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Indochinese Workers in France (Indochina)

By [Kimloan Vu-Hill](#)

About 49,000 Vietnamese workers went to France during World War I. Although their jobs and their working experiences varied, they shared some common experiences which changed their outlook on life and their perception about their relationship with the French in Vietnam. When the war ended, they returned home and shared their experiences with the native workers who looked up to them as teachers and leaders. In the following decades, these men created a labor movement that eventually led to the collapse of the French colonial enterprise in Indochina.

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Introduction

This is a discussion of the experience of Vietnamese worker in World War I (WWI). In the first ten months of WWI nearly 6 million Frenchmen were drafted. This caused a severe labor shortage that

had to be filled to meet the growing demand for workers to produce [weapons](#) and [ammunition](#). The Undersecretary of State for Artillery and Munitions proposed to hire women, European immigrants and colonial people. In subsequent months, the Colonial Labor Organization Service recruited labor from [North Africa](#), Madagascar, [Indochina](#) and [China](#). In Indochina, nearly 49,000 men volunteered to serve in [France](#) as workers.^[1] Wartime France became their common training ground and their working and living experiences changed their outlook on life. In his book, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945*, David G. Marr also focuses on the transformation of consciousness and agents of change for the Vietnamese but he argues that this happened in the period of 1920-1945 among a small group of intelligentsia.^[2] This paper argues that the transformation began during WWI when the Vietnamese directly encountered French civilization. Their experiences transformed their consciousness, taught them the power of collective action which was essential in their struggle for recognition and change back in Indochina. The conclusion of this article discusses the impact of this historical period on the French colonial enterprise in Vietnam.

The Mobilization of Workers

After the outbreak of war, a group of volunteers from Indochina was sent to France as a trial. Under their contracts each volunteer received a bonus, food, lodging, clothing and a guaranteed return passage to his country of origin once his labor contract expired.^[3] Initially, the length of the contract was only one year and one had to be twenty years old to volunteer. By December 1915, when the [French government](#) realized that the war would last much longer than originally thought, the length of service was changed to “the entire war years plus six months” and the age of eligibility was reduced to seventeen.^[4] In December 1915 the Minister of the Colonies and the Minister of War signed a decree officially launching the recruitment campaign. The Governor General in Indochina seized the opportunity to reduce the number of surplus workers and get some professional training for unskilled laborers. He also hoped that when the volunteers returned to Indochina, they would facilitate the modernization and industrialization of the country.^[5] Local administrators had the task of finding volunteers. Some of them took the opportunity to get rid of “unwanted elements” in their villages – landless and homeless peasants, criminals and vagabonds – by forcing them to volunteer. This caused violent resistance from villagers and resulted in the demotion or dismissal of the offending officials.^[6] The men who went to France worked in factories, military industrial complexes, chemical plants, hospitals, military camps, offices, shops and stores; they also worked in the agricultural sector and on construction projects.

Working and Living Conditions

After arriving in the seaport of Marseille, each volunteer took another medical examination and a series of aptitude tests before receiving a worker-identification paper and a labor contract from the person’s employer. The contract specified the worker’s wage, benefits and duties. The employer

would provide food, lodging, clothing and medical care. The amount of food they received each day was specified in the contracts. Working and living conditions did vary. In certain places, workers could have a member of the group cook for them; to buy food, the cook received a sum of money equal to the total daily allowance of the members of the group. The employer, however, had to provide cooking utensils and facilities. Workers were paid twice a month and had to work ten hours a day, six days a week with Sunday off. In Angoulême, the worker's compound had a lounge, a swimming pool and indoor toilets. It even had a small shop where workers could buy personal items and magazines in the Vietnamese language.^[7] In La Ciotat, the worker's compound was heated; each worker had his own bed with a headboard, mattress and pillow. Each group of workers also had its own cook. In the Toulon naval shipyards, Vietnamese and French workers shared the same lodgings; they could choose between Vietnamese and French style meals; their bathrooms had hot and cold running water; and they slept in hammocks.^[8] In contrast, workers in Clermont-Ferrand walked 1.5 kilometers to get their meals, the plumbing system in their buildings did not always work and water was not always heated. In St. Chamas, due to water restrictions, workers could take a shower only once a week in the washroom of the factory. In Challuy, Nièvre and Cazeau, they slept on cement floor with only one blanket in the winter. Those in St. Raphael slept in straw mattresses on dirt floors. To keep warm they slept side by side, their body heat keeping one another warm.^[9] In some areas, the Committee to Assist Indochinese Workers created *Cerle Indochinois* [Indochinese Club] where workers could gather to read French and Vietnamese newspapers, play guitars or flutes, smoke and chat. It also provided them with pens and papers to write letters. The *Alliance Française* organized classes to teach them French and *quốc ngữ* (Vietnamese writing script). About 25,000 men took advantage of this offer and become literate in both French and *quốc ngữ*.^[10]

