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# FORUM

 COUNCIL ON SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDIES

A REVIEW OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Summer-Fall 1988

co-published with  
the WILLIAM JOINER Center  
U/Mass, Boston



YALE SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDIES

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ISSN 0735-3855

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*A REVIEW OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE AND SOCIETY*

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Subscription rates: US\$12.00 a year in the U.S.; US\$14.00 a year elsewhere.

Please address all correspondence to

THE VIETNAM FORUM  
Box 13A Yale Station  
New Haven, CT 06520 USA

Printed in the U. S. A.

## A FRENCH DECISION FOR WAR

### French and Vietnamese Decision-Making before the Outbreak of the War in Indochina, December 1946\*

*Stein Tønnesson*

This article, based on research in French, British and American archives, attempts to analyze the decision-making process which led to the first war in Indochina. After a presentation of the main French and Vietnamese decision-makers, it shows how the French in Saigon, as a result of a political crisis in the Cochinchinese Republic, adopted a new and aggressive attitude towards the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. A strategy aimed at breaking the power of the Việt Minh was applied locally without any prior consent from the French government. At the end of November 1946, the French occupied Haiphong. One month later, war broke out in Hanoi.

#### THE DECISION-MAKERS

On the sixth of December 1946, an important American visitor landed at the Gia-lâm airport in Hanoi. Abbot Low Moffat was his name. He directed the Department of State's Southeast Asia Division. In this article he will be our guide, showing the way through the jungle of decision-makers who either initiated or failed to prevent the outbreak of the First Indochina War.

In letters to his wife Moffat described the visit to Hanoi as his first personal experience of an area under tension, with hostilities expected at any time.<sup>1</sup> It was quite a shock to him having to drive into a city with ditches cut across all but the narrow spots in the road, seeing foxholes excavated in the sidewalks, barricades erected at certain points and holes for mines dug at various street intersections. All these preparations had been made by the Vietnamese self-defense forces (Tự Vệ) during the last two weeks before his arrival. Much of the population had already left the city, and he was struck by the fact that during his stay in Hanoi he could only raise a smile from one single child.

Despite the tension, Moffat managed to meet almost all the top decision-makers in Hanoi, on both the French and the Vietnamese sides. Until his arrival, representatives of the two antagonists had not met for some time, "calling each other names in the press", as Moffat told his wife. But he was relieved to see that, at the cocktail party and the dinner

arranged in his honor, they "chatted away most happily". It was the last time that such conviviality happened until the Geneva Conference in 1954.

The host at the main dinner on Saturday, December 6, 1946, was the "Commissaire de la République pour le Tonkin et le Nord-Annam", Jean Sainteny, described by Moffat as "very handsome and attractive and not a civil servant", which was true: Sainteny was a businessman, a wheeler-dealer. He had, as so many other businessmen, got into intelligence during the war and in 1945 headed the Gaullist mission to Kunming in South China. In that capacity he landed as the first French representative to Hanoi after the Japanese surrender and witnessed part of the Vietnamese August Revolution. Thereupon he was appointed Commissioner of the French Republic. On March 6, 1946, on behalf of France, he signed an agreement with President HỒ Chí Minh, recognizing Vietnam as a "free state" and allowing the French Ninth Division of Colonial Infantry to set up garrisons in the main centers of the north. With help from the British forces, this French division had already crushed in the south the revolutionary forces which were now being regrouped.

Sainteny's widely read memoirs have fostered the image of a far-sighted and peace-loving negotiator who, if his colonial-minded French masters had only permitted him to, would have exploited his friendship with HỒ Chí Minh and prevented the outbreak of war.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the March 6 agreement was more the result of pressure from Chiang Kai-shek's generals than of Sainteny's diplomatic skills, and in December 1946 HỒ Chí Minh's *ami français* was an instrument of the hawks in Saigon—he was the most important player on the French side in Hanoi. By ordering provocative military actions in the streets, he deliberately pushed the Vietnamese leaders into a corner where they would have to choose between war and political surrender.

At the December 7 dinner, Moffat was seated on the right of Madame Sainteny, the hostess. She was charming, and it was only just before dessert that he suddenly and miserably bethought himself of the possibility of toasts. Sure enough, a few minutes later Jean Sainteny rose, spoke briefly and toasted "Monsieur le Directeur". Moffat had noticed on the menu some kind of "Bœuf Talleyrand" and decided that might give him a line. He made an *ex tempore* reply—in French—and toasted "Monsieur Talleyrand Sainteny". We do not know if the host took it as a compliment.

Moffat also met "a bluff, hearty, pleasant French officer" named Louis Constant Morlière. He was in command of the French forces in the north, but he was not the sort of officer who likes war. On the contrary, he boasted of having avoided all incidents during most of the time he had served in Hanoi. He had a patriarchal compassion for the natives, personified by his excellent *annamite* cook. In December 1946, as the American vice-consul in Hanoi explained to Moffat, Morlière was completely out of his depth when it came to the political difficulties. Since Sainteny's return to Hanoi on December 3 after a long

stay in France, it was he and not the military commander who made the decisions.

On the Vietnamese side, Sainteny's first interlocutors were Hanoi's two foremost doves, Hoàng Minh Giám, the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, and Hoàng Hữu Nam, the Minister of the Interior. Giám tried to tempt Moffat by offering the United States the naval base in Camranh, but the American guest of honor knew perfectly well that this base was already in the hands of the French. The impression conveyed by Giám was one of extreme naivety. Moffat was more impressed with what he heard about Nam: during the initial fighting in Haiphong the Interior Minister had courageously attempted to stop it by walking into the embattled streets. Nam was the only man in the Vietnamese leadership who stayed continuously in touch with the French and struggled to avert war.

Our American guide was also introduced to the Vietnamese hawk par excellence (at least among the "visible" leaders): Võ Nguyên Giáp, Commander-in-Chief and Minister of Defense. He was not to Moffat's liking. He had a deadpan face and looked like the archetype of a Communist cadre. During their conversation, the American ventured a comment on the loss of Vietnamese civilian lives that would inevitably follow general warfare. The general's reply was that there must be sacrifice, sacrifice: the Vietnamese might not win the war, he said, but nor would the French.

President Hồ Chí Minh was ill and in bed when he received the visitor from the United States, and he was not quite able to dispel the suspicions of the American who, of course, knew Hồ's record as a Moscow-trained communist. Hồ said he realized that the United States did not like communism, but that was not his aim. In a hesitant English he insisted that if he could win his nation's independence, that would be enough for his lifetime: "Perhaps fifty years from now the United States will be communist; and then the Vietnam can be also", or "then they will not object if the Vietnam is also". (Moffat could not remember the exact words when he wrote his letter home.) Moffat's own opinion coincided rather well with Hồ's statement. The American specialist agreed with those who believed that the establishment of an "effective nationalist state" was seen by Hồ Chí Minh as the prerequisite to any attempt at developing a "communist state". In Moffat's view, Hồ ought to receive American assistance in reaching his first goal. If the French were allowed to persist in their stubborn opposition to the Vietnamese government, that would only strengthen the communist tendency in the nationalist movement. Although Moffat denied it later, he probably hinted to Hồ that it would be a good idea to appeal to the United Nations.<sup>3</sup>

Abbot Low Moffat's attitude was not adopted by the more powerful American decision-makers. Moffat shared the late president Franklin D. Roosevelt's anticolonial outlook. But since Harry S. Truman took over, the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs in the Department of State had consistently been overruled by the pro-French European Of-

fice (headed by John Hickerson), which exerted far more influence on Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of States James Byrnes than the Asian Office of John Carter Vincent.

