

Indochina

By [Claire Thi Liên Trần](#)

Summary

Indochina contributed significantly to the French war effort in terms of funds, products and human resources. Around 93,000 volunteers, soldiers and workers went to France on the home front and the battlefield. This exceptional human mobility offered the Indochinese, mostly Vietnamese, the unique opportunity of direct access to French social life and political debates and their aspirations to become “masters of their own destiny” increased. The promises by Governor General Albert Sarraut (1872-1962) of a new policy of association for the wartime contribution rapidly resulted in disappointment. Besides some liberal reforms, colonial rule increased economic exploitation and ruthless repression of nationalist movements.

Table of contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 Indochina on the Eve of World War I: 1914](#)

[2.1 The Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao Kingdoms under French Colonial Rule](#)

[2.2 The Context of Anticolonial Revolts in the Early 20th Century](#)

[2.3 The French Colonial Policy of “Mise en valeur” and “Mission civilisatrice”](#)

[3 Indochina during World War I](#)

[3.1 The Indochinese Contribution to the War Effort](#)

[3.2 The French Colonial Policy of “Association Franco-Annamite”](#)

[3.3 Uprisings and Conflict during the Great War](#)

[4 The Legacies of World War I in Indochina](#)

[4.1 French Indochina and Rising Regional Powers \(Japan, China, Siam\)](#)

[4.2 The “Franco-Annamese Collaboration” or the Missed Opportunity](#)

[4.3 Anticolonial Parties and Political Radicalization](#)

[5 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

Indochina, the so-called “Pearl of the French Empire”, was known as the only fully self-financed and zero-cost colony for the metropolitan budget, and significantly contributed to

the Great War effort in terms of both funds and products, and military and labor forces. Out of fewer than 17 million inhabitants, around 93,000 Indochinese volunteer [soldiers](#) and [workers](#), mostly Vietnamese, went to work in the factories on the home front, or to fight on the battlefronts in [France](#) and the Balkans. The Great War was a unique period during which a significant number of colonized Indochinese from diverse social backgrounds had the opportunity to travel far from their homeland to their colonizers' homeland and the rest of Europe: "The First World War witnessed migration from the colonial world to Europe on an unprecedented scale."¹ Despite the close [control](#) by the French *Sûreté* (the colonial security and police service created during the war), the exceptional mobility offered these men, for a couple of years, access to French society and its social and political debates. They also were exposed to new skills and ideas that they were to take back home.

During and after World War I, nationalist sentiments and aspirations to become "masters of their own destiny" increased, whereas the French failed to realize their promises for the great wartime contribution of the Indochinese. The hopes of a new policy of association set by [Albert Sarraut \(1872-1962\)](#) were rapidly disappointed: the golden age of the interwar period in Indochina coincided with increased economic exploitation of its wealth and labor forces, and close tracking and strong repression of the nationalist movements in Indochina and their networks in France and neighboring countries, Thailand and South [China](#).

After a political, [social](#) and economic overview of Indochina under French rule in 1914, this article first describes the Indochinese participation in the war and the situation of Indochinese people during this period. Then, it analyzes the war legacies, especially the failure of the French policy of association and the strengthening of nationalist movements, in the regional context of rising Asian powers.

Indochina on the Eve of World War I: 1914

The Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao Kingdoms under French Colonial Rule

By 1914, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos had been under French colonial rule for less than thirty years, after a period of conquest that lasted from the 1860s to the 1880s, and had been under a common general budget since 1898. French Indochina (*Indochine française*), officially known in 1887 as the Indochinese Union (*Union indochinoise*) was a colonial entity created by the French. It consisted of three kingdoms: Đại Việt, divided by the French into three parts (Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin); Preahreacheanachakr Kampuchea (Kingdom of Cambodia); and the three kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak, reunified under the French Protectorate of Laos. In 1913, the Indochinese population was around 16,395,000 (14,165,000 Vietnamese, 1,600,000 Cambodians and 630,000 Laotians).²

Sarraut was governor general from 1911 to 1914 and from 1917 to 1919, with three different governors in between. In Hanoi, capital of the Indochinese Union, the governor general was the representative of the French state, which ruled five territories with different statuses. Cochinchina was under direct rule whereas the four protectorates were each formally under their king's power, but in fact under the close control of the French senior residents. As the governor general, [Pierre Pasquier \(1877-1934\)](#), stated: "The King reigns but the Resident superior rules."³ The effective power was in the hands of the governor of the colony of Cochinchina (Saigon) and the senior residents of the protectorates of Annam (Huế), Tonkin (Hanoi), Cambodia (Phnom Penh) and Laos (Vientiane): henceforth, the local high officials played a subordinate role.