Although the labor contract indicated that their work day would be ten hours long, in Angoulême the day shift was eight hours and thirty minutes; the night shift was only seven hours. A third shift was eleven hours long for which workers were paid overtime. As the war intensified, French and foreign workers had to work longer hours. In some factories there was no rest on weekends. In the Renault automobile plants, French workers had to work twelve hours a day and could be jailed for absenteeism.^[11] Similarly, in some places Vietnamese workers operated under a twelve or fourteen hour shift. One worker wrote: "Work is harsh; no rest even on Sunday... If we were absent one day, we are thrown into prison."^[12]

Ethnic Conflicts

Between 1914 and 1918 France hired 662,000 foreign workers to work in war industries and the agricultural sector. The extensive use of foreign workers triggered tension and conflict among different ethnic groups.^[13] Brawls often broke out between Vietnamese and French workers because the latter were "ignorant" of the former's customs. At Versailles, the French laughed at the Vietnamese's blackened teeth and clothing. The Vietnamese feared to go out alone lest they be

attacked by “French hoodlums.”^[14] In groups they feared no one. After a Frenchman beat a Vietnamese worker, the worker’s friends “laid siege” to the man’s home and destroyed it, seriously injuring three persons in the house. However, four people on the Vietnamese side were also injured.^[15] Some prison workers slit a guard’s stomach when he beat them. They were executed the next day; the friend of one lamented: “We left our fathers and mothers only to be executed by those whom we came to save. Is that justice?”^[16] Tensions also existed between workers from different colonies: during a celebration of TẾT [Lunar New Year] in 1918 a gun fight broke out between Vietnamese and Malagasies at Istres resulting in the death of a Vietnamese.^[17]

Conflict among workers was not restricted to racial differences and erupted between workers from different regions of Indochina. On All Saints Day in 1917 workers from Tonkin and Cochinchina fought each other with “fists and knives” in the courtyard of a powder factory. The latter lost and six men were hospitalized. In Bordeaux, a Cochinchinese planted a knife under the bed of a Tonkinese and reported him to the authorities in retaliation for his loss in a previous fight with the man. After that, members of both groups carried knives in their shirtsleeves at all time to protect themselves.^[18]

Worker Justice

In the history of [French labor](#), French workers were known for their militancy and their use of strikes to achieve their demands. This ceased after France declared war on [Germany](#) in 1914. The leaders of French trade unions agreed not to call any strike for the sake of national unity. However, by 1916, when facing inflation, food shortages and long working hours, French workers had returned to strikes to voice their demands. The French government gave in and agreed to enforce the ten hour working day and allow one day off every week, although no raise was granted.^[19]

This struggle did not escape the watchful eyes of Vietnamese workers. One worker wrote to a friend that the French workers were “powerful,” had set a “fine example” and had showed the Vietnamese workers that they had the “right” to file complaints against their supervisors and demand better treatment and better pay.^[20] In 1917 and 1918, when the number of French labor protests spiked, the Vietnamese workers also organized a few of their own. In Clermont-Ferrant, they refused to go to work when there was no heat in their building. In Camp Bassens, workers walked off the job to demand one day off per month.^[21] In Cassern Robert, 400 workers stopped working to protest bad treatment from their supervisors and forced the government to launch an investigation.^[22] These events were the manifestation of a transformation in the Vietnamese workers’ consciousness; they also marked the beginning of an era of where the Vietnamese workers had learned the power of collective action.