Moffat had played a prominent role in the mediation between France and Thailand leading to a relatively peaceful French reoccupation of the disputed provinces of western Cambodia and Laos, which had been seized by Thailand in 1941. The French military take-over of Battambang actually took place while Moffat was in Indochina. The French in Hanoi welcomed the American "tourist" (a euphemism borrowed from one of Sainteny's telegrams) as a sort of reward for the services he had rendered during the mediation. They did not yet know how opposed Moffat was to their colonial policy. Before going to Indochina, he had paid a visit to his colleagues in England. C.M. Anderson, the person in the Foreign Office who at this particular time followed the course of events in Indochina, had in fact developed the same critical attitude towards French policy in Indochina as Moffat. He too wanted something to be done about it, but Moffat only met his boss, R.H.S. Allen, and failed to convince him that the United States and Great Britain should work together to influence the French once again. The Anglo-French conflict over Syria and Lebanon was still fresh in the memory: both in London and in Washington the main decision-makers now systematically rejected any initiative that might disturb their relations with the French government. British and American policy towards the European continent required a strong and friendly anticommunist and non-Gaullist France. Allen knew that Moffat did not speak on behalf of his department.

Before proceeding to Hanoi, Moffat had stayed a couple of days in Saigon where he was received by the "triumvirate" which ran the Indochinese Federation in the temporary absence of the High-Commissioner himself, Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu. General Jean Valluy, Commander-in-Chief of the French Expeditionary Corps to the Far East, was interim High Commissioner. At the dinner the general gave, Moffat noted that his host made the error of toasting *him* ("Monsieur le Directeur") instead of the President of the United States. Moffat did have the opportunity to review the guard with Valluy and to listen to a speech in which, to Moffat's discomfort, the United States was linked to France's great effort to restore peace and order in Indochina. But he held no discussion with the general in private. Our guide therefore needs some assistance from the historian.

Jean Valluy was an able and generally respected military officer. In February and March 1946, he had made plans for a forceful reconquest of North Vietnam, on the model of what the French had achieved with British in the South. But he had recommended against the implementation of these plans for fear of having to confront the Việt Minh and the Chinese occupation army at the same time. From March to October, Valluy favored a moderate policy with regard to the Vietnamese government. In late October, however, possibly under pressure from High-Commissioner d'Argenlieu, he changed his mind.<sup>5</sup>

During his stay in Saigon, Moffat had several 20-minute discussions with the two other members of the triumvirate that ruled Indochina during d'Argenlieu's absence. Maurice Gonon was Commissioner for Financial Affairs and Léon Pignon for Political Affairs. Though both made a favorable impression, Moffat gathered that they were badly hamstrung by subordinates, even by their seconds-in-command, "the same seventh-rate functionaries" who had been there before the Second World War. If we are to believe Moffat's letters, Pignon enjoyed art, literature and big-game hunting. He was "hard-boiled, but very able and intelligent", knew and liked the Vietnamese: he had first become interested in Tonkin as a student in Paris and had served as an official for four and a half years in Tonkin. We may add that he had worked for the Free French during the war and returned to Tonkin as political advisor to Sainteny in Hanoi. In the summer of 1946 he had come down to Saigon as the High Commissioner's top political advisor. Pignon acted as a sort of federal Minister of the Interior, his main instrument being that particularly French police force called *la Sûreté*. During the second half of 1946, he was the most influential of all French policy-makers in Indochina. Two years later he assumed the post of High Commissioner.

In 1945 and through the spring and summer of 1946, Pignon had preferred to cooperate with the Việt Minh, for two main reasons. First, by working with the Việt Minh, France could stall Chinese ambitions to extend their hegemony to Tonkin. Second, by tolerating a Vietnamese free state in Tonkin, France could have her hands free to re-establish full control over Cochinchina, Cambodia and Laos, set up friendly governments there, and reoccupy the provinces lost to Thailand in 1941.

In October 1946, just like Valluy, Pignon changed his mind, for three main reasons:

1) In mid-September, after living off the country for one whole year, the last Chinese occupation troops had finally left the north of Indochina (Tonkin and Laos). Chiang Kai-shek was now so bogged down in his conflict with the Chinese communists that it seemed unlikely he would intervene in Tonkin once again, no matter what the French did.

2) The situation in Cambodia had improved to a great extent, especially after an agreement was signed with Thailand on October 13, whereby France would regain the disputed provinces. There had been a remarkable correlation between Franco-Thai tension and Franco-Vietnamese calm and vice versa. When tension rose in Battambang, as in November-December 1945, from May to July 1946, and again in September 1946, Franco-Vietnamese relations were relaxed. When Franco-Vietnamese relations went through their critical stages, as in February-March 1946, August 1946 and November-December 1946, Battambang was quiet. At least in part, this must have resulted from deliberate French planning: it would be dangerous to fight Vietnamese and Thai forces at one and the same time.

3) The determinative cause for Pignon's reevaluation of his policy towards Vietnam was the complete failure of the French attempt to set up a strong and friendly separatist government in Cochinchina. By October, Pignon had to admit that the majority of the political élite in the south wished to see Cochinchina, or Nam Bộ as they called it, reunified with the "state of Vietnam". Pignon thus had to devise a Vietnamese solution instead of a Cochinchinese solution.<sup>6</sup>

The provisional government of the Republic of Cochinchina was headed by a very respectable man, Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh. But he failed to establish his authority in the countryside, where village notables loyal to him (and to the French) were threatened, kidnapped or murdered by the Việt Minh guerrilla forces led by Nguyễn Bình. Dr. Thinh's separatist regime only attracted a tiny class of wealthy pro-French landowners and businessmen as well as a few officers in the colonial army. The French did not trust Dr. Thinh enough to give him any real power, and he was unable to reach any understanding with the leaders of the major religious sects. Even within the political community of the city of Saigon, Dr. Thinh's government did not enjoy any substantial support. Most of the Saigon press demanded that Nam Bộ be reunited with Trung Bộ (Annam) and Bắc Bộ (Tonkin) to form one Vietnamese state. In September 1946, upon his return from futile negotiations with representatives of the Vietnamese government at the Fontainebleau conference in France, Pignon realized the debacle of the separatist experiment and started to plan for an all-Vietnamese anti-communist regime under the former emperor, Bảo Đại, who had abdicated during the August Revolution.

The French thus demanded, as a first step, that Dr. Thinh include in his government some moderates who advocated reunification. This led to a cabinet crisis in late October and, on November 10, Dr. Thinh committed suicide. That was a severe blow to the French because it suddenly brought their Cochinchinese failure to everyone's attention. The French were far from prepared yet to set up a countergovernment of reunification and therefore temporarily replaced the deceased with a colorless politician named Lê Văn Hoạch. He made a very poor impression when receiving Abbot Low Moffat in early December. A French officer escorted the American representative to the Cochinchinese president "who sat in an almost empty room and was desperately flustered at receiving such distinguished foreigners—called Charlie [Charles Reed, the American consul in Saigon] 'Ambassador' and had me, I think, practically the Secretary of State: told us how they all loved and honored the French and how the two countries go forward together: champagne was then brought... Finally after three glasses we were able to retire".

It may have surprised those familiar with the history of Indochina that so much has been said about Léon Pignon, Jean Valluy and Jean Sainteny and so little about the man who held the top position as French High Commissioner in Indochina, Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu. This has to do with the fact that our American guide was spared from



encountering this pompous and inflexible Gaullist admiral and former Carmelite monk. On November 13 he had left for Paris, only to return in late December after the outbreak of war. There is another reason for taking more interest in Pignon's strategies than in d'Argenlieu's dogmas: Pignon (like Valluy) was a rational decision-maker, a man who studied reality, calculated various possible actions and proposed a policy. D'Argenlieu was irrational. His way was just to go ahead with carrying out the ideals he believed in regardless of resources or consequences.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach can succeed, of course: d'Argenlieu had seen how his great master Charles de Gaulle had contrived against all odds to impose his will on the Allies, but in the case of Indochina it did not work quite as well. D'Argenlieu's favorite idea was that if you display enough force you will not have to use it. The admiral neglected no occasion to show his warships to the Vietnamese and felt confident that if he stood firm enough the Vietnamese would bow to his demands. In February 1946, he had hoped to reconquer Tonkin militarily, but under Chinese pressure his generals had forced on him the March 6 agreement.

