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# Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Indochina)

By [Kimloan Vu-Hill](#)

**This paper provides a brief account of the experiences of the Vietnamese who went to Europe as soldiers during World War I. It shows that, contrary to a common belief among many historians that they were conscripted laborers, most were volunteers. Their experiences in the war changed their perceptions about the established order and the standing of French colonialism in Indochina. It eventually led to resistance to the French domination of the country. The paper concludes that World War I was the beginning of the end of the French colonial enterprise in Vietnam.**

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## Introduction

In 1925 Nguyễn Ái Quốc - the future [Hồ Chí Minh \(1890-1969\)](#) - claimed that the nearly 100,000 Vietnamese who participated in World War I in [France](#) were [conscripted laborers](#), “taken in chains,

confined in a school compound... . Most of them will never again see the sun of their country”.<sup>[1]</sup> Historians, such as Joseph Buttinger and Martin Murray, treated his statement as an article of faith and believed that the Vietnamese men who participated in World War I were “forcibly recruited” by means of “terrorism,” and that the recruitment enterprise was only “ostensibly voluntary”.<sup>[2]</sup> This episode in history therefore gives rise to several questions: were these men volunteers? If they were volunteers, what were their reasons? Additionally, what were their experiences in France? And what was the impact of those experiences on their lives, on the established order in Vietnam, and on the French colonial enterprise in Vietnam?<sup>[3]</sup>

The following discussion will answer those questions and will show that while there was some truth to the claim made by Nguyễn Ái Quốc, the majority of the recruits were actually volunteers. They were motivated by personal and economic ambitions, a desire to escape poverty and, for some, excitement at the prospect of seeing the world beyond the bamboo hedges in their villages. Their service in France enabled them to earn money and provided them with an opportunity to see France. It also exposed them to the brutality of [modern warfare](#) and changed their perception about many social norms and beliefs in Vietnam.

## The Recruiting Campaign and Volunteerism

Before recruiting native volunteers to fight in the war, the Acting Governor General of Indochina [Joost van Vollenhoven \(1877-1918\)](#) ordered all French active military and reservists to go to France in March 1915; all French born and naturalized citizens of military age had to enlist by July. In November, indigenous soldiers and officers and indigenous reservists whose active service had ended between 1900 and 1909 were recalled to active military duty. The recruiting campaign for volunteers began in December.<sup>[4]</sup> There were twenty-two recruiting centers in Cochinchina, twenty-seven in Tonkin, and fourteen in Annam. Posters as well as French and indigenous local administrators were used to advertise the campaign.<sup>[5]</sup> The recruiting campaigns in Cochinchina did not meet their targets, so the colonial government had to turn to Tonkin and Annam to find more volunteers.<sup>[6]</sup> To be accepted, a volunteer had to pass a medical examination and be at least 1.5 meters tall.<sup>[7]</sup> Each new recruit received a bonus of 200 francs and a monthly salary; his family received a monthly allowance. If he died in the war, his wife and children under eighteen years of age would receive his pension.<sup>[8]</sup>

Similar to millions of young men in Europe and elsewhere, many Vietnamese men initially greeted the war with [enthusiasm](#) and eagerly signed up.<sup>[9]</sup> Stories told in the [letters](#) of the volunteers who left for France in 1915 inspired their desire to fulfill *mộng giang hồ* [a dream of adventure] and even motivated some members of the royal family at Huế to enlist.<sup>[10]</sup> Their stories described majestic [churches](#), tall monuments, paved streets, large ships and shops, and wealthy residential areas.<sup>[11]</sup> A soldier confessed that he could not contain his excitement because the war would help him fulfill his

desire to see France.<sup>[12]</sup> Some were attracted by the terms of employment listed on the *Yết Thi*, or official announcement, posted in the communal centers throughout the country. It promised bonuses, family allowances, pensions, honorary titles of the mandarin system, posthumous honors, and an exemption from the head tax, which was a great relief for poor peasant families. By showing pictures of Vietnamese soldiers posing with Allied and French officers, it also implied that if they joined the colonial army they would have Allied soldiers for *bạn đồng minh* [comrades] and French officers for *bạn đồng chí* [fellow combatants].<sup>[13]</sup> Hence, the announcement suggested a bright future for the volunteers: prosperity, an elevation of social status, and racial equality.

Poverty, however, was the main motivation for peasants to volunteer. Poverty among the peasants had always existed in Vietnam, especially in Tonkin and Annam where population density was very high, but in the decade before the First World War and then in the period 1915-1916 natural disasters exacerbated their plight.<sup>[14]</sup> A series of floods and droughts, which inevitably led to famine, unemployment and destitution, had prompted poor peasants to enlist in the colonial army in order to improve their lives and the lives of their loved ones.<sup>[15]</sup>

Although France desperately needed more manpower for the war, it did not accept those in ill health. Those who were rejected resorted to illegal means to get to France by hiring strong and healthy peasants to take the medical examination for them. When the imposters passed the medical examination they switched places. In some cases the rejected peasants found ways to get on the ships that transported the volunteers to France. They were usually discovered in Marseille because they did not have the identification cards that were issued to volunteers. Nguyễn Văn Ban, for example, made it to France twice: in 1916, he was discovered when he became seriously ill and was sent back to Vietnam; and in 1917, he was caught again and immediately repatriated to Tonkin.<sup>[16]</sup>