But the threat of rebellions all over Indochina remained a permanent concern for the colonial power. To counter the hostility of the kings and their supporters, the French policy was to remove and exile them and choose younger princes who would be raised to be pro-French and easily controlled.⁴ By 1914, the Vietnamese emperor was [Duy Tân \(1900-1945\)](#), who had acceded to the throne when he was only seven years old. His father, [Thành Thái \(1879-1954\)](#), had been declared insane and exiled to Vũng Tàu (Cochinchina) in 1907, because of his opposition to French rule. But the French strategy failed: in 1916, Duy Tân was accused of calling upon the people to rise up against the French. He was deposed and exiled with his father to the island of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Thereafter, the emperor [Khải Định \(1885-1925\)](#) closely collaborated with the French.

In Cambodia, King [Sisowath \(1840-1927\)](#), who quelled the uprising against French rule in 1867, was chosen by the French to succeed his half brother [Norodom \(1834-1904\)](#). King Sisowath was crowned in 1904 and cooperated with the French. He attended the colonial exhibition in Marseilles in 1906, soon before the retrocession to Cambodia of the provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap by the Siamese in April 1907. There was "an inexorable increase in French control" and the French residents gained executive authority to issue royal decrees, appoint officials and collect taxes.⁵ The king of Laos, [Sisavang Phoulivong \(1885-1959\)](#), who trained at the *Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat*, Saigon, and at the *Ecole coloniale*, Paris, was also crowned in 1904. In 1914, the French built a new palace in Luang Prabang for him, and a new agreement in 1917 allowed him only formal signs of royal power.

The Context of Anticolonial Revolts in the Early 20th Century

In 1914, calm was supposed to reign as the colonial power had "pacified" the three kingdoms, but uprisings contesting French rule characterized French Indochina at the dawn of World War I. Early in the 20th century, the French *Sûreté* had worried about the victory of

[Japan](#) over [Russia](#) ([Russo-Japanese War](#) in 1905), the first victory of “a yellow people over the white”, and the fall of the Qing dynasty and establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, under the leadership of the nationalist party, Guomindang. These events had a significant echo in Indochina.

In Vietnam, after the crushing of the resistance movement *Cần Vương* (Save the King) led by the traditional mandarin elite (1885-1895), a new generation of anticolonial leaders emerged in the early 20th century, looking to outward influences to deal with the issue of modernization. Some, such as [Phan Châu Trinh \(1872-1926\)](#), chose to travel to the West (*Di Tây*) to obtain the “keys” to modernity. Others, such as [Phan Bội Châu \(1867-1940\)](#), made the “Journey to the East” (*Đông Du*) to Japan, the other role-model of modernization. This was with the help of Prince [Cường Để \(1882-1951\)](#), who was a direct descendant of the Nguyễn dynasty’s founder, Emperor [Gia Long \(1762-1820\)](#). Cường Để supported hundreds of young Vietnamese to study in Japan with the hope of freeing Vietnam with Japanese help. The Tonkin Free School (*Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục*), created in Hanoi in 1907 by the supporters of these two major figures of modern Vietnamese [nationalism](#), was closed the same year, as it was seen as anti-French.

The French faced significant popular contestation in Vietnam shortly before the war. Thousands of people were arrested, some condemned to death, others sent to Poulo Condore jail island, which would become the best school for political prisoners, nationalists and communists, who were gathered in large, common cells. In March 1908, mass demonstrations demanding a reduction of the high taxes took place in Annam and Tonkin. In June 1908, a group of indigenous riflemen attempted to poison the French colonial army’s garrison at Hanoi citadel and overthrow the French with the help of Commander [Đề Thám \(1858-1913\)](#). The plot was discovered and martial law proclaimed. Accused of the plot, Phan Châu Trinh was sent to Poulo Condor, and Phan Bội Châu fled to Japan and thence, in 1910, to China.

His supporters organized attacks in Tonkin and Cochinchina in 1912/1913. In March 1913, 600 peasants dressed in white robes demonstrated in Cholon; their leader, [Phan Xích Long \(1893-1916\)](#), a mystic millenarist who claimed to be a descendant of deposed emperor [Hàm Nghi \(1872-1943\)](#), aimed to restore independence.⁶

In Cambodia, there had been revolts during the earlier years of the reign of Norodom, who had little authority outside Phnom Penh. “There is ample evidence of the rural populations’ involvement in revolts against authority during the first 50 years of the French colonial presence in Cambodia.”⁷ The rebellions led by Prince [Si Votha \(1841-1891\)](#) got the support of

thousands of peasants. Defeated by Norodom with the help of the French, Si Votha remained a figurehead of local uprisings against French colonial rule. Laos appeared quite calm and was considered to be the most “docile” of the Indochinese territories. The French view was that both the traditional elite and the peasants enjoyed the stability of the colonial order after a century of Siamese rule. But sporadic revolts continued, like the one which broke out in South Laos at the end of the 19th century. Foremost among these revolts were those of the upland minority communities led by Bac My and Ong Ma on the Boloven plateau, who demanded the restoration of the “old order” and led an armed insurrection until 1936.⁸

