses on the contested history of the Mekong Delta, and how it shaped the upheavals there and in Saigon from mid-1945 to late 1947. Because these years were so pivotal in modern Vietnamese history, this section makes up almost half the book. At the beginning of the First Indochina War, a broadly supported but internally split Việt Minh confronted the French. Vietnamese military units, while often full of ardor, remained disorganized and badly trained. A surprisingly weak French military tried to subdue these ragtag forces, with limited success. Meanwhile, the communists in the Việt Minh tried to bend the organization to their will, alienating their non-communist allies. The French did their part to encourage these divisions. The result was the “double fracture” of the political system that occurred in 1947. The Việt Minh fractured: one wing stayed with the communists, who opposed the French, while the other one tactically collaborated with the French with the aim of achieving independence. At the same time, Khmer-Vietnamese ethnic violence broke out, following its own logic. This messy double fracture deeply shaped southern politics up to 1975 and beyond.

<sup>11</sup> For an example of such factual wealth combined with charged language, see Hội Đồng Chỉ Đạo Biên Soạn Lịch Sử Nam Bộ Kháng Chiến, ed., *Lịch sử Nam bộ kháng chiến* [History of the Southern Resistance] (Hà Nội: Chính trị quốc gia, 2010), Vol. 1.

The second section of the book (Chapters 5 to 9), entitled “Disassemblage/Reassemblage,” examines the war from mid-1947 up to 1953. Rather than pen a simple chronological approach to these developments, I divide this section into thematic chapters that address key themes of the book, including the shifting use of race; the issue of sovereignty from the level of the empire down to the village; the variegated character of violence; and the collapse and rebuilding of institutions. The title of this section gets at a general truth about war: while war often destroys institutions, it also gives rise to a parallel recombination and reassemblage of their fragments in innovative ways.

By late 1947, the conflict, no longer a binary contest between two sides, was settling into a complicated stalemate. Despite the “double fracture,” the Việt Minh, now increasingly dominated by the communists, pursued a clear strategy for victory. The French countered it in the South with a “pacification” strategy, and managed to gain the cooperation of a range of Vietnamese and Khmer Krom (Khmer of the lower Mekong Delta). These groups included the Tây Ninh branch of the Cao Đài, militias claiming to defend the Buddhist Hòa Hảo, as well as a sprinkling of other armed groups, such as Catholic militias and village self-defense forces. Slowly, the French-led alliance, aided by Việt Minh mistakes, gained the upper hand. From 1950 onwards, with the coming of the Cold War (and American funding to the war in Indochina) the war in the South tilted in favor of France, the State of Vietnam, and local anti-communist groups. By 1953, the Franco-Vietnamese anti-communist alliance in the South had effectively defeated the Resistance in most of the delta. The South, in other words, differed sharply from the Center and the North.

Chapter 10 looks at the endgame of empire and its legacies. By late 1953, the French clearly realized that they could not delay the birth of a truly independent South Vietnam. Furthermore, by 1954 the Resistance was marginalized in the South. But the alternative to the Resistance was unclear. Into 1954, the balkanized parastates and militias of the Mekong Delta which had confronted the Resistance still relied on French funding to make this system work. As this system fell apart in 1954, and the Americans pushed aside the French, the South entered a new tumultuous phase. In essence, the French and a motley, assorted group of parastates and militias had cleared a path for the rise of a new non-communist Vietnamese state. Such was the context of the rise of Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm in 1954. While this book does not go into detail on the Diệm regime, it does trace overlooked legacies from the war that had impacts and aftershocks from the local level all the way to the far

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reaches of the French empire. But let us first return to look in depth at the issues of sovereignty, institutions, and violence, as this discussion helps to frame the book as a whole.

### Empire and the Problem of Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a core political concept of the modern world. In Daniel Philpott's pithy definition, sovereignty is the "supreme authority within a territory."<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson adds that "[i]n the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimetre of a legally demarcated territory."<sup>13</sup> But how well do such definitions capture the situation of people in southern Vietnam at the end of empire? This book will bring together what at first seem like incommensurate approaches to the study on sovereignty: ones that focus on legal claims to define a territory, and which are propounded by states or their agents, and others that look at the de facto practice of sovereignty in rural areas. It is only by combining attention to both that we can understand how sovereignty was debated, articulated, and practiced, and how seemingly incommensurate approaches, put together, help us understand the strange end of the French empire in southern Vietnam.