Nonetheless, there was also resistance against the recruiting campaign. Although the bulk of the volunteers were not supposed to be shipped out until April 1916, the earlier-than-expected German attacks and the heavy [casualties](#) in 1915 (1,292,000 men killed and wounded)<sup>[17]</sup> caused French military commanders to urgently request more reinforcements. In turn, the Military High Command in Paris requested immediate assistance from the colonies. Besides the existing indigenous soldiers, who were bound by military law to go wherever the army sent them, the colonial government was pressured to find volunteers. To meet its target, village leaders rounded-up vagabonds, criminals, and troublemakers and sent them to the recruiting centers. Their families reacted violently by carrying sticks and scythes to the communal centers, the *đình*, where they vandalized the buildings and chased the village notables. In southern Vietnam, to calm the population, the Governor of Cochinchina removed R. Striedter, chief of the recruiting center in Sa Đéc, discharged native officials in Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh and Rạch Giá from their posts, and reprimanded others in Gia Định and neighboring districts for their oppressive and abusive behavior toward the peasants.<sup>[18]</sup> In northern Vietnam the unwilling recruits were released when French officers at the recruiting centers learned of their plights during an interview.<sup>[19]</sup>

The arrests of military deserters also caused resentment among villagers, especially in Cochinchina, where 33 percent of reservists were “missing” or declared themselves “inapt” for combat. On 16 August 1915 the colonial government issued an order for the arrest of all deserters and offered a ten-piaster reward to anyone who reported a deserter to the authorities. During *Tết*, or Lunar New Year 1916, upon learning that they had to go to France, about 700 indigenous active soldiers deserted their posts.<sup>[20]</sup> Their arrests spread fear and anger in the villages. In total, 97,216 people volunteered to serve in World War I, of whom 48,922 were soldiers; “7/8 of them came from Tonkin and Annam.”<sup>[21]</sup> Before being shipped to Europe, the new recruits received basic training in various military centers such as the *École des Soldats*, *École de la Section*, or *École de la Compagnie*.<sup>[22]</sup>

## War Time Experience

In France the soldiers formed eighteen battalions of colonial *infantry* (*Bataillons de l'Infanterie coloniale*; hereafter BIC) comprising four combat battalions and fourteen labor battalions. Except for BICs#1 and #2, which were already active in Tonkin, the rest were formed between 1916 and 1919 in Indochina and France.<sup>[23]</sup> These battalions provided support to the French army throughout France, in the Balkans, and in the Middle East.<sup>[24]</sup> On the frontline these battalions were often broken up into small units and attached to different regiments of the French army. In 1917, for example, BIC#7 was divided many times and attached to different regiments of the 12<sup>th</sup> Division of the French army in the Vosges region.<sup>[25]</sup>

If a soldier had volunteered for financial gain and for the betterment of his family, his wishes were fulfilled, as long as the war lasted. Between 1916 and 1918, volunteers remitted nearly 5.3 million francs to Indochina, in addition to large sums in the form of money-orders that they sent to their families separately. Many also had saving accounts in French banks and bought (French) treasury bonds.<sup>[26]</sup> As a result of their savings, on 9 May 1917 an article in *Le Courier d'Haiphong* reported, their families in Indochina “lacked for nothing.”<sup>[27]</sup>

For soldiers who had looked forward to having an exciting adventure, they got more than they bargained for. To begin with, they were honored by Emperor Khải Định (1885-1925), court officials, and the Governor General of Indochina, who went to the train station to send them off to France.<sup>[28]</sup> Then, on the journey to France, their ships stopped at various international ports before entering the Mediterranean to continue to Marseille. According to François Can, the highlight of his journey was the special treatment accorded his ship at Port Said, where an airplane dropped a bouquet of flowers, which had ribbons in the colors of the French flag, to welcome them.<sup>[29]</sup> On one ship each soldier had his own bed. The food on the ship was also not so bad. They had coffee in the morning and two meals each day, both of which included rice and meat, such as beef, although one soldiers complained that “the rice was not well cooked!”<sup>[30]</sup>

On some ships, however, the voyages were difficult and dangerous: storms caused rough seas; there were outbreaks of cholera due to crowded and insanitary conditions; and deaths occurred from suicides and enemy attacks. On 1 March 1917, for example, the *Athos* was torpedoed; 752 people were killed, including thirty-seven Vietnamese.<sup>[31]</sup> The Journal of BIC#13 recorded that on the *Pei Ho* about 200 recruits lived near latrines and cooked next to an area reserved for livestock, resulting in outbreaks of cholera that killed 116 people on board, including twelve soldiers.<sup>[32]</sup>

When they first arrived in France, the recruits “lacked for nothing except *nước mắm* [fish sauce].” Toward the end of the war they had only “stale bread and salted fish” to celebrate the Lunar New Year.<sup>[33]</sup> The winters in France were much harsher and colder than those in Tonkin and northern Annam. According to Sergeant Phùng, “it was so cold that saliva immediately froze after it was spat on the ground” and “the chill of winter pierces one’s heart.”<sup>[34]</sup> To make matters worse, toward the end of the war there was a shortage of fuel in some places. Members of BIC #3 had to walk fourteen kilometers to obtain wood. Life on the frontline, therefore, became “unbearable” for many, which prompted Sergeant Trần Nguyễn Xuân to advise his friends in Vietnam to “stay home” and not to volunteer.<sup>[35]</sup>

