

A Study of the August Revolution of 1945 and its Impact on Colonial French and Japanese Rule in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The August Revolution of 1945 posed a significant challenge to colonial French and Japanese rule in Vietnam. This paper aims to examine the extent of this challenge and its impact on the dynamics of power in the region. Through an analysis of historical events and primary sources, the paper seeks to shed light on the revolutionary forces at play and their role in shaping the trajectory of Vietnam's struggle for independence. The August Revolution of 1945 challenged French and Japanese colonial rule through long-term planning, internal support, OSS influence, and the establishment of an independent government by the Viet Minh guerrilla troops. The Vietnamese people took advantage of the power vacuum left by the Japanese coup d'état against French officials in Indochina. This, combined with the determination and anticolonial spirit of the Vietnamese people, led to the success of the August Revolution. The Viet Minh further consolidated their power by garnering support from the rural population and receiving military aid and training from the United States OSS.

Introduction

Vietnam is a country known for its rebellious people, from the Trung sisters' uprising against the Han dynasty's domination of Vietnam (New World Encyclopedia, 2022) to the resistance against Mongol invasion (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2016), and most prominently, French colonization. When considering the success of each uprising and revolution against foreign rule, the August Revolution was one of the most significant events that marked the turning point for Vietnam's independence.

Vietnam has been under colonial French rule since the late 1800s. Napoleon III decided to invade Vietnam in 1857, with an interest in expanding overseas markets and the French share of Asian territories (Buttinger, Joseph, and William J Duiker, 2019). Under French colonial rule, Vietnam was governed as part of French Indochina, including Cambodia and Laos. They introduced modern infrastructure, such as railways and roads, and established a centralized administrative system (Ladenburg, Thomas, 2007). Prior to the August Revolution, the French administration held complete control over key aspects of governance, economy, and society. In 1897, French rule was firmly established in Vietnam under the governance of Gov.-Gen. Paul Doumer (Buttinger, Joseph, and William J Duiker, 2016). At every level of administration, the Vietnamese bureaucracy lost its influence as it became subject to direct control from French authorities, and Vietnamese emperors were removed (Cady, 1996). Vietnamese workers have attempted to host strikes and demonstrations throughout French colonial rule to challenge their systemic exploitation. For instance, the Yen Bai uprising of 1930, which was part of the Nghe-Tinh Soviet Movement organized by Viet Nam Quoc Dan (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) aimed to overthrow the French while simultaneously promoting Communist-led nationalism (Bernal, Martin, 1981). Yet wasn't until 1945, through the August Revolution that the Viet Minh (Central Committee of the Communist Party) led by the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, successfully

toppled the French and Japanese colonization in Vietnam. However, after France fell under Germany's occupation in 1940, Japan took advantage of the French weakness and stationed troops in French colonies and Northern Vietnam before they expanded their colonization over the rest of Indochina ever since 1941 (Alpha History, 2018). During the Japanese occupation of Vietnam in 1941, they made assurances to the Vichy French government about respecting French sovereignty over their colonies in Indochina. Under Vichy's control, the French colonial administration, including its army of "native" troops, remained intact and continued to govern France's Indochina colonies as they had before. The Japanese considered this approach to be the most efficient and least burdensome way to control their new territory, as it required minimal involvement from the Japanese Army and allowed their troops to focus on other engagements. However, this soon changed when a Japanese coup d'etat successfully ousted the French from their administrative control and arrested them as prisoners in a short span of under 24 hours in March 1945 (Bartholomew-Feis, Dixee R, 2006). The Japanese troops launched Operation Meigo, an attack against the French armed forces on all strategic locations in Indochina. The collapse marked the complete downfall of the long-standing French colonial system that had endured for almost eighty-seven years. Thus, to determine the impact of the August Revolution on French colonial rule, it is important to also consider its influence on Japanese rule since Vietnam was under Japanese rule in 1945 instead of French colonial rule. Thus, this essay will elaborate on the research question: To what extent did the August Revolution of 1945 significantly challenge colonial French and Japanese Rule in Vietnam? It is worth investigating this question to highlight the effort of the Vietnamese fight for independence and determine the legitimacy of the revolution. A variety of primary and secondary sources such as biographies, journal articles, selected writings, and websites, will be used and analyzed to answer the research question. Both primary and secondary sources must be used to evaluate historical events to prevent one-sided arguments and biases, as primary sources are first-hand accounts or documents that offer direct evidence and insights to support secondary sources as evidence for interpretation and analysis.