Recent studies of empire have reoriented our attention away from bilateral relations of imperial powers with particular colonies in order to fathom the nature of imperial sovereignty in general.<sup>14</sup> Burbank and Cooper refer to such rule as "layered sovereignty"; Will Hanley, writing on the Ottoman Empire, calls this phenomenon "multiple, overlapping sovereignties."<sup>15</sup> Sovereignty was not simply layered, or fragmented, but interpenetrated in quirky ways. The same could be said of French Indochina during the war. Natasha Wheatley adds to a new twist to such arguments: she shows how experts in international law debated, between the two world wars, the emergence of new legal subjectivities, as in mandates and minorities, which were endowed with real or potential

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) draws on American, British, and French sources to provide a transnational perspective of the diplomatic struggle to pull the United States into the war.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 17; Will Hanley, "When did Egyptians Stop Being Ottomans? An Imperial Citizenship Case Study," in Willem Maas, ed., *Multilevel Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 90–91.



legal personhood.<sup>16</sup> “Trading in analogies that spanned slaves and unborn children, interwar jurists labored to uncover (or create) conceptual space around the edges of state sovereignty. In so doing, they generated a remarkable catalogue of new legal species.”<sup>17</sup> Similar activity shaped the “end” of the French empire and its “replacement” by a new creature, the French Union: the end of one real entity and its replacement with another entity, whose sovereign reach was ambiguous, and whose reality, fictionality, or legal personhood was not clear. Understanding such oddities is key to understanding the halting transfer of power from France to the State of Vietnam.

If empires at their end were sometimes puzzling in legal terms, how was sovereignty expressed and practiced within the boundaries of political units such as French Indochina or Cochinchina? Internally, sovereignty claims are made real through territorialization: the process by which a territory is made and remade as part of a political unit. “Always in the making,” Christian Lentz argues, “territorial relations are continually generated through material and symbolic contests, landscape transformations, and spatial practices.”<sup>18</sup> Yet even in times of peace, such processes can be undermined by a lack of capacity to extend a state’s reach into peripheral regions. Territorialization can be hemmed in by “friction of terrain.” That is, the more difficult it is to reach an area from the center of state power, the less likely that area is to come under effective state control. State authority can fade and even stop at marshes and mountains.<sup>19</sup>

So far, so good. But as Lentz and others have implied, the particular *texture* of sovereignty in a time of decolonization and war is different. In such times, violence overtly shapes its nature and practice.<sup>20</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat argue that *de facto* sovereignty is “a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state.”<sup>21</sup> Stepputat has further argued that the practice of sovereignty is fragmented through

<sup>16</sup> Natasha Wheatley, “Spectral Legal Personality in Interwar International Law: On New Ways of Not Being a State,” *Law & History Review* 35 (August 2017), 753–788.

<sup>17</sup> Wheatley, “Spectral Legal Personality,” 786.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Lentz, *Contested Territory: Dien Biên Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 4.

<sup>19</sup> On “friction of terrain,” see James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009) in Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2019), 66.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, “Sovereignty Revisited,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006), 296, 297.

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different “registers of sovereign power” including, for example, states, companies, and illegal networks.<sup>22</sup> Achille Mbembe is more blunt: “The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes.” Wars against reoccupiers, and civil wars, are at the extreme of the practice of such violence. The preceding observations underline that conceptualizing and “making” sovereignty are shaped by one’s place in a hierarchy that stretches from the global to the local level. It ranges from legal claims in the international arena to practices, in local areas, that make real the claims to sovereignty. It involves territorialization and violence.

Of course, every historical trajectory is shaped by contingent events. When we turn to the First Indochina War in southern Vietnam, we can see that it involved the entirety of the French empire. The five constituent “countries” (*pays*) of French Indochina (Cochinchina, Cambodia, Annam, Tonkin, and Laos) formed part of the larger French Union after 1946. As I will argue in Chapter 6, this legal reality was far more important (and perplexing) than much of the scholarship recognizes. Membership in the French Union was also crucial in a very practical way: the reconstituted French empire provided soldiers to fight the war. As earlier noted, a slight majority of all “regular” soldiers sent by France to Indochina were born outside of France. Recruits hailed from Europe, Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, North, Central and South America, and South and Southeast Asia. These new soldiers were integrated into an empire-spanning military, shipped across the globe, and deployed in Mekong Delta villages. To the above we can add all the local militia and self-defense members who fought in the conflict. In the south, these were mostly Vietnamese, but also included a large number of Khmer.

If the war was shaped by empire, it unfolded at regional and local levels. Going local allows us to think through what it meant to be part of an empire, and how that affected fundamental issues of sovereignty and belonging at the ground level. The South was the site of an epic contest over sovereignty. The inhabitants of the Mekong Delta entertained, at different times, five possible sovereignty outcomes for the region: to remain part of a larger “federal” Indochina (whether under the French Union or “Indochinese” control); to become part of an independent Vietnam (whether of a South Vietnam or a unified Vietnam); or, for the

<sup>22</sup> Hansen and Stepputat, “Sovereignty Revisited,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006), 297, 302.