The French Colonial Policy of “Mise en valeur” and “Mission civilisatrice”

Unlike Algeria, Indochina was not a settlement colony: it had only about 18,000 French civilians, militaries and civil servants but over 16.4 million Indochinese. In 1914, it was but a colony of economic exploitation (*colonie d'exploitation économique*) which funded its own budget through revenue collection, taxes on locals and consumption quotas for monopolized goods such as opium, salt and alcohol.⁹ The trade of those three products formed 44 percent of the colonial government's budget in 1920. The Indochina bank (*Banque d'Indochine*) was the colony's principal bank, responsible for minting the colony's currency, the Indochinese piastre. It also supported investment in infrastructure, rice, mining and plantations in an export economy. The new economic sectors which developed during World War I – [rubber](#) plantations, mines and plantations, for example – were in French hands and the local trade to the great export-import houses was in Chinese hands.¹⁰ Except for a handful of Vietnamese landlords, moneylenders and middlemen, the colonial economy of exportation enriched the French at the expense of the local population. Peasant livelihoods were still more drastically reduced by direct and indirect taxes which financed the ambitious program of public works realized by the *corvée* system ([forced labor](#)).

Before 1914, the “*mise en valeur*” (development and improvement) of Indochina was financed primarily by public loans from the metropole, private capital from France and increasing taxes. The expenses of the 93,000 Indochinese sent to France during the war – salaries, pensions, family allocations, the levy in kind (mostly rice) and even the functioning of the Indochinese [hospital](#) – were entirely financed from the Indochina budget. The investment funds from the metropole were stopped and the Indochinese had to pay still more taxes, export more rice and buy [war bonds](#). Indochina provided a significant amount of funds to metropolitan France during the Great War. Between 1915 and 1920, it sent 367 million francs out of a total of 600 million francs for the whole of the French Empire.¹¹

Moreover, the goals of the French “*mission civilisatrice*” (civilizing mission) were to share its

egalitarian destiny with other people and to educate the natives to progress through [science](#) and culture in the framework of the French model: “unique, universal and superior”.¹² The republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity would be possible for natives once they reached the necessary level of civilization. In practice, the French colonial educational and medical system was primarily intended for the French colonists and a handful of native elites living in the main cities: local populations continued to use traditional medicine and educational structures (Confucian village [schools](#), some Catholic parish schools and seminaries in Vietnam, and some Buddhist schools in temples in Cambodia and Laos). The initial project of assimilation in accordance with the republican ideal of equality was quickly abandoned in favor of an association policy respecting the local culture. The association program was destined for the few Indochinese elites with a modern education from the “Franco-Indigenous” schools. They were supposed to become the “new collaborators” to perpetuate the “Franco-Annamite community”, but the gap between discourse and practice was huge.

Indochina during World War I

The Indochinese Contribution to the War Effort

Of the 93,000 Indochinese soldiers and workers who came to Europe, most were from the poorest parts of the Tonkin and Annam regions, which had been badly hit by [famine](#) and cholera, and – to a lesser degree – from Cambodia (1,150). Some 44,000 Vietnamese soldiers served in combat battalions on the fronts in Verdun and the Vosges (both in northeastern France), on the [Eastern Front](#), in the [Middle East](#) and in the Balkans.¹³ In [logistics](#) battalions they were used as drivers transporting troops to the front, stretcher-bearers or road crews. They were also in charge of “sanitizing” the battlefields, mostly at the end of the war, working in mid-winter, without warm clothing, to allow French soldiers to return home sooner.

In addition, 49,000 Vietnamese were hired as workers under military authority between 1916 and 1919. Because of labor shortages in the munitions factories, Vietnamese peasants were assigned to production sites in the south of France, such as the Arsenal of Tarbes and the Bergerac gunpowder works.¹⁴ The workers were housed in makeshift camps, overseen by gendarmes, forced to work on the assembly lines, at night and at a furious pace, handling hazardous materials like explosives and gas. Thus, World War I contributed to the emergence of a Vietnamese proletariat of skilled workers. While serving in French factories, they also discovered labor unions and city life.

Some Vietnamese workers acquired technical and professional skills and a handful took the opportunity to obtain higher education in France, that was inaccessible in Indochina. One

example is Dr. Nguyễn Xuan Mai, who was one of the first Vietnamese auxiliaries to graduate from the medical school in Hanoi in 1910: he enlisted into the war, aiming to gain his PhD in France (which he did in 1921) in order to get the same rights as his French colleagues in Indochina.¹⁵

The more egalitarian social relations in France contrasted sharply with the racial hierarchy imposed in the colonies. Postal [censorship](#) offers a glimpse of Vietnamese friendships with their French comrades, and their relationships with French women, which would have been unthinkable in Indochina.¹⁶ Their return home after the war was not easy, as the sacrifices they had made were repaid with nothing but promises.