In July 1946, General Võ Nguyên Giáp told a French communist (who also happened to be a French intelligence agent) that if French interests in Indochina had been directly represented by the *trusts*, he (Giáp) felt sure that Vietnam and France would have come to terms, but French policy was formulated in accordance with the "prejudices of officials who cling to their plans like drowning people" and with the "sentiments of reactionaries for whom Indochina is a sacred fief". Giáp no doubt had d'Argenlieu in mind.<sup>8</sup>

By presenting the admiral whom Premier Charles de Gaulle had handpicked for the reoccupation of Indochina, we have entered the one decision-making theater where Abbot Low Moffat cannot guide us: the Paris scene. When d'Argenlieu made his appearance there in mid-November, he was by no means performing in an orderly Greek drama. French politics were more like a cabaret, with many actors and no main story line.

General de Gaulle had left the political arena in January 1946 and, therefore, d'Argenlieu had to lobby hard for governmental toughness. His chief allies were Alexandre Varenne, Minister without Portfolio (a Radical who had been Governor General in Indochina and who now headed the "Union pour la Défense de l'Oeuvre Française en Indochine"), and Georges Bidault, Premier as well as Foreign Minister (a Christian Democrat, MRP). D'Argenlieu's most formidable opponents were the aging socialist Marius Moutet, Minister of Overseas France (ably advised by his Director of Political Affairs, Henri Laurentie), and Admiral Pierre Barjot, Deputy Chief of Staff (supported by General Philippe Leclerc, the former commander of the French forces in the Far East).

Moutet and his allies opposed any move that would lead to a complete rupture with Hồ Chí Minh. They had two main reasons. First, they saw no political alternative; Laurentie and Moutet had no faith in the Bảo Đại solution and, in fact, prevented it from being pursued after

the actual outbreak of hostilities. Second, they thought it would be impossible for France, with her limited resources, to sustain a protracted counterinsurgency campaign both in Cochinchina and in Tonkin at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

Despite their opposition d'Argenlieu carried the day in Paris. The politicians were preoccupied with a cabinet crisis; in late November Bidault had to resign and on December 17 the peace-loving Léon Blum took over as both Premier and Foreign Minister. He was placed before an *Indochinese fait accompli*. During the cabinet, d'Argenlieu could not prevail on Bidault's caretaker administration to denounce existing agreements with Vietnam, nor did he obtain any green light for breaking with Hồ Chí Minh. But he did succeed in making the ministers remain passive while the policy of firmness was executed locally by Valluy, Pignon and Sainteny. The outbreak of hostilities, which resulted from a new French strategy decided upon in Saigon before d'Argenlieu's departure, was made to look like premeditated Vietnamese aggression: the start of the war in Indochina was a classical example of the "*fait accompli*".

#### SAIGON'S NEW STRATEGY

The old strategy, agreed upon by all French decision-makers from March to October 1946, was one of containment. The Vietnamese Republic was to be tolerated—in Tonkin—while France secured control of Laos, Cambodia, Cochinchina, South Annam and the highlands of Annam. The idea was that, in the long run, when Cochinchina and Cambodia prospered and Tonkin lagged behind, the Việt Minh would either comply with French demands or lose popular support.

The strategy of containment collapsed because France failed in Cochinchina. On September 14, Marius Moutet and Hồ Chí Minh agreed on a cease-fire between the French and guerrilla forces in Cochinchina and South Annam, to be implemented as of October 30. The cease-fire would allow the Việt Minh leaders to prove the discipline of their forces and their great impact on public opinion in the south. The French decision-makers in Saigon saw the cease-fire, imposed on them by Paris, as a disaster already before it was carried out. They felt their whole Cochinchina policy, the "cornerstone" of the Indochinese federation, was eroding under their feet, and so they looked for a completely new strategy. To them the acknowledgement of any Việt Minh authority in the south was inconceivable. The containment strategy could therefore only be supplanted by an offensive strategy.

As early as September, Saigon began preparations for a more aggressive containment policy by establishing a license system for all imports and exports from and to Tonkin that required naval inspections of merchant ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Shortly afterwards, Pignon and d'Argenlieu approached Bảo Đại in Hongkong, and the Sûreté established secret liaisons with representatives of the various anticommunist (but also anti-French) groups in Huế and Hanoi. One of the many French intelligence agencies, the "Service d'Études Historiques" (SEH),

directed by one of Valluy's close collaborators, stepped up its attempts to penetrate the inner circles of the Việt Minh and find out if it might be possible to provoke a break between the "moderate" and "extremist" leaders. This agency seems to have operated a network of left-wing French and Vietnamese personalities. It is highly probable that some were double agents, reporting simultaneously to French and Vietnamese security officers. Others may not have known they they were being used as informers at all, only thinking that they were promoting peace and Franco-Vietnamese friendship.<sup>10</sup>

In mid-October, d'Argenlieu asked Valluy to draw up a detailed plan for a "coup de force" in the north. Before leaving Saigon on November 13, the admiral formally instructed his interim High Commissioner to carry out all the necessary preparations for executing the plan in January 1947, once reinforcements from France had arrived.<sup>11</sup>

Valluy was a responsible officer reluctant to take unnecessary chances or to disperse his forces. From a military viewpoint the plan he presented to d'Argenlieu and which was discussed in Saigon between Dr. Thinh's suicide (November 10) and d'Argenlieu's departure (November 13) was fairly prudent. Valluy proposed to withdraw the French garrisons from Langson and from four other outlying positions. He also would like to withdraw the Hanoi garrison and evacuate French civilians from that city but recognized that for political reasons it might be necessary to hold the capital and control the road linking Hanoi with Haiphong.

The only point in Tonkin that Valluy found to be of real military value was the "strategic base" of Haiphong. If the French could establish a stronghold in Haiphong and let the navy close the coast to all trade, the Việt Minh could just as well be left to wither away in the inland.

Valluy did not, however, prescribe an immediate and passive retreat from those centers where garrisons had been established by virtue of the March 6 agreement. The French forces were to be pulled out only after they had launched simultaneous surprise attacks on the Việt Minh's leadership organs in the respective centers. By such swift action, all known Việt Minh leaders, including the central government, could be arrested. The plan did not spell out what was to be done with them after their capture, but it stressed the need for the operation to be carefully prepared. Not even high French local officials should be informed in advance, and any sort of ploy to fool the enemy would be legitimate.

As already mentioned, d'Argenlieu instructed Valluy to prepare for the execution of this plan *in January 1947*. For some reason it was suddenly precipitated. On November 23, Valluy decided to exploit a local incident in Haiphong and set in motion the first stage of his plan—the occupation of the entire city.

#### STAGE 1: HAIPHONG AND LANGSON

Why Valluy moved so fast is hard to explain. Perhaps it was simply because an incident on November 20 provided him with a tempting

opportunity. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that Colonel Pierre Dèbes, the tough local commander in Haiphong, was scheduled to be relieved of his command on that very day. Dèbes and Valluy had worked closely during the war in Europe, and we may assume that Dèbes was privy to Valluy's secret plan. General Morlière in Hanoi, however, who held a position between the two in the chain of command, had not been informed. Valluy's haste in setting his plan in motion might also have something to do with the success of the French communists in the November 10 elections. Depending on its makeup, the new cabinet might very well block of the implementation of Saigon's new strategy.

On November 20, a Chinese junk arrived in the port of Haiphong loaded with petrol, thereby violating the new French license system. Well ahead of the junk's arrival, Morlière warned Saigon that the seizure of the boat would most likely provoke a major incident, since the Vietnamese had strongly protested the new license system.<sup>12</sup> The incident occurred as predicted. There was some shooting, a Vietnamese civilian was killed and some French officers, who happened to belong to d'Argenlieu's favorite secret service (the Bureau Fédéral de Documentation), were put under temporary arrest by the Vietnamese.