When they first arrived on the frontline, some Vietnamese immediately requested to go into combat. They thought that shooting the enemy was easy: “one only had to aim at the targets and squeeze the trigger.”<sup>[36]</sup> But as the war intensified and the two enemies fought “day and night with airplanes, bombs, submarines and torpedoes, and with tanks and mines,” that perception changed.<sup>[37]</sup> François Can recounted that sometimes he went into battle on an empty stomach. On the battlefield, besides coping with the deafening sound of artillery and engaging the Germans in one-on-one combat, he often stumbled over lifeless bodies.<sup>[38]</sup> Another soldier expressed the same view: “[Although] dead bodies lay in heaps, the enemies kept on fighting and killing each other with grenades, shells, and poison gas.” Therefore, living in the trenches was like “living in a cemetery,” because they were surrounded by dead bodies and the stench of rotting flesh, and haunted by the groaning of wounded soldiers in French, German, and English.<sup>[39]</sup>

The experience on the battlefields also triggered a negative view of France and its soldiers. According to a report by the Comptroller General of Indochinese Troops, French soldiers in Verdun, Argonne and Champagne abused and were hostile toward Vietnamese soldiers. In 1917 a French soldier killed a Vietnamese soldier of BIC #6, triggering a revolt by Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>[40]</sup> On the Vietnamese side, when seeing that the French army had suffered heavy losses Vietnamese soldiers ridiculed its soldiers’ inability to win the battles: “they had only 1/10 of the Germans’ talent” and “the Germans were much more superior...; if Heaven fights them it would lose too.”<sup>[41]</sup> Military records indicated that, when many Vietnamese soldiers recognized the futility of fighting for France they deserted their units.<sup>[42]</sup> One soldier wrote that when his battalion went into battle, some just “waved the white flag and went over to the enemy’s side.” Another reported that in his battalion of 1,250 men,

“only 200 men showed up when the bugle sounded to rally soldiers on the battlefield”.<sup>[43]</sup> Others, like Nguyễn Văn Tiều and Lê Văn Trung, however, deserted their posts, not because they feared the Germans, but because they did not want to be sent back to Vietnam when the war ended.<sup>[44]</sup>

Information gleaned from the letters of soldiers, such as that of Sergeant Nguyễn Văn Diệm, indicated that there were hundreds of Vietnamese prisoners in [Germany](#).<sup>[45]</sup> In May 1918 alone, the Germans captured 150 Vietnamese at the battle of Chemin des Dames in the Aisne region. When the Ministry of War tried to locate them, it learned that they had been sent to labor camps in [Romania](#) and Africa and “most of them had died.”<sup>[46]</sup> The total number of Vietnamese deserters and [prisoners of war](#) were never fully accounted for, although the Ministry of War had a list of Vietnamese prisoners in Germany.<sup>[47]</sup>

Overall, though, French military commanders had nothing but praise for their Vietnamese soldiers. In August 1918 General [Hyppolyte-Alphonse Pénét \(1867-1953\)](#), the Commander of the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division wrote that he was satisfied with their performance and their excellent demonstration of military codes of behavior during the battles at Chemin des Dames.<sup>[48]</sup> On 29 August 1918 General [Paul Henrys \(1862-1943\)](#), the Commander of the French [Army of the Orient](#), wrote that Vietnamese soldiers had risen up to meet the occasion and had executed their jobs with great skill and in good spirit. He recalled: “When being attacked by Austrian troops, who were far superior in artillery and in number, they pushed them back without ceding one inch of ground.”<sup>[49]</sup>

Their bravery and sacrifice brought [medals](#) to many. Corporal Phạm Văn Lương was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and was promoted because he did not hesitate to attack the Germans by surprise on one of his patrol missions.<sup>[50]</sup> Air Force Lieutenant [Đỗ Hữu Nghi](#) was promoted to Captain for “carrying out a dangerous mission and bringing back valuable information for the Command Headquarters.” Captain Phạm (no first name listed) was rewarded with a medal for fighting off an enemy assault and for taking Germans prisoners. Hundreds of others received military decorations for their bravery and courage and for their sacrifices when fighting the Germans.<sup>[51]</sup> By the end of the war 4 percent of the recruits or 1,548 had sacrificed their lives to defend France’s national borders.<sup>[52]</sup>

## Post-war Resettlement and Repatriation

In June 1918 the Governor General of Indochina, the Governor of Cochinchina, and the Residents Superior of Tonkin and Annam started to work with the Ministries of the Colonies and War in France on a plan to repatriate the volunteers to Vietnam and to reintegrate them into Vietnamese society. This effort included providing them with social, medical, financial, and employment support, and long term health care for the disabled and the handicapped.<sup>[53]</sup> However, a number of the soldiers wanted to remain in the army or stay in France to work, to pursue education or vocational training, or to be

with their French wives. According to one official, in principle all volunteers had to be repatriated in accordance with the terms of their enlistment. If they requested to be discharged in France, they could stay only if they had received a grant or a scholarship for professional training or to return to school, were employed by a French company, were married to a French woman, or had a child with a French woman. Their applications for permission to stay in France had to include a personal statement, police records, a letter from their former military commander(s) testifying to their good character, a marriage certificate or the birth certificate of their child, a new employment contract if they were staying to work, plus a certificate of residence issued by the mayor of the municipality where they would live and work.<sup>[54]</sup>

