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Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Indochina)

By [Patrice Morlat](#)

Vietnamese resistance to French colonial rule had begun before the war and continued throughout it. The Duy Tan League, founded in 1904, was the most significant of the revolutionary resistance groups: Often aided by secret societies in Cochinchina, it led several insurrection and raids on French colonial offices, prisons, and administrative hubs. In response and empowered by the wartime state of emergency, the colonial government reorganized its intelligence, police, and propaganda networks. The recruitment of some 100,000 Vietnamese “volunteers” as troops and labourers in France additionally disrupted local societies, while also reinforcing the colonial state’s repressive apparatus. Though the Duy Tan League was ultimately defeated, its disappearance opened the door for a far more organized new generation of revolutionaries who would come to prominence in the post-war years.

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The Indochinese Union in 1914

On 3 August 1914, the day [Germany](#) declared war on [France](#), the latter had been present in the eastern part of the Indochinese peninsula for sixty-six years in Cochinchina (in the south) and twenty-nine years in Tonkin (in the north). A government general ruled the so-called Indochinese Union, comprising five “countries” (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Laos) and one leased territory (Guangzhouwan), located in southern [China](#).

Cochinchina, Guangzhouwan, and the southern part of Laos were managed directly by the colonial administration. Conversely, Annam, Cambodia, and the northern part of Laos were considered protectorates, and were therefore governed indirectly by way of treaties signed by pre-colonial ruling dynasties. Tonkin, meanwhile, stood somewhere between these two schemes.

In 1914, Indochina was considered “pacified” and economic development and infrastructure projects were well underway. The French centrist Radical party, which exerted considerable influence in Hanoi, had in 1907 directed the colonial government toward a policy of association with indigenous elites, which in theory implied respecting local cultures and society rather than assimilating them. Governor [Albert Sarraut \(1872-1962\)](#) was one of the main champions of this project.

The Vietnamese Nationalist Movement

Following the arguments of historian Charles Fourniau,^[1] one can contend that Vietnamese national resistance never abated over the course of the entire colonial period. The ferocious Can Vuong (Loyalty to the King) insurrection, grouped around regional warlords and mandarins, the most famous of them being [Phan Dinh Phung \(1847-1896\)](#), was only suppressed in 1912, a mere two years before the outbreak of the First World War.

While most traditional administrators continued to operate loyally under the French yoke, an influx of French industrial companies such as the *Union commerciale indo-chinoise*, the shipping company *Est Asiatique français*, the *Chemin de fer français de l'Indochine et du Yunan*, or the coal corporations of Tonkin, as well as tea, [coffee](#), and rubber plantation magnates, brought significant change to the region and prompted new forms of resistance.

In 1904, a new generation of young revolutionaries founded the Duy Tan League, alongside the man of letters [Phan Boi Chau \(1867-1940\)](#) and prince [Cuong De \(1882-1951\)](#). First exiled to [Japan](#) in 1905 in the wake of that country’s victory over [Russia](#) — a highly charged and deeply significant victory for all subjugated Asian peoples — this new group, a few hundred members strong and composed of students and nationalists, established a network of commercial companies so as to gain money and to hide their political activities.

The year 1908 constituted a first stand against colonial rule. The Duy Tan launched a first insurrection, attempting to poison a garrison in Hanoi. Meanwhile, in Annam, a revolt led by another mandarin, Phan Chau Trinh (1872-1926), who was convinced that French republican and democratic values could be used to achieve Vietnam's emancipation, rose up against taxes and fomented unrest. Finally, in Cochinchina, colonial authorities dismantled a ring led by French national Gilbert Chieu (1868-1919), which had recruited young people to Duy Tan and to Japan.