Colonel Dèbes reacted vigorously to this "premeditated Vietnamese aggression" and used armored cars to seize control of strategic points in the city. French and Vietnamese authorities in Hanoi then intervened and, ignoring Colonel Dèbes' protests, signed a cease-fire agreement. When Valluy learned this, he circumvented Morlière and instructed Dèbes directly to carry out the complete occupation of Haiphong.<sup>13</sup> On November 23, Dèbes issued an ultimatum with an extremely short deadline. The chairman of Haiphong's administrative committee asked for time to consult with his government. Dèbes refused and attacked with all the forces at his disposal. In a matter of days, he occupied the whole city. This conquest was, as Jean Sainteny put it when inspecting the ruins a week later, "brilliant but very brutal".<sup>14</sup> One third of the city was smashed to pieces by heavy naval shelling. Thousands were killed. In the western press the whole affair was described as a minor incident instigated by the Vietnamese. The French communist press blamed it on a Chinese provocation.

The strange thing is that Valluy launched the first stage of his plan without having prepared the commanders of the other northern garrisons for following it up. What would now happen to the French in places like Vinh, Nam-định, Hanoi, Phủ-lạng-thượng, Bắc-ninh, and Langson, or in Đà-nẵng (Tourane) and Huế? Incredibly, it seems that no instructions had been given yet for evacuation of civilians or withdrawal of exposed troops.

The first dramatic effects of the Haiphong battle were felt in Langson, that town which has suffered so much over the centuries because of its proximity to the Chinese border. On November 21, several Vietnamese and some French soldiers were killed or injured in an incident which happened when the French tried to dig up French corpses from a

site too close to the Vietnamese barracks. Morlière, who was at this time struggling hard to prevent the Haiphong incident from growing into a serious clash, did the same with regard to Langson: he instructed the local French commander, Colonel Sizaire, to arrange a cease-fire, which he did. Documents captured some days later showed that the Vietnamese authorities in Langson had also been instructed by Hanoi to avoid fighting. But when Morlière received his copy of Valluy's November 22 instructions to Dèbes, the "bluff and hearty" general interpreted them as applying also to the situation in Langson. He therefore ordered Sizaire to occupy the town, which was accomplished on November 26.<sup>15</sup> The French occupation of Langson was popular with the local Chinese and Nung minority population. Partly out of concern for these people, partly out of the optimism that initial military success so often produces, the French now completely abandoned the idea of withdrawal from Langson and instead improvised a plan for driving away the Việt Minh forces and occupying the whole border area.<sup>16</sup> Of course, this led to an increased dispersal of the forces Valluy had strived to concentrate, but French control of the road along the border to the Gulf of Tonkin also eliminated the need for controlling the inland Hanoi-Langson road. Provisions could instead be brought in by sea. The ambitious plan for direct French control of the border region was therefore not altogether devoid of military justification.

#### STAGE 2: THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM

How did the Vietnamese react to the occupation of Haiphong and Langson? Until these events the Vietnamese government had every interest in avoiding incidents with the French in the north. Their immediate aim was to make the French deal with local Việt Minh authorities in the south as a first step towards full recognition. The acute crisis of Dr. Thinh's government had created great expectations, and the Hanoi government was prepared to make concessions to the French in the north in exchange for French concessions in the south. The success of the French Communist Party (PCF) in the recent French elections seemed to improve the possibility for a settlement along these lines. The high hope in Hanoi was that a new French government would replace d'Argenlieu with a more flexible High Commissioner.

The French seizure of Haiphong and Langson did not shatter this hope, but it forced the Vietnamese government to step up contingency planning for a showdown in the northern urban centers as a prerequisite to possible protracted and nationwide guerrilla warfare. French intelligence reported that Việt Minh cadres in the south, such as Nguyễn Bình and Lê Duẩn, now urged the government to give up its illusions and proclaim the resistance war. The Sûreté bought (at a "reasonable price") a secret plan, signed on November 24 by Võ Nguyên Giáp and approved by Hồ Chí Minh, for a major attack on the French in Hanoi, destroying as much as possible of their armed forces and taking the civilians away as hostages.<sup>17</sup>

In the last week of November the city's Vietnamese population

started to evacuate, and Tự Vệ forces erected barricades and other defensive and offensive installations described in Abbot Low Moffat's letters to his wife. In following weeks French intelligence reported serious internal disagreements in the Việt Minh leadership. It was claimed that on the one side Hoàng Hữu Năm and Trần Huy Liệu, as well as some noncommunist members of the cabinet, pleaded for patience and moderation, with Năm keeping constantly in touch with French liaison officers and trying to sort out their intentions. On the other side, the vindictive lower and higher cadres of the Việt Minh-affiliated organizations, the Army and the Tự Vệ, demanded action. The key figure within this majority was none other than the author of the attack plan, Võ Nguyên Giáp. According to French intelligence, Hồ Chí Minh himself wavered and was unable to reach a decision.<sup>19</sup>

Which options were available to Hồ?

1) He could withdraw his government to well-prepared headquarters, leave the population centers to the French forces, build his army for a protracted guerrilla war, and appeal to the French and Chinese governments, as well as to the United Nations, for an intervention to restore the March 6 agreement. If Hồ had chosen this option, his hands would have been clean, but the great powers would probably have ignored his call, and he would have been left with his guerrilla and a loss of face.

2) He could give up all hope for a negotiated settlement, launch the prepared attack on the French garrisons and proclaim national resistance. The war would then start with heroic struggles in the cities, however doomed to defeat. This option seems to have been favored by the majority of the Việt Minh cadres and, according to official Vietnamese history, it was the course of action chosen by Uncle Hồ.

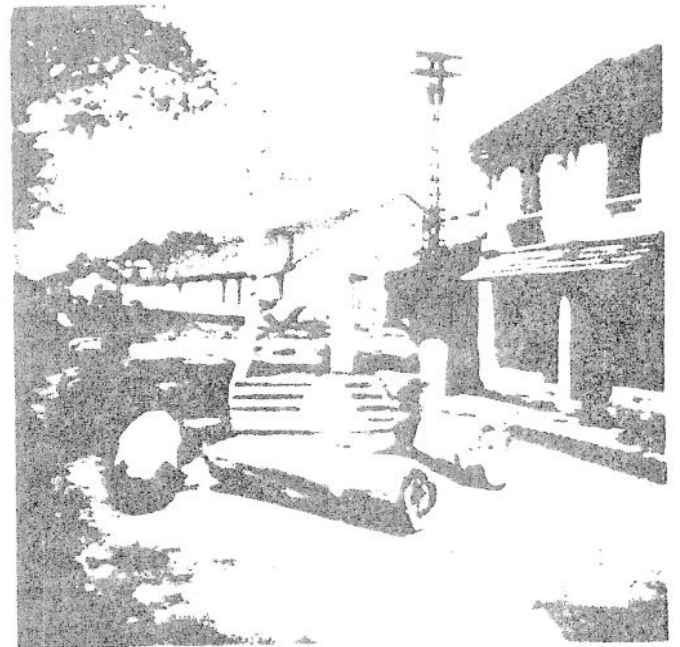
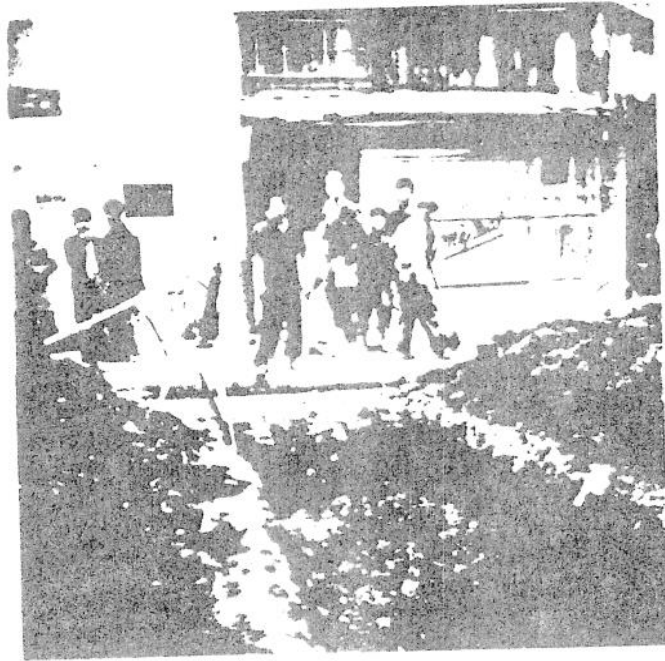
3) A third option for Hồ was to remain in contact with the French in Hanoi, maintain a token presence of government institutions, plead for intervention from the new French government and keep his troops ready to launch the planned attack at any sign that the French carry out their offensive plans.