By 1920, about 4,000 Indochinese soldiers remained in France, of whom 1,100 were sent to the French occupied territories in Germany, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and South China; the rest were reassigned to the French army's Automobile Service to learn how to drive at the Driving Instruction Center in Paris.<sup>[55]</sup> According to an article in the *Chronique d'Haiphong*, about 50 percent of the soldiers who returned to Indochina reenlisted to go to France again because they realized that they "prefer the weather and the way of life in France;" the rest were reintegrated into the colonial army in Vietnam.<sup>[56]</sup>

Those who were discharged from the army and returned to Vietnam received a bonus, a pension, and a land grant if they wanted to farm. If they chose to work in the industrial or public sectors, they were given priority over their fellow countrymen.<sup>[57]</sup> The colonial government inaugurated two political reforms aimed at creating a foothold in the local administrative and political system for all returnees and tried to use them as agents of modernization. In 1921 it abolished the traditional *Hội Đồng Hào Mục* [Council of Notables] whose members were chosen solely among the village elders, retired officials, degree holders and former village chiefs. In its place the *Hội Đồng Tộc Biểu* [Council of Lineage Representatives] was instituted, whose members were elected by their family members, relatives, and friends. In 1926, to pave the way for all returnees to enter the French colonial civil service system, President Gaston Doumergue (1863-1937) issued a decree allowing the indigenous people of Indochina to gain employment in all fields of the French colonial civil service system, some of which had previously been saved for the *colons*, if they were qualified.<sup>[58]</sup> It is not clear how many World War I veterans took advantage of the reforms to establish themselves in the new political and administrative system, but obviously some did. After being discharged from the army, Nguyễn Văn Ba returned to his village and mobilized the support of his relatives to get elected to the Council of Lineage in Tử Liêm district, Hà Đông province. He also actively worked to modernize his village, building new roads and giving advice to villagers on health issues, modern farming techniques, and better ways to raise cattle.<sup>[59]</sup> A number of former soldiers also received land grants, buffaloes, and farming tools to form new settlements in Thái Nguyên (northeast of Hà Nội). However, after a three-year trial period only one-tenth of them remained there.<sup>[60]</sup>

Despite all efforts by the colonial government to create a smooth transition from war to peace for the

veterans, the results did not meet their expectations. At the time of demobilization the veterans had two demands: to receive honorary titles of the mandarin system as promised in their contracts, and French citizenship as traditionally awarded to indigenous soldiers who served in the colonial army. When French military leaders led military campaigns to pacify Tonkin in the 1880s and afterward, they recruited local men into the French army to carry out their campaigns. In turn, these men were rewarded with honorary titles of the mandarin system and French citizenship if they were injured or became disabled while fighting for the French forces. The demands of World War I veterans could not be realized, however, because according to a 1912 law, a soldier must have served fifteen years in the National Guard in Tonkin to receive these types of honors. Furthermore, it was the village leaders who controlled the granting of such honors, not the colonial government.<sup>[61]</sup>

In 1913 the practice of doling out French citizenship stopped because the law required that a naturalized citizen be twenty-one years of age or older, be able to read and write French, and met one of the following conditions: have served in the Territorial or the French army for at least ten years, be decorated with the Legion of Honor, or have provided exceptional services to France. In effect, these new laws prohibited granting such an honor and French citizenship to someone merely on the basis that he had served in the French army and sacrificed for France. The [French government](#) also feared that if all World War I veterans were awarded French citizenship, this would cause trouble for France and the colonial government in Vietnam. Between 1921 and 1924 only eight of the seventy-one applicants for French citizenship were successful; the rest were rejected because they lacked an education and proficiency in the French language.<sup>[62]</sup> The colonial government's inability to fulfill its promises and satisfy the World War I veterans' demands inevitably caused resentment, distrust, and anger among them. One such veteran bitterly expressed his sentiments in an article published in *Le Paria*, an organ of the Intercolonial Union established by Nguyễn Ái Quốc in 1922: "[The volunteers] were willing to sacrifice their lives because the French government had promised them more rights and citizenship. After they had done their services to France, those promises were never fulfilled. Their sacrifice, now, became the sources of hatred against France."<sup>[63]</sup>

Such a sentiment was rationalized and further stoked in the political pamphlets written by Nguyễn Ái Quốc and sponsored by the French Communist Party. These pamphlets condemned France's exploitation and oppression of the Vietnamese people and demanded national independence for Vietnam. In 1919, according to the French postal [censorship](#) office in Paris, the letters that World War I veterans sent to their friends and families in Vietnam revealed that Nguyễn Ái Quốc had emerged as a popular figure among Vietnamese soldiers; at the same time the French *sûreté* (police) also reported that a movement to demand national independence for Vietnam "was on the rise" among veterans.<sup>[64]</sup>

