

Displacement of People in French Indochina Following WWII

WWII was responsible for the displacement of many ethnic groups such as Jews, Germans, Nazis, Slavs, Americans, and those from French Indochina including countries Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In the European theater it is clear that the aftermath of the war directly forced millions of people to leave their homes, becoming refugees and immigrants. Yet, displacement resulting from WWII was less substantial in areas other than the Eastern Front including French Indochina, specifically Vietnam. Vietnamese involvement in WWII may seem less substantial, yet the country's subordination with the war effort was critical, and following WWII their efforts had shaped the independence of French Indochina. This paper will introduce Vietnam's impact in WWII and focus on how Japanese and French colonization post WWII directly contributed to the independence of the Vietnam rather than the mass displacement which other ethnic groups faced.

Vietnam falls within the label of French Indochina because of the French victory over China in the Sino-French war, and has remained a colony of France from the early 1800s-1954. The French took an interest in Vietnam to gain more influence in Southeast Asia, to exploit resources such as rice, tea, and rubber, and to establish a plantation economy where these resources could be produced at small expenses¹. In the beginning of WWII, Nazi occupation weakened the French. France feared losing their control over Vietnam, leading Vietnam to coexist with Japan as well. Japan took an interest in Vietnam because it would allow them to close off China's southern border so they could limit China's supply of weapons and materials, as well as establish

¹ "Vietnam during World War 2," Pacific Atrocities Education, n.d., <https://www.pacificatrocities.org/blog/vietnam-during-world-war-2#:~:text=Vietnam%20was%20mostly%20used%20as,known%20as%20the%20Vietnam%20Famine.>

strength in Southeast Asia to combat western capitalists². Japan's hold over Vietnam strengthened as the French dealt with Nazi occupiers and although it seemed as if Japan and France had a mutual imperial hold over Vietnam, there was substantial tension and competition over who is enforcing power.

Vietnam had an extremely unique impact on WWII. Its location could operationally and tactically support the Japanese war effort by serving as a base for the Japanese Army. Troops were stationed near the border of China and Saigon, giving the Japanese an advantage in the Pacific Theater. With a strong footing in the Pacific, Japan could turn its attention to the French Imperial Navy and the US Navy. In *The War With Japan*, Willmott states, "Kaigun planned to use aircraft carriers to neutralize US carriers and", "...deprive the American battle force of deep reconnaissance capability"³ The Japanese army was convinced over their strength over the Allied powers in the Pacific because of their strategic location. They were able to store armor, enhanced weapons, and ammunition as well as rebuild and repair ships. Willmott adds, "...battle would be joined with light forces backed by cruisers and battleships, making two or perhaps three massed torpedo attacks"⁴ The Japanese were able to plan out new formations and incorporate their strategy in battle. The geography of Vietnam helped them determine ways to take advantage of the US and Imperial Navy as they were distracted in the Eastern front by battle planning in the Pacific. While Japan focused on using Vietnam to improve their military force and strategize their attacks, they left a lasting impact on the people of Vietnam through their rule.

² Alpha History, "Japanese Occupation of Vietnam," Vietnam War, June 18, 2018, <https://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/japanese-occupation-of-vietnam/>.

³ H. P. Willmott, *The War with Japan: The Period of Balance, May 1942-October 1943* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). Pg. 5

⁴ Willmott, *The War with Japan: The Period of Balance, May 1942-October 1943*. Pg. 5

Japanese occupation of Vietnam presents an interesting dynamic because of its coexistence with France. Japan was allotted an unlimited number of troops throughout French Indochina while France had about thirty-nine thousand.⁵ Even though the colonial government tried to limit Japanese contact with the Vietnamese people and French colonists out of fear of conflict, it was inevitable that the Japanese would infiltrate Vietnamese cities and towns. The Japanese and French developed a relationship of tolerance with one another where public operations such as restaurants and hospitals became more segregated to maintain peace. Oftentimes this peace would come at the expense of the Vietnamese people. In an article by Chizuru Namba, he presents a quote from a Vietnamese weekly newsletter. It states, "It's a difficult situation for us Vietnamese. If we have social or economic relations with the Japanese, the French consider us traitors or treat us even worse. If we maintain our relations with the French, the Japanese will be suspicious of our hesitation toward them and hold a grudge against us."⁶ For the Vietnamese it was a question of where their loyalty lies. Not only were indigenous Vietnamese people living under conflicting powers, their culture was suffocated and their economy was exploitative which resulted in great distress and frustration.