The French Colonial Policy of “Association Franco-Annamite”

Albert Sarraut, who was governor general during almost all the Great War, and minister of the colonies just after, was the great architect of the policy of association also called the “*collaboration franco-annamite*” (*Pháp Việt Đề huề*),¹⁷ which characterized French colonial policy during the interwar period. Sent back as the head of Indochina at the heart of the war, from 1917 until 1919, Sarraut pursued his dual policy: “I have always estimated that Indochina must be protected against the effects of a revolutionary propaganda that I have never underestimated, by carrying out a double action, one political, the other repressive.”¹⁸ Sarraut’s strategy distinguished between those willing to cooperate and those opposed to the colonial regime.

On the one hand, he gave an attractive perspective to the westernized elite, by presenting the “*collaboration franco-annamite*” as a necessary period of French protection which would permit the modernization of the country in the framework of a mutually beneficial partnership before full sovereignty could be restored. In giving the opportunity for a handful to participate in the decision-making processes of the Cochinchina colony through representative assemblies (Cochinchina’s Colonial Council, Saigon Municipal Council), Sarraut boasted the image of a liberal “indigenophile”.¹⁹ In Laos, the French also set up provincial advisory councils, in 1920, and an indigenous consultative assembly with highly educated aristocrats, in 1923. Despite their solely advisory role, it brought them together from all over the country and contributed to the formation of a modern national consciousness.

From 1916, the colonial government authorized Vietnamese newspapers in Cochinchina colony, granting them some financial support to secure popular support for the war effort and to create a loyal indigenous political counterpart. But it kept close control over newspaper editors, often returned from France, but under suspicion for their close connections with

anticolonial activists. With French support, and aiming to promote Franco-Vietnamese collaboration to modernize the country, the agronomist [Bùi Quang Chiêu \(1898-1969\)](#) created the newspaper *La Tribune indigène* in 1917 in collaboration with two other “*retours de France*” (people back from France): the lawyer [Dương Văn Giáo \(1892-1945\)](#), and the journalist [Nguyễn Phan Long \(1889-1960\)](#). *La Tribune indochinoise* (Indochinese Forum) followed and the three founded the Indochinese Constitutionalist Party in 1919 in Saigon with the aim of obtaining the right to political participation for the indigenous people in Cochinchina. They were considered dangerous nationalists by the French *Surêté*.

On the other hand, Sarraut was determined to neutralize any active native opposition to French rule through strong political surveillance. This was made easier by the centralization of all Indochinese police forces and the development of intelligence with the creation of the *Sûreté Générale indochinoise*, within and outside the country.²⁰ As the French military presence was reduced to support the battles in France, the colonial police in 1917 were reformed in connection with the “The general control of Indochinese workers and riflemen” (*Contrôle général des travailleurs et tirailleurs indochinois*) – political police under the authority of the ministry of colonies – to control the state of mind of the Indochinese soldiers and workers. The police included a large network of local informants in Indochina, France, Japan, China and [Siam](#) in order to counter the development of political movements in Indochina. For example, Phan Bội Châu went to China in 1909 and was arrested in 1917 by Chinese warlords.²¹

Uprisings and Conflict during the Great War

Despite the proclamation of a state of war in Indochina in 1914, three major uprisings happened in Vietnam. In Cochinchina, a series of revolts broke out in 1916. In February of that year, around 300 supporters of Phan Xích Long marched toward the penitentiary in Saigon asking for the liberation of their leader, and there were other uprisings in the Mekong Delta. In the same year, in Huế, the emperor [Duy Tân \(1900-1945\)](#) was engaged with the mandarin [Trần Cao Văn \(1866-1916\)](#) and others in a plan to overthrow the French by seizing the strategic towns of Huế, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Quy Nhơn and Tourane.²² The plot failed: Trần Cao Văn and his accomplices were beheaded and Emperor Duy Tân was exiled to La Réunion island, in the Indian Ocean. After the *Cần Vương* movement, the Duy Tân plot is considered to be the last monarchist anticolonial action in Vietnam. A third rebellion happened in Tonkin on 30 August 1917, when the Thái Nguyên uprising seized the opportunity to attack the French, mobilized by the war on its soil.²³ Around 200 of Đê Thám’s followers, who were imprisoned in Thái Nguyên prison, organized a mutiny with the help of 130 prison guards, and were able to join some 300 townspeople. It took six months for the

French forces to crush the movement. This uprising has been described as the “largest and most destructive” anticolonial rebellion since the end of the conquest by the French (1885) and before the major *Nghê An* and *Hà Tĩn* revolts in 1930-1931.²⁴