## The Seeds of Change

Although there is no way to measure the exact extent to which the First World War changed the lives

of Vietnamese veterans and the impact it had on them in the postwar period, one can generally gauge its impact from their experience of several years living and working in France. Before the Vietnamese recruits went to France, in their eyes Frenchmen belonged to a superior race; by the end of the war that perception had diminished. They no longer viewed themselves as inferior to Frenchmen, because during the war they had “fought the battles on a par with the French” and had “defended national borders.” Sometimes, they even felt superior to the French because on the battlefields they were the “brave ones, who marched in front and the French just followed.”<sup>[65]</sup> Four years of living in France also made Phuong, a soldier of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at Grasse, realize that “France is not an extraordinary country and *neither were its people*” (italics mine) because, he elaborated further, “in Vietnam Frenchmen ruled the Vietnamese people but when they returned to France they were but laborers pulling coal wagons and scraping mud off their shoes.”<sup>[66]</sup> The recruits’ egos were boosted further by the fact that French women were attracted to them and some even married them. By the end of the war, there were 250 French-Vietnamese couples legally married in France; hundreds of other were living together or having affairs.<sup>[67]</sup> Their contempt toward France was reinforced when they served in Germany as guards in the occupied territories. Seeing how Germany was devastated by the war and the French occupation, some empathized with the Germans. Official reports summarized the contents of the soldiers’ letters in that period this way: “The French oppress the Germans in the same way they have the Annamites [sic].”<sup>[68]</sup>

The recruits’ views about the established order in Vietnam also changed because of the war. When they left for France, many had been uneducated and poor peasants; by the time the war ended, they had been trained in [modern warfare strategy](#), tactics, and [weaponry](#). Hence, they did not feel that they had to answer to village leaders who did the colonists’ bidding and who had never travelled beyond the bamboo hedges of the villages. They sidestepped the village authorities and dealt only with the French administrators.<sup>[69]</sup> Their actions caused some colonists to despise them and fear them, because they had become “a dangerous social force to reckon with.”<sup>[70]</sup> Most of the villagers, however, looked up to them and turned to them for advice in dealing with native and French authorities.<sup>[71]</sup> The World War I veterans had sown discord at the very foundation of Vietnamese society.

The former World War I soldiers were emerging as new leaders in Vietnam. Therefore, they wanted recognition and a new place in society. It appears that recognition and change did not happen soon enough for them, so they took initiatives to find ways to bring about change themselves. Many joined an anti-colonial party, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party [Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng], which advocated violence as a means to remove the French from Vietnam. According to the late Huỳnh Kim Khánh, a large number of veterans joined this party and used their war-time knowledge to fight the French. In fact, grenades and bombs of World War I vintage were used to assassinate and terrorize the French.<sup>[72]</sup> In 1927 these men staged an unsuccessful rebellion in Bắc Ninh (northeast of Hà Nội). In February 1930, a number of soldiers in the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Tonkinese Soldiers in Yên

Bái coordinated with civilians in the Vietnamese Nationalist Party to plan another rebellion. They killed a few French officers and indigenous soldiers who did not collaborate with them. Unfortunately for the participants, the attempt was botched and collapsed after a few hours. Among the forty-four soldiers who were condemned by the Criminal Commission of Tonkin were seventeen World War I veterans.<sup>[73]</sup> The severe punishment of the people involved in the uprising triggered more discontent among the veterans. They resorted to tactics they had learned while fighting in Europe to retaliate: they ambushed and staged surprise attacks against the French military and police forces.<sup>[74]</sup> As history shows, this event marked the beginning of a long but ultimately successful resistance movement against the French in Vietnam.

## Conclusion

An article in a [French newspaper](#) shows that before the war ended there was a debate on the impact of the First World War on the volunteers from Vietnam and how to deal with them when the war was over. The author pointed out that although the World War I veterans had contributed to defending France, they formed a new class of men who were not content to return to their former places in society and who would not hesitate to rise up to claim more prestigious roles. He then asked: “Are we prepared to deal with them?”<sup>[75]</sup>

As records show, the colonial government did take measures to ease the World War I veterans back into society. These measures did not, however, fully anticipate the psychological impact the war had had on their lives. It had transformed them from docile and uneducated peasants into professional soldiers. The war also undermined many Vietnamese traditions and thereby undermined the French claim to power. One of the traditions was the *Tam Cương*, or three sets of relations. Of the three relations, the one between the ruler and his subjects, dictated that the subjects must render their absolute loyalty and obedience to their ruler.<sup>[76]</sup> However, the Confucian theory, or the “mandate of heaven,” also dictated that if a ruler was not trustworthy and benevolent, his subjects could overthrow him. These traditions seemed to serve the French well until World War I when they were seen to be weak and untrustworthy. Nguyễn Ái Quốc’s anti-colonial [propaganda](#) further reinforced that perception by pointing out that the French were not benevolent rulers as they had claimed to be. The change of attitude toward the colonial authority was also a case of “familiarity breeds contempt,” because the Vietnamese felt that they were equal to the French and that France even owed them a great debt of gratitude. Regarding the relationship between the World War I veterans and the village leaders, the veterans no longer felt that they had to submit to the authority of the latter. When they left their villages for France they were poor and lowly; many were regarded by village leaders as “unwanted elements.” The First World War, however, had turned the table against the leaders. The former peasants returned with money and prestige; some were even elected as village leaders. Although many of them were dissatisfied with the status quo, there is no evidence that any of them sought democratic reforms. Rather, they sought to advance themselves within the existing system, while others joined violent protests led by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party or the Communist Party,

neither of which promised democratic reform.