Flushed out of Japan by French diplomatic pressure, Vietnamese nationalists next sought refuge in southern China in 1909 among the ranks of Chinese nationalist Sun Yat-sen's (1866-1925) Guomindang. Guangdong and Guangxi as well as Yunnan, all provinces once subjected to French influence by virtue of their common borders with Tonkin and Laos, now emerged as threats to French colonialism, due to the presence of both Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries. Members of the Duy Tan League could henceforth launch raids into the border regions of both Tonkin and Laos.

In 1913, two years after the Chinese revolution, the League launched a second insurrection that resulted in the murder of two French police officers in Hanoi, as well as in the attack of militiamen and soldiers, and the execution of several mandarins accused of collaborating with the French. Revolt also broke out in Cochinchina. Armed with sticks and swords, hundreds of peasants rushed headlong to attack prisons and administrative hubs. Many of the assailants died of bullet wounds, and the protests were broken up.

New Circumstances: The World War

The global conflagration of 1914 was at first perceived in East Asia as a civil war among whites (though Japan and other Asian powers would later become involved as well). The fact that Indochina's French overlords found themselves confronted with the same deadly enemy that had defeated them forty-four years prior during the Franco-Prussian War (indeed, this time war was being waged against an even stronger, unified Germany) provided a fresh opportunity for the Duy Tan League.

The French responded by invoking the so-called "German connection," alleging financial ties between Vietnamese revolutionaries and German agents based in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Beijing. According to the French consul in Hong Kong, Gaston Ernest Liébert (1866-1929), a major player for the intelligence services coordinated by Indochina's political affairs bureau,^[2] Vietnamese revolutionaries shared Germany's objectives (i.e. France's defeat) and consequently had to be considered either enemies or traitors.

The French authorities were not entirely mistaken: Phan Boi Choi himself confirmed that contact had been made between Vietnamese nationalists and German and Austrian diplomats. From his cell in a Chinese prison (he had been captured by authorities in Canton, at the behest of French authorities in Hanoi), he wrote that he had received a secret note from German and Austrian ministers, promising

support of the Vietnamese revolutionary cause and confirming the revolutionaries' receipt of the considerable sum of over 10,000 Ticals (approximately 55,000 Euros).^[3]

The Destruction of the Duy Tan League

Immediately prior to the start of the war in Europe, Vietnamese revolutionaries launched several attacks against positions in Tonkin, manned by both French and indigenous forces.

All of these attempts proved to be in vain and led to many arrests. Faced with this recrudescence of armed opposition, on 28 March 1915, the new governor of Indochina, Ernest Roume (1858-1941), declared a state of siege in Tonkin. This proclamation was in fact illegal, for the *conseil de guerre* convened to declare the state of siege could only technically be called upon in instances where French troops faced outside enemy fire (while this was an internal colonial insurgency). Yet its concrete consequence was that prisoners taken during the 1914-1915 raids faced military courts with no possibility of appeal. Civilian justice was set aside and a certain Captain Billès described as follows the charges faced by the accused:

“I received files on plots against the security of the state, crimes intending to disrupt the state by civil war, illegal used of armed force, devastation and public pillaging, crimes of treason and espionage, crimes covered under articles 87, 91, 92 and 93 of the penal code, modified for Annamese people by articles 203 and 204 of the code of military justice.”^[4]

Each of these charges, or nearly all of them, carried the death sentence when they took place in time of war. One month later, on 28 April, Captain Billès, representing the Ministry of War from Indochina, sought twenty-eight death penalties and ten sentences of forced labour in perpetuity. Two other Vietnamese were sentenced to death for a separate attack on Phu To Quan. [Siam](#) and China's entry into the war on the Entente side, respectively in July and August 1917, strongly contributed to neutralizing the Duy Tan League. Phan Boi Chau was already being held captive in China, and between April 1914 and June 1915, most of the League's other prominent members were apprehended by French and British authorities.