In Cambodia, a movement that Milton Osborne has called “The 1916 Affair” gathered between 30,000 and 100,000 peasants in nearly three months, and protested in Phnom Penh and other provinces against taxation and the *corvée*, which increased during the war. The complaints were about the requirements decreed by the French but more specifically about the Cambodian officials in charge of raising the taxes and organizing the *corvée*. The leaders included former officials, militiamen, freed prisoners, people with some education, and Buddhist monks. This three-month uprising caused deep concern to the French administration. The unexpected magnitude, speed and efficiency of the movement made the French suspect the hand of German agents. The resident, [François Baudoin \(1867-1957\)](#), recognized the “unsettling effect of the First World War on Cambodians” and the fact that the people were aware that the bulk of the European troops based in Cambodia had been withdrawn. Osborne has compared the 1916 affair with the Vietnamese peasants’ uprising in 1930-1931 as a proto-nationalist movement.²⁵ He also mentions the role of Buddhist monks connected with *Thái* Buddhism and the role of the *Cao Dai* millenarist movement from Cochinchina.

In Laos, an anti-French rebellion took place from 1914 to 1917 among the *Tai Lu* under the leadership of Prince *Phra Ong Kham (Chao Fa)* of *Muang Sing*. It took on the character of a secession movement of the *Hmong*²⁶ from French rule. The same year, another uprising was inspired by emergent Chinese nationalism following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. In late 1914, a band of Yunnanese living in the Black River region sacked a French post in *Xam Neua*, killing the French commissioner Lambert, and repeated their success in *Sơn La* in Vietnam. They were joined by people of other ethnicities (*Lao*, *Kha* and *Black Tai*). The rebels paraded with flags of the Chinese Republic and seemed to be well informed about the war raging in Europe, as their proclamation stated: “Drive out the French”, and mentioned that “Paris has been crushed by the German army”.²⁷ The revolt was crushed and viewed as the work of Chinese opium smugglers. But Geoffrey C. Gunn considers it a political movement inspired by Chinese Republicans and joined by *Lao* nobility opposed to the French opium trade monopoly on the Chinese borders.

It was during World War I that the colonial state created the principal instruments to repress nationalist activists during the 1920s and 1930s. Even though all these rebellions failed, the significant number of uprisings during the four years of the war shows cracks in the idyllic image of a “pacified Indochina” and the real threats to French rule that were facilitated by an

intense circulation of political ideas in the regional context of rising Asian powers.

The Legacies of World War I in Indochina

French Indochina and Rising Regional Powers (Japan, China, Siam)

By 1914, “a fear of revolutionary nationalism had become a basic ingredient of French policies in Vietnam, as well as a feature of French diplomatic activity in Asia.”²⁸ Anxious to defeat the German troops on their soil, the French also had to deal with the affirmation of three Asian powers. As Japan, China and Siam joined the war on the Allies’ side as independent countries, the French took the opportunity of these new alliances to go after the Indochinese “rebels” who fled to these neighboring territories.

After Japan’s entry into the war on 27 August 1914 and its victory over the most significant German base in the region, the Chinese port city of [Qingdao](#), in November 1914, the country developed its economic and political influence in southern China, supplanting German interests and competing with French Indochina’s economic interests (mining and railways to Kunming). Despite the fact that the Japanese supported Vietnamese nationalists in South China (League Duy Tân of Prince Cường Để), the French prime minister, [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), desperately requested that the Japanese send troops to Europe to help with the transportation of Indochinese to France, and to Siberia to defeat the Bolsheviks in order to save the French-Russian loans. The situation of France was so bad that the idea of giving Indochina to Japan in exchange for their military and financial support was raised (but abandoned) in 1914 and again in 1918. As Japan became a creditor of France during World War I, economic relations with the new industrial power increased.²⁹

The First World War was seen by the young Chinese republic as an opportunity to put an end to its semi-colonial nation status since the Opium War and recover its full sovereignty,³⁰ first in Qingdao and the Shandong Province under German control, and later in the western concessions, including the French ones. In committing to the war, China aimed to become an equal member in the “family of nations”. China supported the Allies as early as 1916, sending around 140,000 Chinese workers to France and declaring war on [Germany](#) in August 1917, with the hope of being granted a seat at a postwar peace conference. However, the Chinese delegation contested the new world order imposed by the Versailles agreements and refused to agree to Shandong being given to the Japanese. From the French side, worries about the spread of civil war in Yunnan, where French companies had important interests in mining and railways, had increased during the Great War.³¹ The Chinese nationalist power also meant the support of the Guomindang for the Vietnamese nationalists who found refuge in south China.