In short, many veterans returned to Vietnam having lost their respect for France and having experienced new ways of life and adopted new ideas that challenged the status quo in Vietnam. Many also resented the failure of the French government to fulfill the promises made early in the war. These developments led eventually to the downfall of the French colonial enterprise in Vietnam. Moreover, it is arguable that, without the war, Nguyễn Ái Quốc and Communism might never have had a role in the anti-colonial movement that emerged in the 1920s because the war removed the barrier which had prevented Vietnamese from going to France to live and work before 1914. It was in France that Vietnamese immigrants like Nguyễn Ái Quốc were exposed to, and later adopted, new ideas such as national independence and anti-colonialism and used them to organize a mass movement against the French presence in Vietnam. Nguyễn Ái Quốc rode that movement and emerged as its leader; they eventually drove the French out of Vietnam. Old revolutionaries like Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu had not succeeded because, to cite Nguyễn Ái Quốc, “[They] do not understand politics... [do not know] how to organize the masses...[they therefore suffer from] the futility of ill prepared actions.”<sup>[77]</sup>

Kimloan Vu-Hill, University of California, San Diego

Section Editor: [James P. Daughton](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ Quốc, Nguyễn Ái: *La Procès de la Colonisation Française*, Hanoi 1962, pp. 9-22; Buttinger, Joseph: *Vietnam. A Dragon Embattled*, Vol. 1, London 1967, pp. 116n, 490.
2. ↑ Thompson, Virginia: *French Indo-china*, New York 1937, pp. 90, 480; Buttinger, Vietnam 1967, p. 96; Murray, Martin J.: *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina, 1870-1940*, Berkeley, CA 1980, p. 217.
3. ↑ Here I use Vietnam instead of Indochina.
4. ↑ SHAT (Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre) at Chateau de Vincennes in Paris; 7 N 2121, “Renseignements concernant le recrutement dans l'Indochine en 1917”; Bouhier, Emanuel: *Les Troupes Coloniales d'Indochine en 1914-1918*, in: Carlier, Claude / Pedroncini, Guy (eds.): *Les Troupes Coloniales Dans la Grande Guerre*, Paris 1997, pp. 69-81.
5. ↑ Amireaux 7599 in Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer at Aix-en-Provence (ANOM), telegram from the Governor of Cochinchina to all administrators in Indochina, 17 January 1916. Amireaux is a collection of the records of the French colonial government's affairs in Indochina, created in 1887.
6. ↑ Amireaux 1883-1934, Cablegram 964, 31 August 1916 from the office of the Governor General of Indochina.
7. ↑ Amireaux 7599, Action de l'Autorité Militaire; Rapport sur le Recrutement Indigène.

8. ↑ Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française, 29 March 1915, 1 July 1915, 22 November 1915 & 25 January 1916, 12 February 1916; La Dépêche Coloniale et Maritime, 1 & 5 May 1915; 9 PA 13 (Papiers de l'Albert Sarraut) in: ANOM, "Pensions de Veuves," L'Indépendance Tonkinoise, 8 November 1917. Pension would be paid only to the legitimate spouses who recognized by Vietnamese laws. It would stop if a widow remarried or committed any offense against the laws. If a wife died, her young children would receive the pension until the age of sixteen.
9. ↑ Merriman, John: Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present, New York 1996, p. 1040; Becker, Jean Jacques: That's the Death Knell of our Boys, in: Fridenson, Patrick (ed.): The French Home Front 1914-1918, Providence, RI 1992, p. 17; Grenville, J.A.S.: A History of the World in the Twentieth Century, Cambridge, MA 1994, p. 95.
10. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 6, Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires de la France d'Outre Mer) in: ANOM "Liste nominative des gens de la famille royale d'Annam dans les bataillons Indochinois".
11. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 4, Notes in file; and "L'Impression d'un Ouvrier 'O.S' qui revient de France," L'Avenir du Tonkin, 27 May 1917.
12. ↑ Can, François Bertrand / Durrwell, George: Carnet de Route d'un Petit Marsouin Cochinchinois. Impressions et Souvenirs de la Grande Guerre, Saigon 1916, pp. 1-9. François was an adopted son of a Vietnamese French, Thomas Can. He was a corporal at the outbreak of the war.
13. ↑ RST 73172 (Résident Supérieur au Tonkin) in Cục Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia I, Hà Nội, public announcements and posters, 20 January 1916.
14. ↑ Buttinger, Vietnam 1967, p. 172.
15. ↑ Vu-Hill, Kimloan: Coolies into Rebels – Impact of World War I on French Indochina, Paris 2011, pp. 27-28; 9 PA13, memos from the Governors of Cochinchina, and Residents Superior of Tonkin, Annam and Cambodia regarding the number of volunteers to France during the war, 2 June 1918.
16. ↑ Vu-Hill, Coolies into Rebels 2011, pp. 46-49.
17. ↑ Merriman, Modern Europe 1996, p. 1054.
18. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 4; Amireaux 7599, Report of the Inspector of the Colonies Saurin, 12 October 1916.
19. ↑ RST 21440 "A/S d'un ONS engagé contre son gré", March 1917.
20. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, Letter from the Minister of the Colonies H. Simons to the President of the Council of War at the Ministry of War, 1919; Journal Officiel de l'Indochine Française, 16 August 1915; Amireaux 7599, "Rapport de l'inspection des colonies sur le service de recrutement volontaire en Cochinchine," 1916.
21. ↑ Sarraut, Albert: La Mise en valeur des colonies françaises, Paris 1923, pp. 42-43; 9 PA 13/3, Memo from the General Governor of Indochina to the Governor of Cochinchina, Residents Superior of Tonkin, Annam, and Cambodia, 2 June 1918; Cross, Gary: Immigrant Workers in Industrial France. The Making of a New Laboring Class, Philadelphia 1983, p. 34-36; Nogaro, B. / Weil, Lucien: La main d'œuvre étrangère et coloniale pendant la guerre, New Haven, CT 1926, p. 32-35: 242,000 soldiers from Africa and Asia had served in the war.
22. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 1, dossier 6, Action de l'Autorité Militaire.
23. ↑ Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris, Les Armées Françaises d'Outre Mer. Les Contingents Coloniaux du Soleil et de la Gloire, Paris 1937, p. 74.