However, Vietnamese nationalists did not simply give up after this string of arrests; some rose up even after internment. A major revolt erupted at the Thai Nguyen penal establishment in Tonkin on 31 August 1917. Morale among the Vietnamese guards was already low, and they rallied to the cause of interned Duy Tan insurgent Luong Lap Nam and two of his comrades. A massive escape ensued. A band of four hundred of these escapees armed with firearms then destroyed part of the provincial capital. A column of colonial troops and indigenous guards were called upon to quell the uprising. Bitter fighting continued over several months; only in December was the band defeated.

The Recruitment of “Volunteers”

Starting in 1915, the French war effort's manpower needs rose significantly. Although racial

hierarchies and a belief in the French equivalent of “martial races” initially meant that the recruitment onus fell on North and [West Africa](#), soon the recruitment campaign came to encompass other colonies like Indochina and Madagascar.

Indochina’s initial contribution was financial: 381 million gold francs (the equivalent of 997 million Euros) were expedited to the motherland for the war effort. This tally constitutes roughly 60 percent of all colonial contributions, excepting Algeria (which was not technically a colony but rather a series of départements), a staggering burden. Indochina also supplied France with some 340,000 tons of raw materials, which amounted to 34 percent of the supplies from all French colonies — this in spite of shipping shortages and the new threat posed by submarines.

In addition, “volunteer” soldiers and labourers were sent to France beginning in 1915, when some forty [Indochinese workers](#) disembarked at the port of Marseille.^[5] Thereupon, they were assigned to the aviation camp of Pont-Long. By the end of the year, roughly 4,000 Indochinese workers resided in France. By the end of 1916, there were 100,000 Indochinese on metropolitan French soil, divided evenly between 50,000 soldiers (indigenous troops, known in French as *tirailleurs*) and 50,000 workers. Indochinese troops were divided into seventeen battalions. 1,548 Indochinese died in battle.

In the second half of 1915 and the first part of the following year, campaigns for raising “volunteer” recruits from Indochina intensified. Although recruitment efforts generally stopped short of explicit force, coercion, bribery, and embezzlement were present in many instances.

Mandarins displayed considerable zeal in recruiting, no doubt in an effort to earn the favour of colonial officials. They used strong-arm tactics to convince young Vietnamese men who were reticent to leave. The reticence was at least partly culturally motivated: attachment to one’s home and a reluctance to leave the land of one’s ancestors were hallmarks of Vietnamese culture. (Many wealthy families managed to avoid having their offspring sent to France, arranging for agricultural workers or sharecroppers to go in their sons’ places.)

These recruitments, featuring various degrees of coercion, provoked greater and greater resentment over time. This, in turn, spilled over into unrest, most notably in Cochinchina. In this southern part of Vietnam, hostility towards recruitment would take the form of actions carried out by secret societies in 1916.

Secret Societies in Cochinchina

The Duy Tan League was aided in its efforts by two secret societies. The Nghia Hoa Doan society (the Peace and Duty Society) had been introduced to Cochinchina by Chinese immigrants loyal to the Ming dynasty (which ruled China from 1368 to 1644). Initially, the society’s activities had revolved around attempts to restore the Ming and chase out their successors, the Qing. Vietnamese adherents to the cause had been channeled into another chapter known as Thien Dia Hoi (Heaven and Earth). Meanwhile, in its struggle against the Qing, the Peace and Duty Society had drawn close

to Sun Yat-sen's Guomindang, and had played a part in the 1911 revolution.

The Duy Tan League, which was close to the Guomindang, thereby had access to the funds raised by both secret societies in Cochinchina. It had also infiltrated and coordinated the actions of the Vietnamese branch, Heaven and Earth. Consequently, in Cochinchina, both the Chinese Peace and Duty Society and the Vietnamese Heaven and Earth were won over to the Duy Tan revolutionary cause. French intelligence seems to have altogether missed these underground movements and connections. The authorities saw in the growing unrest of 1916 merely as the actions of a few isolated revolutionaries operating for Duy Tan itself.