By deferring action it was in fact this third course that was pursued by Hồ Chí Minh during the first three weeks of December. It had the advantage of keeping the other two options open, but the disadvantage of leaving the initiative to Sainteny.

Which were the French options after they had occupied Haiphong and Langson?

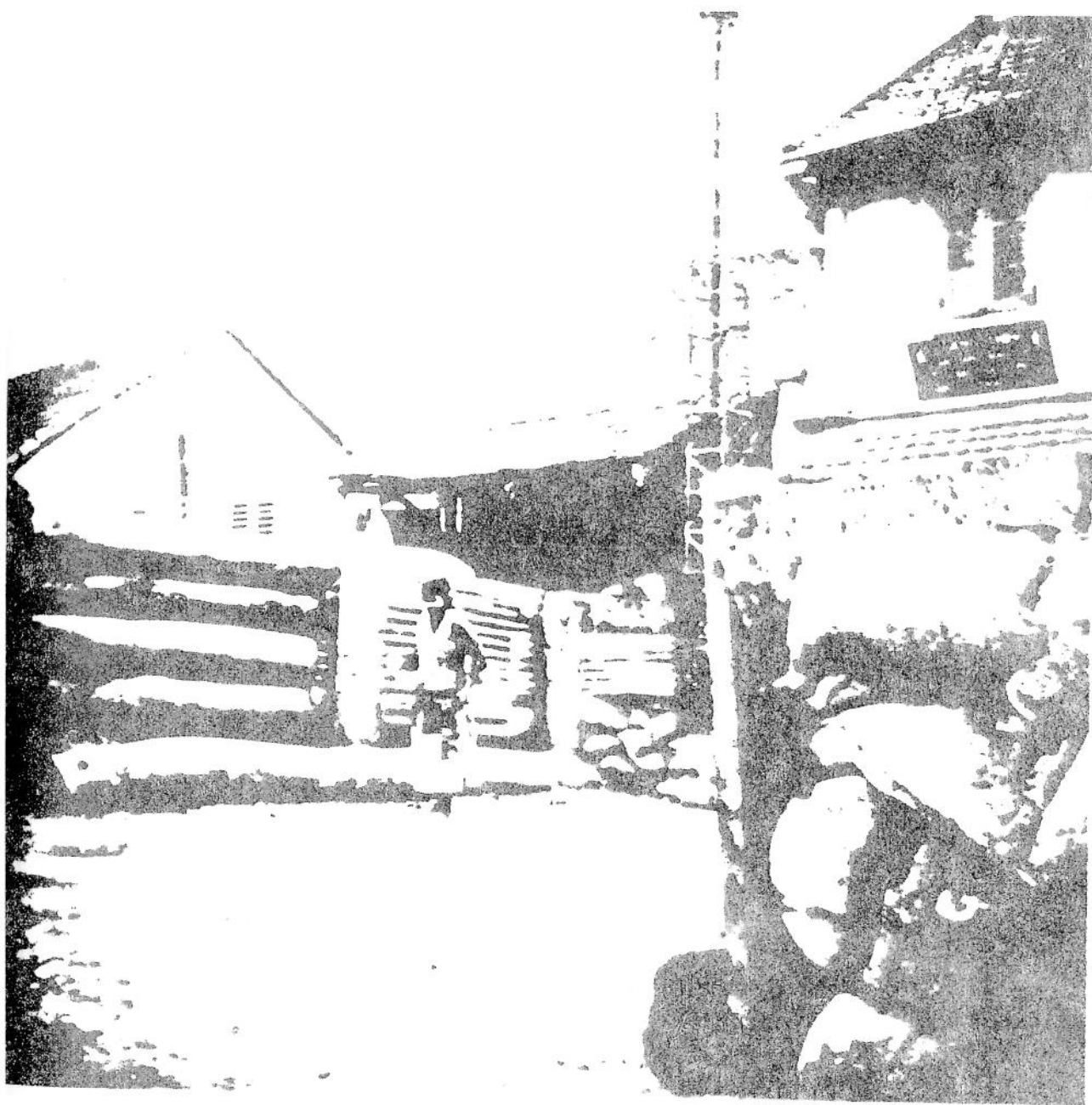
1) They could engage in new negotiations, try to work out a settlement allowing the Vietnamese authorities to return to the occupied cities, but maintaining French military control over them. This was the course of action proposed by General Morlière, but it was not even contemplated in Saigon. If Paris had wished to follow this course, it would have had to replace d'Argenlieu.

2) The French could implement what remained of Valluy's secret plan, arrest Vietnamese leaders, occupy Hanoi, Hue and Danang, and evacuate exposed garrisons. This was no doubt what Valluy wanted to do but did not feel he could. Before executing the aggressive part of the



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plan, he wished to know for certain that it would be accepted in Paris, and the plan to evacuate the exposed garrison of Namdinh met with strong opposition from other local French decision-makers.

Like Hồ Chí Minh, Valluy adopted a dilatory compromise solution. In early December, he sent Sainteny to Hanoi (he had been in France since May) to take over the reins from Morlière. Sainteny was instructed to engage in negotiations with Hồ Chí Minh, but not to make other concessions than the withdrawal of garrisons Valluy was intent on withdrawing anyway. The main demand to make on Hồ was that he oust the "extremists" (i.e. Giáp) from his cabinet. Sainteny's mission was not to reach a settlement with the entire Vietnamese government but to drive a wedge between Hồ and the "extremists". On this mission Sainteny was to be assisted by a special task force trained to intervene swiftly and capture the dangerous leaders.<sup>19</sup> The Commissioner of the Republic was to perform this assignment while Colonel Dèbes' troops would proceed slowly toward Hanoi from Haiphong, repairing the damaged road. At the start of December, Valluy ordered Dèbes to prepare for an immediate move westward, but on December 8 he suddenly stalled and asked Dèbes to wait. This unexpected hesitation must have been caused by some warning from France. Valluy sent his chief of staff to Paris in an attempt to convince the government that a break with the Việt Minh was unavoidable. He did not succeed. The secretary-general of the governmental commission for Indochina made it clear that a showdown in Hanoi would be acceptable to the French government only if the Vietnamese appeared as the unquestionable aggressors.<sup>20</sup>

On December 16, Valluy consequently called off the whole operation designed to open the Haiphong-Hanoi road and, instead, ordered Dèbes to mount another operation, more in the spirit of the general's original plan, namely to withdraw the French from the most exposed of the garrisons in the north (in Vinh) and conquer more territory around the "strategic base" of Haiphong. Valluy thus returned to his control-of-the-coast strategy and was, so it seemed, willing to let Hanoi remain in a state of emergency. He refused to take responsibility once again for any action that might be denounced by Paris. In a 1967 article, he remarked with regret:

... if we had not been interims, we could have... captured the president and his ministers: their collapse seemed possible and maybe we were very close to it.<sup>21</sup>

Before recounting the bloody events in the streets of Hanoi from December 17 to 20, we must return to the scene where the nominal High Commissioner was acting: Paris.