Living amongst the Japanese came with many cultural difficulties. Communication and enjoying daily life were hard because of the language barrier and the how the Japanese treated the Vietnamese people. Throughout Vietnam, the Japanese language was taught, and it was a way for the Vietnamese to make working and existing in a majority Japanese region easier. Vietnamese students attended Japanese schools, and started to develop relationships with the

⁵ Chizuru Namba, "The French Colonization and Japanese Occupation of Indochina during the Second World War: Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese," September 1, 2019, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jflm788>.

⁶ Namba, "The French Colonization and Japanese Occupation of Indochina during the Second World War: Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese." Pg. 81

Japanese. The Japanese used this growing relationship as a way to turn the Vietnamese people against the French, as they manipulated them into thinking that they were fighting for the greater good of East Asia and that they were working towards independence of French Indochina. A Vietnamese employed by the Japanese Army states, “But the situation changed dramatically.... The Japanese failed to supply us with enough food and began to rudely order us about”⁷ As the war situation worsened for Japan, the treatment of the support troops, including the Vietnamese workers, deteriorated. The change in Japan’s military success contributed to changes in loyalty amongst the Vietnamese people, as well as the ongoing economic decline.

Even with the coexistence with France, both Japan and France were extremely exploitative of the Vietnamese people. For example, “The colonial government made it compulsory for Vietnamese peasants to sell rice directly to them at a fixed, cheaper-than-market price, resulting in severe poverty for the peasants.” Japan saw Vietnam as “another heaven” and “untouched by the war”, its resources and production were critical to the Japanese war effort especially because maritime trade was unstable.⁸ The treatment of Vietnamese workers only led to more of a distrust towards the Japanese, who kept promising independence as a way to justify their actions. Additionally, the Japanese kept promoting independence because they truly feared Vietnamese communists seeking independence of their own. Vietnamese communists were seen as a part of the resistance creating internal conflict amongst the Vietnamese people and any discord amongst the people could contribute to an even more tense relationship with the French. As much as the Japanese were uninterested, their relationship with the French was so essential

⁷ Namba, “The French Colonization and Japanese Occupation of Indochina during the Second World War: Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese.” pg. 87

⁸ Namba, “The French Colonization and Japanese Occupation of Indochina during the Second World War: Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese.” pg. 80

because it allowed Japan to present itself as a partner rather than an aggressor in the eyes of other colonial powers and it made their false promise of independence less suspicious. Japan's resources, diplomacy, geographic advantages, and diversions would be compromised.

Near the end of WWII, the Vietnamese people were weakening due to inconsistency, attempts at resistance, and the pressure to produce for the French and Japanese. Peasants were becoming impoverished as the cost of living, taxes, and limited resources increased. David Elliott states, "Even matches were hard to find", "A nervous rural population jumped at sounds in the night and whispered important affairs to each other for fear that someone was listening"⁹ Describing the Vietnamese as a nervous rural population speaks to the state of anxiety and fear. Elliott also explains that even the colonial government was in a state of unrest as Vietnamese soldiers were afraid of being sent to France to fight.¹⁰ The social unrest and economic exploitation had great effects on the demographic of Vietnam and the displacement of the Vietnamese people.

The decline in the Japanese war effort was evident, as the US became more dominant in the Pacific Theater and as the Vietnamese resistance intensified. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, their control over Vietnam was lost and had to gradually begin withdrawing. The local revolutionary leadership in Vietnam wasn't at its strength either. The communist movement spread and tried to gain support. "Some said that the Communists would take from the rich and give to the poor"¹¹ Propaganda was spread throughout Vietnam about these Communists who made promises of wealth for all which seemed promising to the demographic in Vietnam. The

⁹ David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* pg 33

¹⁰ David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* pg 33

¹¹ David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* pg. 37

hierarchy included landlords who owned the majority of land, rich peasants who could hire laborers for farming, middle peasants who were self-sufficient but not wealthy enough to hire labor, poor peasants, and very poor peasants.¹² It was appealing for the Vietnamese to accept communism, and most Vietnamese people didn't fully understand what it meant and saw it more as something that could bring back structure. Also, groups such as the Viet Minh became popular since they worked towards fighting the French for independence.