On 24 January 1916 in Bien Hoa, colonial authorities were busily recruiting for the war in Europe. The Heaven and Earth society seized the opportunity to harangue the crowd, which then turned on the notables. The provincial head intervened, which led to the arrest of a few agitators, but the next day, those arrested mutinied, seized firearms, and formed a gang of some fifty insurgents, who went about pillaging a village, before killing one European and one indigenous guard. The group was dismantled when gendarmes and troops were sent in.

Following an inquest, Governor General Roume extended to Cochinchina the state of siege that already existed in Tonkin. At the end of January 1916, in Ben Tre, an indigenous canton chief arrested several members of the Heaven and Earth organization. The prosecutor in charge of the case noticed similarities to the 1913 revolts, leading him to suspect would-be emperor Phan Xich Long (1893-1916), also known as Phan Phat San, who would be demystified, arrested, and incarcerated for his role in the 1913 troubles. Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly describe Phan Phat San as a magician, and "an alleged descendent of Ham Nghi (who had been overthrown by the French in 1885) and the Ming dynasty who proclaimed himself emperor."^[6]

At this time, information trickling into French authorities pointed to troubles in various regions. Gendarmes and indigenous guards, dispatched to different parts of the south on 2 and 3 February observed several dissidents waving red flags bearing the inscription of the Heaven and Earth society. Troops were sent in to reassure the population; they made some 150 arrests. Those apprehended were immediately dragged before military courts.

On 12 February 1916, a group of 130 armed men attacked the Saigon prison in which Phan Phat San was held. The guards were killed and several gendarmes wounded. Simultaneously, unrest began to sweep across Cambodia. The massive recruitment of "volunteers" was beginning to show its negative side-effects. The similarities with the events of 1913 was by now completely established. One of the lessons learned by colonial authorities was the need to completely reform the methods and organization of the political police in Indochina. More immediately, it was feared that the scope of repression — more than seventy capital punishments — might give the impression of colonial vulnerability.

The Rise of the Political Affairs Bureau

Following the fiasco of the 1913 uprising, in April 1916 the administrator of civil services at the Political Affairs Bureau in Hanoi drafted two voluminous and important reports chronicling the parallel histories of what he referred to as the Annamese Revolutionary Party (i.e. the Duy Tan League) and of the secret societies of Cochinchina. The reports triggered the complete overhaul of both the Political Affairs Bureau and the police. The Political Affairs Bureau became the umbrella organization for both police and intelligence services: Police forces were amalgamated into the *Police Sûreté* service, headed by a *Service central de renseignement* — an intelligence organization — that collected and coordinated, then dispatched, the totality of information gathered both within the Indochinese Union and without, in China, Siam or Japan, via consular services, as well as in France through nascent surveillance organizations in charge of policing the 100,000 Indochinese present on metropolitan French soil.

The revamped Political Affairs Bureau rapidly finished off the decapitation of the Duy Tan League and succeeded in winning over some of its remaining cadres in a bid to promote the new colonial policy of association dear to Albert Sarraut, who returned to Indochina in 1917 after an absence of three years. Thus, several cadres, including Nguyen Ba Trac (1881-1946) (aka Cu Trac), Phan Ba Ngoc, the son of Phan Dinh Phuong, and even Phan Boi Chau, contacted clandestinely in China by Victor Néron, a special operative for the *Sûreté*, were successfully “converted” or “won over” to “Franco-Annamese collaboration.” After having convinced Phan Boi Chau himself of the merits of Sarraut’s policy and of the “enlightenment” of French colonialism, Néron even got the old revolutionary to draft a book on Franco-Annamese collaboration. A little later, Sarraut would go so far as to depict colonialism as a servitude of the colonizer towards the colonized, a kind of white man’s burden.^[7]

Propaganda Mouthpieces

In fact, the war provided new weapons and instruments with which to buttress imperial power. In addition to physically eliminating its main antagonist, the Duy Tan League, the war also justified implementing a new “extraordinary” justice system (invoking the state of emergency), then the beginnings of preventative actions, tied to the new policy of association. This, in turn, brought about a fresh new colonial propaganda campaign.