The decision of the [Vajiravudh, King of Siam \(1880-1925\)](#), to join the Allies in July 1917 at least gave him the opportunity to strengthen his country's position in the international arena and in particular vis-à-vis the British and French colonial powers.³² The French were preoccupied by the influence of the German representatives and their merchant ships, as German shipping lines dominated passenger and cargo [transport](#) between Bangkok and the two major trading hubs, Singapore and [Hong Kong](#). Moreover, the Siamese financially supported followers of Phan Bội Châu and the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam (Duy Tân). Indeed, since the early 20th century, Vietnamese nationalists built solid rearguards in Siam among the Vietnamese diaspora. The independent status of Siam was "a painful (and fascinating) point of comparison for Vietnamese nationalists. It can be said that Siam/Thailand became the center of a larger Vietnamese revolutionary network."³³ Despite the important territorial disputes with the French in Laos and the Cambodian western provinces of Battambang, Siemreap and Sisophon, Rama VI collaborated with the French *Sûreté* to suppress Chinese and Vietnamese political networks in Siam. The Siamese king, who was close to [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#), worried about the influence of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution's ideas in the Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Siam, as was happening with the French in Indochina.

The "Franco-Annamese Collaboration" or the Missed Opportunity

Sarraut's doctrine of "Franco-Annamese collaboration" was reaffirmed after the war by a victorious but exhausted France. But it rapidly became a missed opportunity (*rendez-vous manqué*).³⁴ With the [League of Nations](#) and the emergence of new great powers ([United States](#), Japan, [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), China and Siam) in the Pacific, France claimed to represent the Indochinese in the Far East through a policy of association with its indigenous elites. In the early 1920s, Sarraut, then minister of the colonies and interior (1920-1924), designed a plan for the development of the colonies which saw in a decade of "full scale capitalist economic exploitation".³⁵ His book *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises* (The Development of the French Colonies) (1923) presented Indochina as the "balcony on the Pacific" of France.³⁶

The Sarraut project was supposed to introduce more democratic elements into the colonial system, including giving more opportunities to the emerging indigenous elite through reforms of the colonial administration and the development of the educational system. Sarraut's famous speech at the Temple of Literature (*Văn Miếu*) in Hanoi in April 1919 on "Franco-Annamese Collaboration" raised great hopes of taking part in the modernization of the country among the modern intelligentsia (composed of a limited number of youth educated

in the French system), civil servants, those working in private companies, and the emerging land and trade bourgeoisie.³⁷ But the promises were quickly forgotten. In other words, it was a “*rendez-vous manqué*” between the local elite and the “*grands commis de l’Indochine*” (high-ranking French civil servants) in charge of realizing the project of Sarraut.³⁸ As early as 1925, the latter became openly conservative with the sole aim of preserving the colonial order.

While the official discourse on the association was proclaimed, the “Bolshevik danger” became the main argument for the hardening of colonial power. From 1922, the *Sûreté générale*, created during the war, became a strong and efficient structure of surveillance and repression, first in France, and then in Indochina, under the authority of the new Department of Political Affairs. It played a key role in the colonial administration as the main instrument of intelligence thanks to large-scale registration by the police of suspects and convicts, covering the five Indochinese countries. But the colonial prison system, built to crush any nationalist political dissent, fostered nationalism against French colonial rule and became a significant “schooling”, turned by the imprisoned into “a site that nurtured the growth of communism, and anticolonial resistance”.³⁹

Anticolonial Parties and Political Radicalization

The important and exceptional mobility of Indochinese between Indochina and France played a decisive role in the circulation of ideas and contributed to the reconfiguration of the anticolonial movement. The positive experience of living in France gave the incomers the opportunity to see French weakness when faced with German enemies, and the main changes in French politics as a result of the Bolshevik revolution. One of the main sources of political radicalization clearly came from the massive [migration](#) during the war. Major figures in early Vietnamese nationalism, called the “Five dragons”, developed, in Paris, a common nationalist project for their homeland.⁴⁰ The two pillars of the group were the well-known Phan Châu Trinh, in exile in France since 1911 on suspicion of being the head of the anti-fiscal uprising in 1908, and the lawyer [Phan Văn Trường \(1876-1933\)](#) who created the Association of Indochinese Patriots (*Association des patriotes indochinois*) in 1914. Both were jailed on the eve of the war, accused of conspiracy with Prince Cường Để, a refugee in Japan, and of collusion with the Germans, but released nine months later. Two further men joined the group: the journalist [Nguyễn Thế Truyền \(1898-1969\)](#), a student at the faculty of sciences in Toulouse from 1916 to 1920, and Nguyễn Tất Thành, who became the leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party under the name of [Hồ Chí Minh \(1890-1969\)](#). He embarked in 1911 as a ship’s cook’s assistant and then traveled all over the world before settling in Paris in 1919. A fifth man, [Nguyễn An Ninh \(1900-1943\)](#), a future journalist and well-known writer

in nationalist circles, went to France in 1920 to study law. In 1919, the five dragons sent a “memorandum of demands for the Annamite people” to the Versailles conference under the common pseudonym of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, a reference to the [Fourteen Points](#) of [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#).⁴¹ But it remained without response.