On November 27, Georges Bidault resigned as Premier, but he continued to direct French foreign affairs. On November 29, the commission for Indochina could not agree on new instructions for the High Commissioner. On December 3, Communist leader Maurice Thorez failed to be elected by the National Assembly as the new French Premier. The following day, Bidault also failed with an even larger mar-

gin. On December 10, at a time when France only had a caretaker government and no one had yet been charged with forming a new one, three caretaker ministers (Bidault, Michelet and Moutet) finally signed a set of new governmental instructions for the High Commissioner. They were a typical compromise and did not satisfy d'Argenlieu. Although unwilling to give any concessions to the Vietnamese, the three ministers warned unequivocally against transposing the French military effort from Cochinchina to Tonkin.<sup>22</sup>

On the very day the instructions were signed, Léon Blum published a resounding article in the socialist newspaper *Le Populaire*, in which he attacked any idea of imposing a solution on Vietnam by force and declared that the only possible way was through peace and understanding.

Two days later, the National Assembly elected Blum as the new Premier but, failing to form a coalition cabinet, he had to settle on December 16 for an interim all-Socialist government. The new cabinet was accepted by the National Assembly, but several opposition leaders made it plain that no change would be accepted in French Indochina policy.<sup>23</sup>

Like Georges Bidault, Léon Blum reserved foreign affairs for himself. On the first day in office he and Marius Moutet, who continued as Minister of Overseas France, sent off a telegram to Hồ Chí Minh urging him to preserve the peace and promising that Moutet would go on a mission to Indochina. This telegram lay on Valluy's desk in Saigon when fighting broke out in Hanoi.

At the same time, Hồ was also writing messages to Blum. He dispatched one telegram on the 15th, another on the 16th, and yet one more on the 19th of December.<sup>24</sup> The first contained proposals for a temporary agreement to restore peace: it was delayed by the French authorities and did not reach Blum until the 20th, along with the news of the Vietnamese assault on the French in Hanoi. The delay of this telegram must be considered a deliberate attempt on the part of the colonial authorities in Saigon at obstructing the action of the new French government.

### STAGE 3: THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

On December 16, Valluy paid a visit to Haiphong where he met Colonel Dèbes, General Morlière and Commissioner Sainteny. He told them he had called off the reopening of the Haiphong-Hanoi road and instead ordered them to prepare an operation to widen the Haiphong base. The new operation was scheduled for December 21.<sup>25</sup>

Documents so far located in the French archives do not tell anything about the instructions Valluy must have given to Sainteny and Morlière at this meeting, but over the following two days they carried out some drastic actions in the streets of Hanoi, destroying barricades, searching houses for a missing paratrooper, occupying the buildings of the ministry of transports and the financial directorate. Many Vietnamese and a few French individuals were killed. Vietnamese author-

ities reacted with strongly worded protests but always avoided to turn the incidents into large-scale fighting.

According to General Võ Nguyên Giáp's memoirs the Việt Minh leaders met on December 18 in a village of Hadong Province to hear Hồ Chí Minh declare an end to the phase of détente. It may well be true that they met, but it seems unlikely that Hồ, at this point, would abandon all hopes for a peace initiative from Léon Blum's new government. The Việt Minh leaders probably decided to make everything ready for a general assault on the French the next day at 7 p.m., but later events suggest that they also decided to explore the intentions of the local French command and see if the offensive could be postponed a little longer.

Thus, in the morning of December 19, French intelligence reported that the Vietnamese troops were prepared to attack at 7 p.m., but at the same time Vietnamese police patrols reappeared in the streets, doing their duty for the first time in several days. The French received two very conciliatory letters, one from Hoàng Hữu Nam to Morlière and one from Hồ to Sainteny. Hồ asked Sainteny to see Hoàng Minh Giám. Both Morlière and Sainteny rejected these peace-feelers. Morlière responded with a letter to Nam, demanding that the Tự Vệ forces be disarmed. Sainteny refused to see Giám. But Sainteny and Morlière also decided to put out a bait. They issued orders (and made them known to the Vietnamese) that the French soldiers be given leave that evening. They were therefore expected to scatter in cafés, restaurants and movie-houses. With a considerable number of French soldiers out on the town, the Vietnamese command would be more confident that a general attack might succeed. On the other hand, this French move demonstrated to the Vietnamese leaders that it *was* possible to wait a little longer for Blum's intervention. The French could not possibly attack with their troops on leave in town.<sup>26</sup>

In the afternoon the Vietnamese received the news that Blum would send Moutet on a mission to Indochina. This seems to have settled the affair. At 4 p.m. Võ Nguyên Giáp called off the attack.<sup>27</sup>

But before the time when the French soldiers were supposed to be let loose on the town, Morlière issued new orders to confine them to the barracks, and armored cars were placed at strategic intersections to block any attempt by Giáp's regular troops to enter the city. Earlier in the month, the French had on several occasions received reports that a Vietnamese attack was imminent. On December 19, they therefore judged it as highly probable that the alarm would prove false once again. Yet they seem to have been prepared, at 7 p.m., for a vigorous counterattack. Sainteny and Morlière were both in their offices. But at 7 o'clock everything was quiet. The French thus seem to have concluded, quite correctly, that the attack had been called off. Sainteny dispatched a cable to Saigon asking for permission to launch another provocative action the next day, the occupation of the *Palais du Gouvernement Général*. After sending this cable he left his office and drove home to have dinner with his wife. Morlière, however, remained

on post.

Then suddenly, just before 8 o'clock, the electricity and water supply was cut. A few minutes later, cannon shots and signal rockets prompted the Tự Vệ forces to execute the missions they had been long trained for. Mines were placed in the streets from well-prepared tunnels, a train was pulled into the city's center to bar access to the French armored cars, and hordes of Tự Vệ combatants assaulted French private houses to take their inhabitants away as hostages. Some of the French civilians defended their houses with firearms distributed two weeks earlier by the Sûreté. About 60 French civilians were killed on that day and the following days. Sainteny himself was wounded when he tried to get over to Morlière's headquarters and his car hit a mine.

At first the French were caught by surprise. It also took them a while to realize that only a part of Giáp's plan was being carried out. The most important part, the attack on the French citadel by regular forces, did not occur.

At 9 p.m. the French launched their equally well-prepared counteroffensive and at 9.30 Võ Nguyên Giáp issued the famous order of general resistance. Thereupon Vietnamese forces attacked the other French garrisons in the north one after another, but with too much delay to profit from any effect of surprise: those targets had been warned from Hanoi. The small garrison in Vinh (which was scheduled for evacuation two days later) was authorized by Morlière to surrender, but all the other French posts successfully resisted their assailants. On the whole the Vietnamese offensive must be called a fiasco. By the morning of December 20, French troops had occupied all the important buildings in Hanoi and encircled the Tự Vệ forces in the Chinese and Vietnamese quarters of the town. All the Việt Minh leaders had been able to get away, however: their escape route had been protected by elite units from the regular forces.<sup>28</sup>

The French authorities in Saigon had every reason to be happy with the turn of events. All the blame for the outbreak of the fighting could be put on the Vietnamese, and this considerably reduced the risk that Léon Blum would strike a new deal with Hồ Chí Minh.

Léon Blum did not accept the *fait accompli* at once. Upon receiving the first French version of the Vietnamese attack along with Hồ Chí Minh's telegram, he suspected the local French authorities of having started the fight themselves. He had the French Chief of Staff, General Alphonse Juin, order Valluy to stop the fighting and arrange for a cease-fire "if you can see a possibility for doing this without compromising the security of the French troops and civilians".<sup>29</sup> Valluy refused to obey this order and sent a long telegram to Paris explaining why. Press reports of the Vietnamese attack and the "massacre" of French civilians had a profound impact on French public opinion. Blum soon found it impossible to live up to his high principles, defended the French military before the National Assembly and placed his last hope in Marius Moutet's mission. Moutet did not even try to see Hồ Chí Minh, however, and declared in Saigon that before any new

political solution could be contemplated the Việt Minh would have to be punished for their crimes. When Blum resigned in mid-January, he must have felt utterly disappointed by the cover-up role he had been compelled to play in the Indochina affair.