Repatriation

When the war ended, 3.46 percent or 1,797 of the Vietnamese workers had died.^[23] A small number stayed in France. To do so, a *metis*, or Eurasian, needed only a paper from the mayor where he lived certifying that he had a “good reputation and had financial support.” A Vietnamese native had to prove that he was employed, had sufficient financial support, was married to a French woman or had a child with a French woman.^[24]

For the majority who returned to Indochina, the Governor-General of Indochina made plans to help them reintegrate into society, including search committees to find employment and to distribute land to those who wanted to farm. The general budget of Indochina would absorb the cost of these services.^[25] 1 million francs was allocated in the 1919-1920 budget to pay for vocational training and education for some workers before they returned to Indochina. Some took classes in the *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Métiers* in Angers, while a number of others interned at various government agencies to get training on the job. Those training to be interpreters were placed in *École Primaires Supérieures* to study. If they completed their courses and passed the exit exam, they would be hired as teachers, replacing the French teachers who were mobilized to France. They could also go to the University of Hanoi to advance their studies.^[26]

In Indochina, the Chamber of Commerce in Haiphong informed companies and government employment offices in naval construction, metallurgical, ceramic and paper industries about the returnees' qualification and availability for work.^[27]

The Governor General also ordered the creation of a “catalogue” of available skilled workers from which French employers could choose. Especially after the Russian Empire (Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917)], many French companies and investors lost their businesses and investments in Russia; they looked to Indochina to invest their money in land and industry and used the catalogue to find workers for their companies.^[28] In effect, the returnees formed a core of professionals and skilled workers that was instrumental in the expansion of the French colonial enterprise in the post-war period.

Labor Movement in Vietnam

In the 1920s France allowed more Vietnamese to enter France to study and work. The Vietnamese immigrants arrived in France by both legal and illegal means to work as sailors, photographers, cooks, restaurant and shop owners and manual laborers.^[29] They formed their own professional and political associations such as the Association of Annamite Cooks and Domestic Servants, Association of Manual Laborers and Committee to Defend the Interests of Indochinese Workers in France. Some of these groups also aligned with the French Communist Party (PCF) to get support in legal and political matters. Many workers also joined the PCF and were active in carrying out clandestine and revolutionary activities against the colonial government.^[30] Sailors, in particular, were instrumental in transporting communist leaders' instructions, propaganda, magazines and

newspapers such as the *L'Humanité* and *Le Paria* to Indochina. In fact, they maintained the link between the anti-colonial movements in France and Indochina.^[31]

In Indochina, because they could speak French and had experience working in France, the returnees were employed in various French companies and as *cai*, or supervisors, in rubber plantations. They were able to make more money than other workers. Not only did the returnees bring back to Indochina new skills needed for the development of its modern industries, they also transmitted their knowledge about the French labor movement and the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution. As a result, their peers looked to them as “teachers and leaders.” In effect, in the workplace the returnees recruited followers, transformed workers’ consciousness and empowered them to rise up against exploitation by their employers. As history shows, between 1924 and 1930 Vietnamese workers in many parts of Indochina banded together to form a protest movement demanding shorter workdays, wage increases and better treatment. In Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, where 20,000 returnees lived, the labor movement became the spearhead for the subsequent revolutionary movement of the Vietnamese Communist Party led by [Hồ Chí Minh \(1890-1969\)](#).^[32]