A new generation of anticolonial activists emerged in France, as the two emblematic figures saw a decrease in their influence. Phan Bội Châu was kidnapped by the French Shanghai police and sentenced to death in 1925, but this sentence was commuted to house arrest in Huế until his death in 1940. Phan Châu Trinh remained faithful to the reformist path, asking in vain for French nationality (in order to act freely and to become deputy of Cochinchina). He died in 1926.

The three younger dragons chose different ways: Thành (who began to use the name of Nguyễn Ái Quốc), the “Indochinese delegate” to the French Socialist Party (SFIO) congress in December 1920 (*Congrès de Tours*), voted to join the Third International, as the only party to pay attention to the liberation of the colonies.⁴² In 1921, Quốc and Truyền joined the Intercolonial Union within the new French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF) after breaking off from the SFIO. They published the communist and anticolonialist newspaper *Le Paria* (The Pariah) from 1922 to 1926. Quốc left France for Moscow in 1923 through the Komintern networks.⁴³ In Indochina, Trương edited the nationalist newspaper *La Cloche fêlée* with the French lawyer Paul Monin, a friend of the famous writer André Malraux. Truyền finally resigned from the PCF in 1925, and created a new party in Paris, the *An Nam Độc lập Đảng* (Annam Independence Party), and published the newspaper *Việt Nam Hôn* (Soul of Vietnam) and later *La Patrie Annamite* (The Annamese Fatherland) before returning to Indochina in 1927.

The interwar period saw the persistence of armed resistance and the emergence of modern anticolonialist parties, in particular in Vietnam. For David Marr, the 1920s marked the transition from “traditional” to “modern” Vietnamese nation-consciousness and its spread among the elites but also the peasantry.⁴⁴ The role of the Vietnamese working or educated overseas (“*retours de France*”) clearly made Vietnamese nationalism more political and “urban”. An array of “modern” movements began to emerge during the 1920s and 1930s. The middle class assumed a bigger role in the nationalist political parties such as the nationalist party, the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDD) and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). Their leaders were more successful in mobilizing anticolonial forces from different parts of Indochina and in establishing organizational structures and communication channels that transcended class divisions and geographical boundaries.

In Cambodia and Laos, the contestation of colonial power in the 1920s consisted mostly of revolts against the heavy taxes and *corvées*. In Cambodia, residents' reports in the early 1920s underlined widespread [rural](#) violence, disorder and insecurity. The assassination of the resident, [Félix Bardez \(1891-1925\)](#), in Kopong Chang in 1925, was a major sign of Cambodian frustration and strong anticolonial feeling. During a visit to a village that was reluctant to pay additional taxes for the mountain resort of Bokor, his refusal to release peasants imprisoned for debt led to a crowd of 700 peasants beating him to death along with the interpreter and militiamen.⁴⁵ In Laos, the colonial administrator [Paul Le Boulanger \(1884\)](#) observed that Upper Laos was more or less "violently agitated" from 1914 to 1921.⁴⁶ A major revolt, "Pa Chay's war", took place among the Hmong highlanders between 1918 and 1922 due to the effects of the heavy taxes on opium, the requisition of horses, and acts of violence by subordinate French officials. In July 1919, the Hmong prince, [Pa Chay \(-1921\)](#), and his sister Kao Mee fought to create a Hmong kingdom with Điện Biên Phủ as its capital, but the French crushed the revolt in March 1921.

During and after World War I, the circulation of people and ideas from Indochina to Europe and back contributed to the political radicalization of a new generation of nationalists and led to the development of a vibrant political press in French and in the local languages, especially in Vietnam, as most of the Indochinese who went to Europe were Vietnamese. A public sphere of oppositional political activism emerged in Indochina, in particular in Cochinchina because of its status as colony and favorable legislation concerning the [press](#).⁴⁷ The rise of this modern Vietnamese political culture of contestation also meant that major sociocultural transformations were experienced by a small minority of the educated, urbanized, middle-income class all over Vietnam. In the 1920s and 1930s, the "traditional" rebellions continued in Cambodia and Laos whereas, in Vietnam, they turned into political activism and radicalism.

Conclusion

The contribution of Indochina to World War I was significant in terms of [raw materials](#), financial support of the war effort and human participation. The transcontinental migration of around 93,000 colonized Indochinese to the imperial metropolis between 1914 and 1919 was unique. During World War II, far fewer Indochinese were sent to Europe (8,000 riflemen and 20,000 workers). The mobility of these men contributed to the circulation of ideas and techniques, introducing new socio-professional profiles and affecting their individual destinies, as well as the political and social future of their country.

The Indochinese hoped that in recognition of their wartime loyalty, the French colonial

government would grant them more political rights. The circumstantial “Franco-Indigenous Association Policy” defined by Sarraut to obtain Indochinese support for the war effort for supposedly mutually benefit opened up a narrow space of political expression, through newspapers, for a handful of the newly assertive [urban](#) Indochinese middle class. The opportunity for Indochinese (mostly Vietnamese) to live in France increased the gap between the official French rhetoric (which was anchored in the republican liberal discourse and its proclaimed universal human equality) and the daily reality of the political, economic and social denial of these rights to the indigenous population.