The policy of association and the accompanying [propaganda](#) covered for political repression. Indigenous elites had to be won over. Peasants living in rural settings that up to then had been spared revolutionary activities now had to be convinced of the “advantages of colonialism.”^[8] Within the Political Affairs Bureau, a team comprised of Vietnamese intellectuals was assembled. Many of them were contacts established through the research organization *Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) prior to the war.

In July 1917, Louis Marty (*Direction des Affaires politiques de l'Indochine*) and two of these Vietnamese intellectuals, Pham Quynh and Nguyen Ba Trac, founded the journal *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind). Sponsored by Sarraut and by the ruling emperor in Hue, the journal did not

dissimulate its ties to the colonial Political Affairs Bureau. On the cover of the first issue, above the journal's title, appeared the phrase "French Information." The journal was available in three formats: *chu nom* (Vietnamese in Chinese characters), *quoc ngu* (Romanized Vietnamese characters), and French. The journal's avowed goal was to facilitate instruction across the land. It proclaimed that if the people were educated, then the country would be stable, and its people would no longer be tempted by revolutionary and foreign siren calls. It tended to reject contributions from authors trained only in the French culture. Its goal was to generate a literary, intellectual, and even political current that would be specifically Vietnamese, one capable of supporting the French policy of association.

In reality, *Nam Phong* was also created in response to the failure of earlier propaganda efforts waged at the root of the problem, in China, by French diplomatic officials. At the time, print propaganda was still very important, as radio use was not yet widespread. The control of information sources emanating from large press consortiums like Reuters, reprinted in the columns of Chinese newspapers, proved crucial for the French war effort. Although the majority of Chinese were illiterate at the time of the war, the press nevertheless carried considerable weight.

In 1917, the government general of Indochina and the French legation in Beijing decided to launch a weekly Chinese language in Shanghai titled *Ngeou Tchan Zhi Bao* (The Truth about the War in Europe) in order to counteract [German propaganda](#). The print run was set at 10,000 copies, and following early successes, it rose to 85,000 copies. This publication was distributed gratis to members of Chinese chambers of commerce. Also under the impulse of Louis Marty, the government general supported the publication in China of 5,000 copies of an *Histoire de la Guerre* (History of the War).

Germany had also initially outpaced France in the audiovisual realm, a significant medium for influencing illiterate populations. However, through Pathé Phono Cinéma China, a local branch of Pathé Frères, which controlled 90 percent of Chinese theatres in 1916, France succeeded in neutralizing this advantage. Pathé China received films directly from Paris and London, which it then played in Beijing and Shanghai, as well as in other cinemas in major Chinese urban centers.

Conclusion

Phan Boi Chau's memoirs illustrate the paradox presented by the destruction the Duy Tan League at a time when it might otherwise have thrived, given the mobilization of French forces in Europe against a mortal enemy. Indeed, the European war's implacable dimension justified the use of new expeditious repressive techniques. Far from weakening the colonial power, the world war actually presented new weapons for its arsenal. The façade of a modern legal state erected by the colonial power, in opposition to the supposedly archaic and unjust precolonial order, collapsed over the course of the war. It was replaced by brute force, the same sort of force that had once been deployed in the original conquest of Indochina. The military lies at the genesis of conquest, and each time a colonial state feels jeopardized, it relies almost instinctively on a repressive apparatus, especially when the colonizers are so badly outnumbered.

What were these weapons in the case that concerns us? First of all, measures decreeing a state of siege in Tonkin, then Cochinchina, with all of their consequences for trials and the justice system more generally. These new extraordinary measures prevented any possible recourse and enabled the rapid liquidation of revolutionaries. Next, the entry into the war of Japan, China, and Siam on the Entente side stripped the Duy Tan League of all of its rear bases. Finally, the Entente powers passed extradition agreements among themselves so as to facilitate the transfer of revolutionaries captured in their respective colonies. All of this contributed to annihilating the second generation of Vietnamese nationalists.