24. ↑ Bouhier, Les Troupes coloniales d'Indochine 1997, pp. 74-77; SHAT 16 N 16, "Rapports sur la situation des bataillons d'étapes indochinois dans le groupement du camp de Tassigny".
25. ↑ Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris, Les Armées Françaises d'Outre Mer, 91.
26. ↑ NF 226, 246 & 247; 3 SLOTFOM 93 & 10 SLOTFOM 5.
27. ↑ 9 PA 13, R. Helgé, "Problème de demain," Le Courrier d'Haiphong, 9 May 1917.
28. ↑ Gras, Edmond: Volontaires indigènes – Hué pendant la Grande Guerre, Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué (April – June 1917), pp.109-16.
29. ↑ Can, Carnet de Route 1916, pp. 13-18.
30. ↑ Marquet, Jean: Lettres d'Annamites – Lettres de Guerre, Lettres de Paix, Hanoi 1929, pp. 11-15.
31. ↑ Archives de la Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Marseille (ACCM), Rapport de Mer by Captain of the Athos, 7 December 1916.
32. ↑ Journal the Marche et d'Operation of BIC #13; ACCM, Rapport de Mer of the Captain of the Meinam, 7 December 1916; Archives Départementales des Bouches du Rhône, Rapport de Mer by the Captain of the Meinam, 8 September 1917.
33. ↑ NF 227, CP (Contrôle Postale) reports January & March 1918; 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP reports November 1917. The CP was created on 12 January 1916 and officially examined the first batch of mail to and from Indochina on 20 November 1916, despite protests from individual and the press agency such as Havas.
34. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, CP reports, January 1918.
35. ↑ NF 227, CP reports January and June 1918 & reports by Dupuy-Volny and Tri Phu Vinh, 31 August 1918; 1SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, September 1918.
36. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, 15 December 1916.
37. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, Nguyễn Lý Mai, BIC #6, 15 November 1916.
38. ↑ Can, Carnet de route 1916, pp. 33-40.
39. ↑ NF 227, CP reports, January - June 1918; 3 SLOTFOM 93, CP reports, July 1918.
40. ↑ Report by J. Bosc, Controller General of Indochinese Troops, 1917.
41. ↑ 1SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, 15 December 1916 & May, July, and September 1918; 3 SLOTFOM 93, Dương in CP reports, July 1918.
42. ↑ 16 N 2767, Direction des troupes coloniales, reports on 20 September, 3 November, 15 December 1918.
43. ↑ NF 227, CP reports, June 1918; 3 SLOTFOM 93, reports by agent Lacombe at CP in Marseille, 31 July 1918. Note: one company had 250 men.
44. ↑ SHAT 16 N 2767, reports by military officers on 20 September, 3 November, 15 December 1918.
45. ↑ 3 SLOTFORM 93, CP reports, July 1918.
46. ↑ 11 SLOTFOM 1 & 2, letter from the Minister of War to the Minister of the Colonies, 24 March 1922.
47. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, Letter from the Director of the General Service of the Prisoners of War in the Ministry of War, 29 September 1918.
48. ↑ Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris, Les Armées Françaises d'Outre Mer, p. 92.
49. ↑ Ibid, pp. 93-94.

50. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 4, Decorations of War; NF 227, CP reports, November 1917. Croix de Guerre was created on April 1916 for soldiers who died during World War I. See section “Armée, Texte de la loi sur La Croix de Guerre,” *La Dépêche Coloniale et Maritime*, 28 April 1916; 9 PA 13, “Nomination pour fait de guerre,” *Le Courrier d’Haiphong*, 13 April 1917.
51. ↑ “Autour de la guerre,” *Chronique d’Haiphong*, 18 February 1917; 10 SLOTFOM 5, “Le Comité de Guerre au sujet des Tirailleurs Indigènes en Service aux Armées,” no date; 10 SLOTFOM 4, Extracts des citations des tirailleurs indochinois.
52. ↑ Sarraut, Albert: *La Mise en Valeur* 1923, p. 44; 10 SLOTFOM 4, Notes in files for 1918.
53. ↑ NF 246, Memo from the Services of the Indochinese to the Minister of the Colonies, 6 July 1918; 9PA 13/3 memo from the Governor of Indochina to the Governor of Cochinchina and the Residents Superior of Tonkin, Annam and Cambodia, 2 June 1918.
54. ↑ NF 226, 1918 Notes in file on the consideration for the requests of the Indochinese to stay in France after the war; Memo from Pierre Guesde on the demobilization of the indigenous soldiers from colonies other than Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, 4 April 1919.
55. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, June 1921; SPCE 364 (Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire Français en Indochine) in ANOM, *L’Humanité*, 4 November 1920; Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris, *Les Armées Françaises d’Outre Mer*, p. 95; Note: the French Army of the Rhine was created in October 1919 to occupy postwar Germany; NF 226, A memo from Pierre Guesde, the Resident Superior and Inspector General of Indochinese Soldiers and Workers’ Affairs, April 4, 1919; 1 SLOTFOM 4, Report from the Worker Control Services, 1932; SHAT 16 N 2767, *Emploi au services automobiles – Réengagement* 1918.
56. ↑ *Chronique d’Haiphong*, 11 October 1919.
57. ↑ NF 226, 10 SLOTFOM 5, Memo in 1919 signed by H. Simon, the Minister of the Colonies; 10 SLOTFOM 4, note in file for 1918. The plan was to create areas each of which was between 300 and 500 hectares (1 hectare = 2.471 acres); and each individual would receive between 6 and 10 hectares, depending on the size of his family.
58. ↑ 3 SLOTFOM 118, presidential decree signed by President Gaston Doumergue, 20 May 1926
59. ↑ Marquet, *Lettres d’Annamites* 1929, pp. 68-69.
60. ↑ Gourou, Pierre: *The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta. A Study of Human Geography*, 1936, New Haven 1952, pp. 242-243.
61. ↑ RST 73172, Letter to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, 3 July 1922.
62. ↑ “La Naturalization des Annamites,” *Chronique d’Haiphong*, 8 November 1919; 1 SLOTFOM 8 CP reports, January 1919; Henry Eckert, “Les Militaires Indochinois au Service de la France, 1859-1939” (Thèse du doctorat Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne, 1998), pp. 436-441.
63. ↑ 5 SLOTFOM 36, Trần Xuân Mai, “La Voix d’Annamite,” *Le Paria*, no. 18-19, (September-October 1919).
64. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP agent Josselme’s reports, July 1919; 1 SLOTFOM 4, Report from the office of the Inspector General of Indochinese Troops, 1 December 1920.
65. ↑ NF 227, CP reports, March 1918; 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, May 1918.
66. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 8, Phuong Mle I, A82 at Grasse, CP reports, September 1923.
67. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, CP reports, December 1918.
68. ↑ 1 SLOTFORM 8, CP reports, August and September 1923.

69. ↑ RST 73172, report from local French administrators to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, 3 July 1922.
70. ↑ Albert Pourville, "L'Indochine en 1918," *La Dépêche Coloniale et Maritime*, 19 February 1918.
71. ↑ Duong Van Giao, "L'Indochine Pendant la Guerre de 1914-1918" (Thèse de Doctorat, Faculté de Droit, Université de Paris, 1925), pp. 133-44.
72. ↑ Khánh, Huỳnh Kim: *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945*, Ithaca, NY 1982, p. 94.
73. ↑ Hoàng Văn Đào, *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng – Lịch sử Đấu Tranh Cận Đại 1927-1954*, (n.p, 1970), p. 28; Văn, Ngô: *Việt-nam 1920-1945 – Révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale*, Paris 2000, p. 144; 3 SLOTFOM 22, reports by the Resident Superior of Tonkin on "The spirit of World War I returnees", 17 March 1930; Rettig, Tobias: *French military policies in the aftermath of the Yên Bái mutiny, 1930 - Old security dilemmas return to the surface*, in: *Southeast Asia Research*, London (2002), p. 311.
74. ↑ 3 SLOTFOM 22, reports by the Resident Superior of Tonkin on "The spirit of World War I returnees", 12 April 1930.
75. ↑ 9 PA 13, R. Helgé, "Problème de demain," *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 9 May 1917; NF 246, Letter from the office of Services of Indochinese Soldiers and Workers to the Minister of the Colonies, 6 July 1918; 10 SLOTFOM 4, "L'Indochine en 1918," *La Dépêche Colonial et Maritime*, 19 February 1918.
76. ↑ The original text: quân xử thần tử, thần bắt tử bắt trung [when a king orders his subjects to die, they must die or they would be deemed disloyal to their king].
77. ↑ Sinh, Vinh / Wickenden, Nicholas (trans.): *Overtaken Chariot – The Autobiography of Phan-Bội-Châu*, Honolulu 1999, p. 20; see endnote 11.

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