Viet Minh's Long-Term Leadership & Planning

Some historians and anti-communists attributed the success of his leadership in the August Revolution to mere luck based on historical and international context (Khanh, H, 1971). At the end of World War II, colonial powers like France and Japan had weakened tremendously compared to the beginning of the war. As the Japanese coup d'etat overthrew the French administration in March 1945, the Vietnamese troops only had to face one enemy instead of two. This provided the Vietnamese revolution an opportunity to rise and gain power. The Japanese killed, arrested, and imprisoned all French officials, taking over administrative buildings like radio stations, banks, and industries (Hammer, 1948). They also gave government positions formerly held by French officials to the Vietnamese, placing the Nguyen Dynasty emperor, Bao Dai to cooperate with Japan and declare "independence" from France (Worthing, 2001). After Bao Dai declared independence from France, Vietnam experienced a period known as *doc-lap banh ve*, also known as "fake independence", as Japan did not acknowledge Vietnam as an independent country but continued to hold administrative control over the country, ignoring Vietnam's Prime Minister Tran Trong Kim and its newly formed government (Wise, 1991). It is important to note that the Vietnamese were in a favorable position during World War II. The opposing forces of the Japanese and French weakened each other and became susceptible to resistance. Moreover, Japan's defeat was an ideal chance for Vietnam to retaliate and claim authority. While these advantageous circumstances formed on a larger scale, it is essential to acknowledge that achieving victory also required suitable internal conditions and effective planning within Vietnam itself. Although international context does play a role in the success of the August Revolution, the Viet Minh's role in planning coordinated actions and fostering unity among nationalist factions show-cases their effective leadership in guiding the revolution toward its goals of reuniting Vietnam as an independent nation, free from French and Japanese imperialism. (Thai Quang Trung, 1985).

Planning for The August Revolution could be dated back to May 1941 with the establishment of the Viet Minh Front. A Vietnamese man named Nguyen Sinh Cung, later known as Nguyen Ai Quoc and Ho Chi Minh developed anti-colonial sentiments and embraced Communist ideology. Having traveled and worked in various countries, including France (Pierre Brocheux, 2007), Ho Chi Minh was exposed to ideas of nationalism, socialism, and anti-colonialism, which shaped his political beliefs and aspirations. He founded the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930 and an umbrella group called the “Viet Minh Independence Movement” in 1941, hoping that Communist principles would provide a framework for achieving Vietnamese independence and social equality (Evgenii Vasilevich, 1999). His leadership and organizing skills helped unite various groups in the resistance movement against both French and Japanese occupiers. He understood that to gain popularity and unite nationalist forces, it was necessary to call for the attention of the oppressed working class and lay out the principles to achieve the goal of overthrowing the French government. In one of his selected writings (1920-1969) on the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party, he wrote: “The Indochinese Communist Party has been founded. It is the Party of the working class. It will help the proletariat lead the revolution waged for the sake of all oppressed and exploited people...” (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2003). He then proceeded to include slogans such as “To overthrow French imperialism and Vietnamese feudalism and reactionary bourgeoisie” and “To make Indochina completely independent”, putting Vietnamese independence and workers' rights as the main objectives. By 1944, he established a base territory (Can-cu Dia) and armed forces with 34 armed fighters and a few stolen rifles and bombs set up in mountainous regions in Cao Bang near Chinese borders (Khanh, Huynh Kim, 1971). Two guerrilla forces the National Salvation Forces (Cuu-quoc-quan) united with the Vietnamese Propaganda Liberation Forces (Viet Nam tuyen Truyen Giao Phong) to form the Vietnamese Liberation Forces (Viet nam giai-phong quan) and recruit formerly local authorities and French militia once loyal to the French. The recruitment of French militia significantly weakened the hold of the French colonial administration and helped the Viet Minh guerrilla troops to reach 3000 men. After the Japanese coup, the Viet Minh held a conference in Ha Noi between the 15th and 20th of April, 1945, outlining a plan against the Japanese occupation of Vietnam through guerrilla warfare tactics across Vietnam (Truong, Chinh, 1971). They created a resolution that was published in the Nhan Dan journal, establishing 7 war zones and advocating for propaganda campaigns to call for a general insurrection against the Japanese by targeting both Vietnamese citizens and Japanese soldiers. Firstly, the Viet Minh published the “Resistance against Japan” (Kháng Nhật) newspaper to spread their political agenda (Truong, Chinh, 1971). Propaganda was commonly conveyed through speeches delivered in factories, schools, markets, and public streets. As a result, more Vietnamese became involved in political strikes and discussions. According to Ngay Nay's journal of 1945, “after the brief storm of bullets of March 9, political parties, groups, and associations shot up like mushrooms” (Khanh, 1971). Although some of these political strikes were spontaneous and unorganized, they introduced the common Vietnamese people to become familiar with revolutionary activities and prepared them for the upcoming revolution. Viet Minh's distribution of propaganda campaigns and recruitment of former French sympathizers to its guerrilla troops, coupled with the power vacuum of the Japanese coup d'état marked Vietnam's path to significantly challenge the French and Japanese colonial rule.