### WHY?

Why did the Vietnamese attack at 8 p.m. on that fatal December 19? It is not possible to give anything near a definitive answer before either the Vietnamese primary sources become available or one of the survivors among the decision-makers of that period (Võ Nguyên Giáp in particular) decides to tell what really happened. Giáp's very interesting memoirs from 1945-46, *Unforgettable Days*, pause just before the decisive event and do not tell the rest:

Dusk fell. The whole city was unusually quiet. It was cold and dry. The houses seemed to shrink back and to be standing warming themselves in the yellowish electric light. Outwardly, the city seemed to grow lacy in the cold and to go to bed early. But beneath this calm surface, line upon line of surging wave was ready to rise. All the combatants were present at their posts. It was reported that not a single French soldier was to be seen in the restaurants, bars or streets. And enemy cars began to push out and stood blocking some crossroads...<sup>30</sup>

We may consider two possible explanations for the fact that the Vietnamese attack was launched at 8 p.m. even though it had been called off at 4 p.m. One of them we may call the "provocation theory", the other the "panic theory":

1) The Tự Vệ forces were dissatisfied with the order to call off the attack. Just before 8 p.m., a group of anticommunist infiltrators, possibly inspired by the VNQDD (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng) and assisted by the French Sûreté, cut the electricity and water supply. The Tự Vệ command, understanding that an important part of the planned attack had been set in motion despite given orders, decided at once to accept the consequences and launch the rest of the Tự Vệ operations. Võ Nguyên Giáp, in turn, proclaimed general resistance but refused, under these unfavorable conditions, to engage his regular troops in the battle for Hanoi.

2) The news that French armored cars were placed at strategic points before 7 p.m. and that the French soldiers were not given leave after all provoked a panic within the Vietnamese command. They suddenly imagined that Sainteny and Morlière had tricked them and feared that French forces were about to take action. The presence of a special French task force, disguised as civilians, in the Hôtel Métropole opposite Hồ Chí Minh's residence had also been reported. At some point between 6 and 8 p.m., somebody within the Vietnamese command, with or without the endorsement of Giáp and/or Hồ, decided to light the fire.

Let us first consider the evidence supporting the theory of a provocation. A host of loose ends seem to substantiate this theory. The

sources leave little doubt that the Sûreté, encouraged by Léon Pignon, had established some sort of working relationship with what remained of the anticommunist opposition in the north. Since July, those parties in Tonkin which had been sponsored by the Chinese Kuomintang, the VNQDD and the *Đông Minh Hội*, had been virtually destroyed by Võ Nguyên Giáp's effective repression. The leaders of those parties, Vũ Hồng Khanh, Nguyễn Tường Tam and Nguyễn Hải Thần, had fled to China and, so it seems, only left one top-level party member behind in Hanoi: Nghiêm Kế Tộ. He had been Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the Vietnamese coalition cabinet formed during the crisis of early March and formally dissolved in late October. After surviving a failed attempt on his life, Nghiêm Kế Tộ lived in Hanoi under a false identity provided by the Chinese consulate. He may have communicated with Nguyễn Tường Tam in China through the Chinese consulate. Shortly after December 19, Tam announced his intention to set up a new Vietnamese government in exile, hoping that Chiang Kai-shek would intervene once again in Vietnam. Subsequently, Chiang's diplomatic representatives in fact approached the Department of State and the Foreign Office suggesting a joint intervention, but these approaches were dismissed out of hand both in Washington and in London. Some time later, John Carter Vincent, head of the State Department's Asian office hinted to a French colleague that the real instigator of the December 19 fighting was a Vietnamese party equivalent to the Chinese Kuo-min-tang.<sup>31</sup>

The sources in the archives do not prove that the Sûreté was in contact with Nghiêm Kế Tộ personally, but several Sûreté reports tell about contacts with VNQDD personalities. The Sûreté also knew Tộ's whereabouts, for on December 20 he was apprehended and asked to play a political role in the French-occupied Hanoi. He refused.

Another loose end can be found in captured *Việt Minh* documents, complaining of VNQDD infiltration in the *Tự Vệ* forces and their lack of discipline. Several written orders demonstrate *Việt Minh* anxiety to locate "reactionaries" among the *Tự Vệ* commanders. The *Tự Vệ* was in fact the result of a fusion of *Việt Minh*'s and VNQDD's militia. The French were well aware of the trouble the *Việt Minh* leadership had with controlling the *Tự Vệ*. Morlière's demand, in the morning of December 19, that the Vietnamese government disarm the *Tự Vệ*, was no doubt a well-calculated move.

Now, what was it that happened just before 8 p.m.? We have seen that Võ Nguyên Giáp's memoirs were concerned with falling dusk and yellowish electric light. One Vietnamese source claims that the 8 o'clock attack was launched because the *Tự Vệ* group at the electric plant suddenly warned of an "ignoble French provocation".<sup>32</sup> For a long time, this electric plant had been run concurrently by one French director and one Vietnamese director, and it was supervised by a mixed guard. A few days before December 19, a French sentry shot dead his Vietnamese colleague. The plant workers went on a protest strike but resumed work on the insistence of the Vietnamese government. A little

before 8 o'clock on the 19th, the alternators of the plant were sabotaged. Someone poured acid in them, thus not only cutting the electric power in all of Hanoi but also stopping the water supply which depended on electric power. This seems to have been the only part of the *Tự Vệ* attack plan that was executed before 8 o'clock. Only some minutes later were signal rockets observed and the first cannon shots heard. *Tự Vệ* documents, originating in the few days before December 19 and captured by the French during the fighting, refer to green and red signal rockets as the planned signal for attack, but none of the evidence gathered by French intelligence suggests that sabotage of the electric plant was intended to *precede* the assault.

On December 20 the French director of the power plant complained to the French military authorities about his Vietnamese colleague, who was subsequently apprehended by the army police. Then André Moret, the able chief of the local *Sûreté*, intervened and obtained the Vietnamese director's release. Moret told the army police that their prisoner had rendered the *Sûreté* important services and that Léon Pignon knew what it was all about.<sup>33</sup> It may be added that, when the French director learned that his Vietnamese colleague had been released, he was so furious that he took another colleague and a gun with him to the Vietnamese director and wounded him by shooting him, a *Sûreté* report says, in the throat. None of this, of course, was ever made public. A month after the above events, Pignon made sure that Moret was decorated and received a promotion.

For all these reasons it would seem inappropriate to exclude the possibility that the "warning" from the *Tự Vệ* group at the electric plant was in fact masterminded by the *Sûreté*, most probably without the knowledge of either Sainteny or Morlière, but perhaps on the instructions of Léon Pignon. However, we may by no means consider the "provocation theory" as proved.

Without access to *Việt Minh* and *VNQĐĐ* sources it is also difficult to evaluate the validity of the "panic theory". French intelligence worked very hard trying to establish irrefutable evidence that the Vietnamese attack was premeditated, but from the mass of Vietnamese documents they captured they just came up with one single letter tending to prove that the decision to launch the attack at 8 o'clock was made at a level near the top. It is a letter from the war commissar of the committee for the protection of the central post office, dated December 23, 1946. The commissar writes that during the night of December 19—a little after 7 p.m.—he learned from the political commissar of the National Guard section that at 8 p.m. there would be fighting. This commissar cannot possibly have worked under the authority of the *Tự Vệ* group at the electric plant.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the truth lies in a combination of the "provocation" and "panic" theories. The question of who actually ordered the 8 o'clock attack still has to remain unanswered.