Conclusion

In sending Vietnamese to work in France during WWI the colonial government had hoped that when they returned they would facilitate changes in Indochina for the benefit of colonial enterprises. By living and working side by side with French workers, in four short years the Vietnamese learned directly from French workers not only professional lessons but also lessons on class warfare and the value of labor and collective action in fighting against exploitation and for their rights. Moreover, from illiterate peasants they had become learned men. When they left Indochina in 1914 many were regarded as “coolies” despite their array of backgrounds. In France many had common experiences and formed a common bond. They had seen and learned much about a different way of life, particularly in the field of labor relations and were no longer prepared to accept the status quo in Indochina. When they returned to Indochina, they worked together to fight for the same goals – that is, more political power and better pay. Contrary to what the colonial government had hoped and instead of using their knowledge and experience to advance the French colonial enterprise, they constituted a body of discontented workers which was a force of change and whose existence contributed to the growth of anti-colonial government in Indochina. In fact, some of the future leaders of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam had lived and work in France during WWI and in the early 1920s.^[33]

Kimloan Vu-Hill, University of California, San Diego

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

Notes

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2. ↑ Marr, David G.: *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* Berkeley 1981, p. 1.
3. ↑ Nogaro, B./Weil, Lucien: *La main d'œuvre étrangère et coloniale pendant la guerre*. New Haven undated, pp. 3-31; Cross, Gary: *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France*, Philadelphia 1983, pp. 34-36.
4. ↑ Amireaux 1883 & 1911, Cablegram 1104 to the Governor General of Indochina, 25 December 1915; Decree 12 November 1914.
5. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 4, Decree No. 1.219/C, 26 December 1915; 10 SLOTFOM 4, "Les Indochinois en France," n.p, 30 December 1919.
6. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 4 and Amireaux 7599, Report of the Inspector of the Colonies Saurin, 12 October 1916; RST 21440 "A/S d'un ONS engagé contre son gré," March 1917.
7. ↑ Ministère de la Guerre: *Instruction sur le fonctionnement de dépôt centres de rassemblement et groupements de travailleurs indigènes*. Paris 1916); SHAT7N2121, "Conditions dans lesquelles des ouvriers Indochinois sont mis à la disposition du GQG"; *La main-d'œuvre indigène en France*. In: *La Ville*, 23 March 1916); 10 SLOTFOM 3, Report by Inspector Lamarre, 17 November 1917. Note: the ten-hour working day was normal at this time.
8. ↑ 9 PA 13, *Les Indochinois en France*. In: *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 25 and 26 June 1917; *Le Groupement des Travailleurs Indochinois Employés à l'Arsenal de Toulon*. In: *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 28 March 1917.
9. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, Inspectors' reports, 1917 – 1918; 10 SLOTFOM 3 & 5, Reports by Du Vaure and Lamarre, 8 August 1916, 3 June 1917 and 21, 30 January & 27 February 1918; NF 246, Report by Przulski, May 1918.
10. ↑ 9 PA 13, Thuy, Pham Gia: *Les Indochinois en France*. In: *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, 24 March 1917; *Comité d'Assistance aux Travailleurs Indochinois*. In: *La Dépêche Colonial*, 13 January and 20 June 1916
11. ↑ Magraw, Roger: *A History of the French Working Class, Volume II*, Oxford 1992, pp. 162-63.
12. ↑ 16 N 1507, instruction regarding working hours for workers, 12 December 1915; 3 SLOTFOM 93, CP reports, January 1918.
13. ↑ Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class* 1992, p. 151; SHAT7N2121, "Conditions dans lesquelles des ouvriers Indochinois sont mis à la disposition du GQG."
14. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, report by Tri Phu Vinh, 14 January 1918; SHAT7N997, CP reports, August 1917.
15. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 1, CP reports, August 1918.
16. ↑ 3 SLOTFOM 93, CP reports, January 1918.
17. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 5, report by Boschette, 14 January 1918.
18. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 8, CP reports, August 1917 & November 1918.