Population Support & OSS Influence

Widespread discontent with French and Japanese colonial rule fueled Vietnamese nationalism and determination to end French and Japanese colonial rule, which contributed to the August Revolution in 1945. Diplomat Bui Minh Dung, estimated that under Japanese control, the Vietnamese people experienced a massive famine called the Famine of 1945, approximately 1 million to 2 million people perished as a result (Gunn, March 2020). The Great Famine of 1944 to 1945 had various origins, according to different historians. Historian Pham Cao Duong attributes the famine to crop failures during the years 1943 to 1944, as well as the lack of dike maintenance after the US bombing of the north to disrupt communications between Japanese forces in August

and September 1944. He also highlights the compulsory sale of rice to the state under Japanese rule as a major burden on the people. Even in regions where food was scarce, the people had to supply rice at low prices. Ngo Vinh Long affirms that the forced sale of rice quotas imposed by the French colonial administration, along with the use of rice to make alcohol, contributed to starvation deaths. Brocheux and Hémery suggest that the crisis had demographic origins, with a rapidly growing population and uncertain grain production (Geoffrey, 2011). Historian Nguyen Khac Vien stated that the famine played a crucial role in setting the stage for the upcoming revolution, as the Viet Minh carried out operations to target Japanese granaries and rice storage facilities, breaking open rice stores to prevent starvation and urging peasants to oppose the forced sale of rice. They framed the famine as a joint oppressive action by the French and Japanese to physically eliminate the Vietnamese population. Interestingly, the famine in the northern region provided an ideal platform for the Viet Minh to highlight the deficiencies of the colonial regime. The Viet Minh not only utilized the famine as a tool for propaganda but also mobilized the population to seize the food supplies stored by the French and under Japanese control since March 1945. Consequently, this led to increased support from the population, generating resentment towards both French and Japanese occupiers. Although the revolution resonated strongly with the Vietnamese population's ideals of self-determination and anticolonialism, it struggled to gain international support and recognition. In 1945 or at the end of World War II, the global political landscape was complex and unpredictable. At the time, Vietnam based its economy on agriculture and there was an inadequate supply of machinery or weapons to fight back the oppression (Cima, Ronald J, and Library Of Congress, 1989). Ho Chi Minh first reached out to the United States for assistance in 1919, knowing that his small country needed allies to become independent from France. However, it wasn't until World War II, that Ho Chi Minh successfully connected with American officials and worked with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to provide information about the weather and Japanese troops (Bergin, 2018). Later, his Viet Minh guerrillas joined forces with the OSS in July 1945 to establish the OSS Deer Team to disrupt supply lines and transportation of Japanese occupation. Alison Kent Thomas, an Officer of the Strategic Service and a leader of the Deer Team provided machine guns, a guerrilla team of 50 to 100 men, and military training to the Viet Minh guerrillas (Currey, 2005). After gaining popular support, the Viet Minh achieved their goal of establishing People's Revolutionary Committees throughout the northern rural regions (Tønnesson, 2009). These committees were established to assume control of local governance once the Viet Minh initiated the August Revolution. The support from the Vietnamese population and the American OSS eventually contributed to the effective dismantling of Japanese forces. As August approached, it was clear that Japan was losing the war, Ho Chi Minh recognized the subsequent power vacuum in Vietnam and took action right on the day Japan surrendered, on August 13, 1945. On August 13, 1945, Viet Minh's "Provisional Committee of Liberated Zone" called for general uprisings across the country (Khanh, Huynh Kim, 1971). Local "People Revolutionary Committees" and the Viet Minh in North and Central provinces would begin to host mass demonstrations, strikes, and uprisings across major cities like Hanoi on August 19. Hue and Da Nang on August 23. The Viet Minh and OSS successfully disarmed Japanese forces and marked Japanese surrender after declaring provisional administration in Saigon, on August 24, 1945. These nationwide protests showcased the Vietnamese people's desire for independence, popular mobilization, and the reunification of Vietnam under the Viet Minh party (Hanoi: Van Su Dia, 1957). This victory and seizure of power from the Japanese which challenged the established colonial authority's grip on governance, could not be possible without the support within the country and internationally.

Establishment of an Independent Government

The August Revolution led to the establishment of an alternative leadership and governance structure that defied French and Japanese authority. This establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh's leadership provided an alternative to French colonial governance, which challenged the narrative of French and Japanese indispensability in governing the country. The Declaration of Independence, read aloud by Ho Chi

Minh himself, served as a rejection of French colonial rule and a declaration of Vietnamese sovereignty. As Ho Chi Minh wrote in his declaration speech:

“We, members of the Provisional Government, representing the whole Vietnamese people, declare that from now on we break off all relations of a colonial character with France; we repeal all the international obligation that France has so far subscribed to on behalf of Vietnam and we abolish all the special rights the French have unlawfully acquired in our Fatherland. The whole Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country” (Ho Chi Minh, Selected Works (Hanoi, 1960-1962), Vol. 3.)