The “historic moment” of World War I offered an exceptional opportunity for the colonized to experience firsthand, from the “inside”, the colonizers’ world, at a difficult moment when the fate of France itself hung in the balance in Europe. It also permitted them to consider and try to respond to the questions raised by French domination. The Great War in the European theater widened the cultural, political and social horizons of Indochinese volunteers and made them more confident in their ability to become “masters of their own destiny” and adapt new ideas and techniques to their own reality. As David Marr noticed:

During the 1920s Vietnamese writers started to reach beyond the East-versus-West paradigm. They eagerly sought information from anywhere [...] Of particular interest were social upheavals in China, postwar unrest in Europe, the ongoing revolution in Russia, and non-violent resistance in India. Increasingly writers became convinced that there was no qualitative distinction between Europeans and Vietnamese. A vast reservoir of knowledge and technique was available to anyone in the world. [...] The next step was to relate new knowledge and techniques to specific Vietnamese conditions.⁴⁸

Claire Thi Liên Tran, Irasec

Notes

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2. Brocheux, Pierre / Hemery, Daniel: Indochine, la colonisation ambiguë 1858-1954, Paris 1994, p. 248. [↑](#)
3. Edwards, Penny: Cambodia. The Cultivation of a Nation 1860-1945, Honolulu 2007, p. 86. [↑](#)
4. Aldrich, Robert: Banished Potentates. Dethroning and Exiling Indigenous Monarchs under British and French Colonial Rule, 1815-1955, Manchester 2018, chapter 4. [↑](#)
5. Chandler, David: A History of Cambodia, London 2007, p. 146. [↑](#)

6. Peycam Philippe: *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism, Saigon 1916-1930*, New York 2012, p. 18. [↑](#)
7. Osborne, Milton: *Peasant Politics in Cambodia. The 1916 Affair*, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 12/2 (1978), pp. 226-228. [↑](#)
8. Gunn, Geoffrey C.: *Rebellion In Northern Laos. The Revolts of the Lu and the Chinese Republicans (1914-1916)*, in: *The Journal of The Siam Society* 77/1 (1989), p. 61. [↑](#)
9. Brocheux / Hémery, *Indochine* 1994, p. 93. [↑](#)
10. Brocheux, Pierre: *Une histoire économique du Viet Nam 1850 2007*, Paris 2009, pp. 71-96. [↑](#)
11. *Ibid.*, p. 102. [↑](#)
12. Peycam, *Vietnamese Political Journalism* 2012, p. 36. [↑](#)
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15. Trân, Claire Thi Liên: *Nguyễn Xuân Mai (1890-1929). Itinéraire d'un médecin indochinois engagé pendant la première guerre mondiale*, in: Trévisan, Carina / Delalande, Hélène Baty (eds.): *Entrer en guerre*, Paris 2016, p. 305. [↑](#)
16. Le Van Ho, *Des Vietnamiens* 2014, pp. 144-154. [↑](#)
17. The French colonials used the term "Annamite" for the Vietnamese, referring to the Chinese word (Annam or "Pacified South") which was originally used for the Tang dynasty's southern protectorate of the 7th to 10th centuries. In French, the term has a patronizing connotation, avoiding the use of "Viet" which referred to the independent and united Vietnamese kingdom (Đại Việt) before the French conquest. The French weakened the kingdom in dividing it into three parts: Tonkin in the north, Cochinchina in the south and Annam, which was used to designate only the central part. [↑](#)
18. Quoted in Larcher-Goscha Agathe: *La voie étroite des réformes coloniales et la « collaboration franco-annamite » (1917-1928)*, in: *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 82/309 (1995), p. 408. [↑](#)
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24. Zinoman, Peter: *The Colonial Bastille. A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*, Oakland 2001, p. 57. [↑](#)

25. Osborne, Peasant Politics 1978, pp. 233-237. ↑
26. The Hmong is an ethnic group living in South China, Vietnam, Laos, Siam and Burma. ↑
27. Gunn, Rebellion 1989, pp. 63-64. ↑
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31. Morlat, Une page de l'histoire 2001, pp. 162-165. ↑
32. The Siamese troops arrived in early 1918 and took part in the occupation of the Ruhr. ↑
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45. Chandler, History of Cambodia 2007, pp. 191-193. ↑
46. Gunn, Rebellion 1989, p. 61. ↑
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[Economy](#) > [War finance](#) > [Foreign lending](#)

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[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Farmers, peasants](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Middle classes](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Population, rural](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Population, urban](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Upper classes](#)
[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Working classes](#)
[The media](#) > [Censorship](#)
[The media](#) > [Press, journalism](#) > [Newspapers](#)
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