19. ↑ Fridenson, Patrick: *The Impact of the First World War on French Workers*, in: Wall, Richard / Winter, Jay (eds.): *The Upheaval of War. Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 235-247; Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class* 1992, pp. 156-159; Horne, John: *Immigrant Workers in France during World War I*. In: *French Historical Studies* 14/1 (1985), pp. 57-88.
20. ↑ NF 227, on "Theory of Strikes," CP reports, March 1918.
21. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 3, reports by Lamarre, 16 January & 30 April 1918.
22. ↑ NF 227, CP reports, March 1918.
23. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 4, report from the Ministry of War to the Ministry of the Colonies, 1 July 1919.
24. ↑ 1 NF226, Notes in file regarding "Considerations for the requests of Indochinese to stay in France after the war ended," 1918; 10 SLOTFOM 6, circulars no. 8549 1/8 and no.16961/8, 4 April 1919 and 24 March 1920.
25. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 4, Albert Sarraut's plan to resettle Indochinese volunteers at the end of the war; 9 PA 13, Memo from the Governor General of Indochina to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, Annam, and Cambodia, 2 June 1918.
26. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 2, Letter from H. Gourdon, the Inspector General of Public Education in Indochina, to the Resident Superior of the General Control of the Indochinese, 1918.
27. ↑ 3 SLOTFOM 93, Memo from the Minister of Public Works, Transportation, and Merchant Marines to the Minister of the Colonies, 24 November 1919; 9 PA 13, "L'Ouvriers Indigènes en France." In: *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, 13 October 1918; cablegram from Pierre Guesde, the Resident Superior of the General Control of the Indochinese, to the Minister of the Colonies, 21 March 1919.
28. ↑ 10 SLOTFOM 6, Notes in file regarding "Considerations for the requests of Indochinese to stay in France after the war ended," 1918; Cablegram no. 2370 from Albert Sarraut, 30 October 1918; 3 SLOTFOM 93, Pierre Guesde, "Instructions on the demobilization of workers and soldiers from the colonies, other than Algeria, Tunisia, Maroc, who requested permission to remain in the Metropole," 4 April 1919.
29. ↑ Vu-Hill, Kimloan: *Coolies into Rebels. Impact of World War I on French Indochina*, Paris 2011, pp. 121-25; 1 SLOTFOM 4, Report from the Controller General of Indochinese Soldiers, 5 April 1923.
30. ↑ 1 SLOTFOM 4, reports from the Controller General of Indochinese Soldiers, 5 April 1923; 3 SLOTFOM 93 & 1M1778 Archives of the Department des Bouches du Rhône, Marseille, "Indochinese Associations in the Department Bouches du Rhône), undated.
31. ↑ 5 SLOTFOM 36, report from the office of the "Control and Assistance to Indochinese Workers," 12 October 1919.
32. ↑ Văn, Trần: *Giàu, Giai Cấp Công Nhân Việt Nam- Sự Hình Thành và Sự Phát Triển của Nó Từ Giai Cấp 'Tự Mình' đến Giai Cấp 'Cho Mình,'* [Vietnamese Working Class: Its formation and Development from the Period of Self Supportive to the Period of For the Self Reliance to the Period for Self-Benefit] Hà Nội 1958, pp. 247, 317-18, 333, 368-384; Vu-Hill, *Coolies into Rebels* 2011, pp. 144-146.

33. ↑ Among these leaders were: HỒ chí Minh, the founder of Vietnamese Communist Party and the future President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). Although there has yet been information to directly show that HỒ chí Minh was a worker in France during WWI, records show that in 1919 he was already well known among Vietnamese soldiers and workers in France and was a delegate for eighteen workers of the “Usine Bobigny” in Paris to the Congress of Tour in 1920. See SPCE 365, report by Desiree, 19 June 1922 and 3 SLOTFORM 93, report by inspector of Indochinese workers, 22 November 1922; [Tôn Đức Thắng \(1888-1980\)](#), the first Vice President (1960-1969) and then the President of DRVN and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976-1980). See Giebel, Christoph: *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism – Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory*, Seattle 2004; [HỒ Đắc Di \(1900-1985\)](#), the principal of the Hanoi College of Medicines (1954-1976). See Di, Ho Duc: *The Path that I Have Chosen*. In: *Vietnamese Intellectuals at a Historic Turning-Point in the 20th Century*, Hanoi 1989, pp. 50-64. Mr. Di did not acknowledge that he went to France in 1918 as a health worker but said only that he went to France to study on a scholarship which was not possible until at least 1920 when the colonial government of Indochina paid for such program.

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