Ho Chi Minh was also mentioned in his Declaration of Independence. However, the Viet Minh had replaced the fundamental control of the French, they fought against the Japanese, not the French in the August Revolution, “The truth is that we have wrested our independence from the Japanese and not from the French. The French have fled, the Japanese have capitulated, Emperor Bao Dai has abdicated” (Ho, chi Minh, 1945).

The formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam indicated that there was an organized leadership ready to take control and provide governance independently from French authority, and the Vietnamese people with their desire for independence would be willing to protect their country at all costs against the French endeavor to reconquer the country. The emergence of an alternative leadership posed a direct challenge to the French and Japanese colonial administration's control and governance. Following the August Revolution and Declaration of Independence, French officials ordered troops to attack Saigon and target Viet Minh strongholds in September of the same year. (Jennifer Llewellyn, Jim Southey, Steve Thompson, 2019). They also proceeded to harm civilians through robbery, murder, and rape (Donaldson, Gary, 1996). The objective was to suppress the Viet Minh movement by eliminating its members. In response, just a few days later, the Viet Minh retaliated by killing 200 Europeans within and outside of the city. This act led British forces stationed in India to send additional troops as reinforcements.

By October 1945, these collective efforts had significantly weakened and diminished the presence of Viet Minh throughout southern Vietnam. This did not stop Ho Chi Minh from sending a letter to President Harry S. Truman of the United States urging him, along with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Premier Stalin, and Premier Attlee, to raise their voices at the United Nations in opposition against France's reoccupation of Vietnam. Accusing France of betrayal and deceiving the Allies by surrendering Indochina to Japan during World War II, he emphasized that it was unjust for France to reclaim control over Vietnam (Ho, Chi Minh, 1995). He also asked for American assistance in securing Vietnam's freedom from French control and support to ensure that negotiations between France and Vietnam aligned with the principles outlined in the Atlantic and San Francisco Charter. Harry Truman left Ho Chi Minh's telegram unanswered among several others received according to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Ho Chi Minh's continuous effort to ensure Vietnam's independence from colonial rule and international recognition of Vietnam as an independent state demonstrates the significance and impact of the revolution. The August Revolution was the first revolution that temporarily deposed foreign colonial rule in Vietnam. It marked the beginning of a momentum towards independence. Rather than fading away, this momentum grew stronger and continued to ignite resistance against colonial powers over the next decades. The enduring impact of the August Revolution can be seen through Vietnam's relentless struggle for self-governance, especially during the First Indochina War against the French. The ideals of sovereignty and independence that emerged from the revolution continued to persist as guiding principles and fueled a prolonged movement against colonialism. This ongoing resistance eventually led to the liberation of Vietnam from both French and Japanese rule in 1954 after the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The August Revolution's ability to inspire and motivate a long-term struggle through the ideals of independence played a significant role in challenging French and Japanese colonial rule in Vietnam.

Conclusion

The August Revolution of 1945 significantly challenged French and Japanese colonial rule through the long-term planning of Viet Minh guerrilla troops, popular support, and the establishment of an independent government. It is arguable that the Vietnamese people were placed in an advantageous position at the end of World War II and used the Japanese coup d'état against the French officials in Indochina as a power vacuum to seize power, which also significantly contributed to the success of the August Revolution. Yet, without a doubt, the Vietnamese people did carry a heavy spirit of determination and anticolonialism as seen through their effort to organize political strikes and distribute propaganda campaigns to ignite the revolutionary mindset. The Viet Minh further consolidated their power through their garnering of support from the common population in the rural areas and the United States OSS. They recognized the widespread discontent of the French and Japanese rule during the famine of 1945 and used this as a way to encourage the Vietnamese population to rebel against the Japanese administration. However, Ho Chi Minh soon realized that internal support was not sufficient to challenge the colonial power. He then turned to the United States for assistance and received a considerable amount of military aid and training from the OSS Deer Team. This combination of internal and external support eventually led to the success of the August Revolution in dismantling the Japanese forces and the declaration of independence by the Vietnam government under the leadership of Uncle Ho. Vietnam's declaration of independence and the success of the August Revolution posed a direct challenge to French and Japanese governance as they showcased Vietnam's ability to protect and regain its own country through persistence and perseverance to fight against foreign threats. Many factors played a role in challenging French and colonial rule in Vietnam, but the August Revolution had, to an extent, caused a temporary termination of both French and Japanese colonialism and declared Vietnam as an independent state. All of this could not have been possible without the support of the Vietnamese people, the OSS, the international context, and the long-term planning of the Viet Minh guerrillas.

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