The First World War also provided the colonial power with new prevention techniques and new tools of political repression. In addition to the information services honed prior to the war, many new devices and instruments were developed during the war itself. Chief among those were new anthropometric *fichage* or cataloguing and indexing techniques, as well as new scientific policing breakthroughs, now used side by side with older proven police methods. These transformations led to greater colonial control over the political arena.

Propaganda took on a new capital importance in this era as well. France needed Indochina, its resources in men and [raw materials](#), in order to pursue the war. It therefore made promises and even formulated some concessions to the populations it dominated. That message, in the form of a policy of association anticipating a brighter future complete with some democratic reforms, was first inculcated to traditional native elites, as well as to youth being trained in Western knowledge.

After the war, some parts of the press, even the French-language [press](#), would remind the colonial authorities of the promises they had formulated in the darkest days of the war. Indeed, this French-language press, unlike its Vietnamese-language counterpart, was not subject to intense colonial [censorship](#). It would be led by highly politicized new young newspaper directors, like Bui Quang Chieu and Nguyen Phan Long, the leaders of the new constitutionalist party. The colonial authorities would have to take stock of this new state of affairs. In this sense, the colonial propaganda disseminated during the Great War would also have important consequences for the post-war, insofar as it was deemed important to keep one's word about colonial reforms. The alternative would have been the emboldening of more radical voices.

One is tempted to conclude that the First World War also helped the Vietnamese nationalist cause. Indeed, a new generation of revolutionary leaders would fill the void left by Duy Tan. This would mark a change in kind and in degree. Indeed, despite using bombs and featuring some neo-anarchists in its ranks, Duy Tan had been relatively traditional in its techniques and in some ways calls to mind the struggle of the literati — this despite the clear republican line advocated by its cadres. It was, moreover, essentially cut off from the peasantry and from the labouring classes. Its disappearance opened the door for a far more organized new generation. These new revolutionaries also boasted solid staging areas either in Moscow, or in China (after the Guomindang came to power). They would learn from Duy Tan's failure, and would attempt to penetrate popular consciences by discussing agrarian reform, and not merely the nationalist struggle. The emergence of these new political

parties, including communists and nationalists, would force the colonial authorities in turn to develop a new round of repressive tools.

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Notes

1. ↑ Fourniau, Charles: Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale (1858-1914), Paris 2002.
2. ↑ See Morlat, Patrice: Les Affaires politiques de l'Indochine (1895-1923). Les grands commis. Du savoir au pouvoir, Paris 1996.
3. ↑ Phan Boi Chau: Mémoires, Paris 1969.
4. ↑ Archives nationales d'outre-mer (Aix) (hereafter ANOM), Indochine sous série 7F carton 49, Captain Billès to the head of the Affaires politiques, Hanoi, 5 October 1915.
5. ↑ Morlat, Patrice: Indochine années vingt. Le Balcon de la France sur le Pacifique. Tome 1. Une page de l'histoire de France en Extrême-Orient, Paris 2001.
6. ↑ Brocheux, Pierre / Hémerly, Daniel: Indochina. An Ambiguous Colonization, Berkeley 2009, p. 292.
7. ↑ Sarraut, Albert: Grandeur et servitude coloniale, Paris 1931.
8. ↑ Hanoi prosecutor Michel declared during the Gilbert Chieu trial in 1908 that colonialism brought about "colonial welfare." It is noteworthy that some ninety-five years later, some French members of parliament similarly tried to pass a law that followed much the same lines, mandating the teaching of the "positive side of colonialism." On this question, see Bertrand, Romain: Mémoires d'empires. Controverses autour du fait colonial, Clamecy 2006.

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