The First Indochina war was the determining event in Vietnam's independence. It describes the decolonization of French Indochina and how Communist led groups supported Vietnamese independence. The Viet Minh used guerrilla tactics and extensive knowledge on jungle terrain to defeat the French.¹³ The military structure of the Vietnamese was highly organized, for example their objective of annihilating the enemy's active forces yet never exhausting their own to launch minor insurrections and to seize power at grassroots level, showed the determination of the Viet Minh to fight for independence.¹⁴ Despite the communist resistance, the independence of Vietnam was the dominant end-goal.

The result of the French and Japanese occupation in Vietnam, the Communist resistance, and the violence of the First Indochina war contributed significantly to disorder and turmoil in Vietnam. Yet there is one key principle that has been consistent over the chaos during and after WWII. The Vietnamese people sought structure. Unlike other cultural groups involved in WWII on the Eastern Front, who were clearly and forcefully displaced thousands of miles from their homes and their families, the Vietnamese people were more so displaced within their own country. Following the First Indochina War, tensions and disagreement grew between those who

¹² David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* pg. 39

¹³ Jacques Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China 1945-54*, 1990. Pg. 99

¹⁴ Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China 1945-54*. Pg. 99

supported the Vietnamese Communist movement and those who resisted. But, both groups remained within Vietnam. The groups who were more displaced in respect to the conflict with Vietnam, Japan, and France were Japan and France. Those countries mobilized the most soldiers in order to establish their presence in the Pacific as they fought in the Eastern Front, and as Vietnam was describes before, as “untouched by war” it refers to how Vietnam and the Vietnamese people were not necessarily involved in the war effort in the Eastern Front.

The Vietnamese people showed more acclimation to their oppressors than they had tried to escape. An example was shown when the Vietnamese would learn the Japanese language. They would put themselves in Japanese schools and became proficient enough to understand that there was something suspicious about the promises Japan was making. Since the direct result of becoming more knowledgeable about Japan’s plans was an increase in resistance, it shows that the Vietnamese were more inclined to fight for their own independence than relocate. Yet, their willingness to resist may not have been much of a choice. The Japanese and French exploitation of Vietnamese labor kept the Vietnamese poor and means of travelling were controlled by Japan who were focused on using main ports for their own warships. It would be extremely difficult for those in Vietnam to relocate as immigrants.

The Vietnamese were rooted together in many ways. Religion and tradition pose another reason as to why the Vietnamese were more inclined to fight for independence. For example, Jacques Dalloz states, “There was a proverb, ‘The power of the Emperor stops at the bamboo hedge’”¹⁵ Throughout colonial rule, the Japanese and French didn’t have much of an interest in disrupting the autonomy of Vietnamese villages, they were more interested in what they could

¹⁵ Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China 1945-54*. Pg. 5

take. “Communities were governed by councils of elders.”, “So at the bottom end of the system there were hundreds of villages protected by hedges and sheltered from the sun by fruit trees. At the top”, “...an absolute ruler assisted by a bureaucracy of mandarins ruled overall”¹⁶ Even under colonial rule the Vietnamese maintained a traditional form of governance, “protected by hedges” suggests that these villages were also self-sufficient which increases solidarity and overall shows the resilience of the Vietnamese people.

What is most interesting about the impact of WWII on Vietnam and French Indochina is that it did not necessarily force the Vietnamese people out of their own country. Rather, it promoted union against France and Japan. After being colonized and exploited the Vietnamese people never truly chose to submit and it was helpful that because Vietnam wasn't directly a main front of the WWII, there was no direct displacement of the Vietnamese people as a result. Yet, compared to the countries in the Eastern front, Vietnam was affected very differently by WWII as they never seemed to stop fighting. From WWII to the First Indochina War with additional internal conflicts between communists and communist resistance to the Vietnam war which contributes to the largest amount of displaced Vietnamese people as immigrants and refugees. Therefore, displacement of Vietnamese people as a direct result of WWII was more internal, and less substantial to the greater result of gaining Independence.

¹⁶ Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China 1945-54*. Pg. 5