## EPILOGUE

After a detailed account of how the Indochina war broke out, it might be appropriate to draw some sort of conclusion as to the deeper causes of the war or as to the question of whether its outbreak was inevitable or not. For those more ambitious questions I will refer the reader to the final chapter in my book, 1946: *Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine*. Here, instead, I would like to remind the reader of our somewhat neglected guide, the American director of Southeast Asian affairs in the Department of State: Abbot Low Moffat. He left Indochina before the decisive events. In Singapore he once more complained of the French to the British and repeated his proposal for Anglo-American mediation. He also cabled Washington asking for permission to go home and plead the cause of mediation in the Department of State. The answer was no. Moffat was sent off to a conference in Batavia. There, while having a drink in a bar, he confided to a Dutch official that he had urged Washington to intervene in Indochina but that he had been overruled. The Dutch official sneaked to the French who sent a note to the State Department asking if it was true that its director of Southeast Asian affairs had said what he had allegedly said. Two of Moffat's colleagues assured a representative of the French embassy that Moffat had never made the statement they all knew he had made.<sup>35</sup> That was exactly the answer the French had been hoping for. Unlike historians, diplomats as well as generals and politicians often prefer a transparent lie to an inconvenient truth.

\*This article draws on the author's book: 1946: *Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine—les vèpres tonkinoises du 19 décembre*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1987. A preliminary version of the book was published in English in 1984 by the Institute of Peace Research in Oslo (PRIO-Report 3/84).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. Abbot Low Moffat's letters were printed as Appendix II to *The United States and Vietnam*, a staff study based on the Pentagon Papers, prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Study No. 2, Washington, 1972.

<sup>2</sup>. Jean Sainteny, *Histoire d'une paix manquée, Indochine 1945-1947*, Paris, Amiot-Dumont, 1953 (reprinted by Fayard, 1967) and *Face à Ho Chi Minh*, Paris, Seghers, 1970.

<sup>3</sup>. Secstate to Reed no. 305 (for Moffat), 5.12.46, Reed to Secstate no. 479 (from Moffat), 12.12.46, National Archives (Washington, D.C.), Record Group 59, Decimal File (hereafter NADF) 851G.00/12-546 and 1246. Note from the Asian Department of the French Foreign Ministry, 1.2.47, Archives of the Ministère des relations extérieures (hereafter MRE), file E-162-1.

<sup>4</sup>. Foreign Office Minutes, the Public Record Office in London (hereafter PRO), file FO 371/53969 and 53970.

<sup>5</sup>. For further documentation of the change in Valluy's basic strategy,



see S. Tønnesson, 1946: *Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine*, pp. 72-80.

6. The development of Léon Pignon's attitude is well documented in the Conseiller Politique file (hereafter CP) of the Centre des Archives d'Outremer in Aix-en-Provence (hereafter AOM).

7. Admiral d'Argenlieu's thinking is clearly shown in his *Chronique d'Indo-chine 1945-1947*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1985.

8. Trocard to NN, 7.8.46, MRE, the "États Associés" file (hereafter EA), Box 34, fld. 505-3 (505-515).

9. Personal notes from Laurentie to Moutet, 21.10.46 and 27.11.46, MRE, file EA, Box 36, fld. 15. Outlines for instructions to the High Commissioner, Archives Nationales in Paris (hereafter AN), Bidault files, 457AP, Box 127, fld. "octobre-novembre 1946". Note by General Leclerc on the "situation actuelle en Indochine", Paris 5.12.46, Archives of the Service historique de l'armée de terre (hereafter SHAT), file 10H, Box 163. "Rapport sur les incidents de Haïphong et de Langson du 20 au 28 novembre 1946", 28.11.46, with conclusions signed by Admiral Barjot 29.11.46, AN, Bidault files, 457AP, Box 127, fld. "octobre-novembre". "Bulletin d'études no. 46" from l'EMGDN (the Chiefs of Staff) 30.11.46, SHAT, file 4Q, Box 77, fld. 5 and "Note historique sur la situation au Tonkin ayant conduit aux opérations du 20 au 30 novembre 1946", Paris 4.12.46; SHAT, file 4Q, Box 77, fld. 3.

10. Most of the SEH reports are located in MRE, file EA.

11. "Étude préliminaire concernant l'exécution d'un coup de force au Tonkin", no. 4310/3-OP-S, appendix to Valluy to d'Argenlieu no. 4309/3-OP-S, 9.11.46. D'Argenlieu to Valluy, 13.11.46. All in SHAT, file 10H, Box 162.

12. Morlière to the High Commissioner no. 646-647, 18.11.46, AOM, file CP-sup., Box 7, fld. 5b.

13. Valluy to Morlière no. 1903/3.T and, directly to Dèbes, no. 1904/3.T, 22.11.46, Service historique de la marine (hereafter SHM), file UU-TB-17. This telegram is quoted in many reports as well as in Georges Chaffard, *Les deux guerres du Vietnam de Valluy à Westmoreland*, Paris, La Table Ronde de Combat, 1969, p. 44.

14. Sainteny à Haussaire no. 698, 4.12.46, AOM, microfilm file 1 MiF 5.

15. Cororient Hanoi à Armées Langson no. 3497/3, 21.11.46, SHAT, file 4Q, Box 43, fld. 1. Cororient Hanoi à Cororient Saigon no. 3610/3, 23.11.46, AOM, file CP-sup., Box 13, fld. 3-II.

16. "Note de service" no. 3539/3, 30.11.46, SHAT, file 4Q, Box 43, fld. 1.

17. Moret to the Director of the "Sûreté Fédérale" no. 3968, 28.11.46, AOM, file Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire (hereafter PCE), fld. "Renseignements 1946".

18. Memoranda from SEHAN in MRE, file EA, Box 40, fld. B-607-06.

19. In a conversation with the American Vice-Consul, Sainteny said he was planning to arrest members of the Vietnamese government in a "police action". O'Sullivan to Secstate no. 133 and 134, 5.12.46, NADF 851G.00/12-546.

20. "Note sur la situation militaire en Indochine", MRE, file E-162-1-1.

21. "... si nous n'avions pas été des intérimaires, nous aurions dû, alors,

sur notre lancée pousser jusqu'au bout et nous emparer de la personne du président et de ses ministres: leur effondrement apparaissait possible et peut-être en avons-nous été très proches", article by J. Valluy in *La Revue des deux mondes*, 15.12.67, pp. 512-513.

22. "Instructions (10-XII-46) pour Monsieur le Haut-Commissaire de France en Indochine", MRE, file EA, Box 27, fld. B-101.

23. *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, Assemblée Nationale, 12.12.46 (p. 74f) and 17.12.46 (p. 103f).

24. Message of the 15th: Haussaire à Cominindo no. 2062F, 18.12.46, AOM, the telegram file (hereafter "Tel"), Box 938, and file "Nouveaux Fonds" (hereafter NF), Box 126, fld. 1125. Messages of the 18th and 19th: Appendix X doc. 74 and 76 of the Ho Chi Minh memorandum, 31.12.46. (In January 1947, this long memorandum, which consisted of an introduction and 76 appendix documents, was sent to the French and United States governments.) MRE, file EA, Box 41, fld. B-608, Box 43, fld. C-112, Box 56, fld. 247 and NADF 851G.00/4-2447.

25. *Le Monde*, 19.12.46, p. 8. Ph. Devillers, *Histoire du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1952, p. 352. Barrière aux Commandants de la Marine no. 485/Cdt, 18.12.46 and no. 494/Cdt, 21.12.46, SHM, file UU-TB-17.

26. J. Sainteny, *Histoire d'une paix manquée*, pp. 223-224.

27. Ph. Devillers, *op.cit.*, p. 355. Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d'un combattant viêt-minh*, traduit et adapté par Jacques Despuech, Paris, Le Seuil, 1955, p. 106.

28. A detailed chronology of the December 19 events can be found in S. Tønnesson, 1946: *Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indo-chine*, pp. 206-218.

29. Juin à Haussaire no. DN/CAB 264 and 265, 20.12.46, AOM file Tel, Box 933 and MRE, file EA, Box 40, fld. B-607-04.

30. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Unforgettable Days*, Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975, p. 416.

31. Bonnet au Ministre des Affaires Étrangères no. 109/114, 10.1.47, MRE, file E 162-1-1 and AN, Bidault files, 457 AP, Box 128, fld. 1131-2.

32. Ngo Van Chieu, *op.cit.*, p. 108.

33. Note signed Moret on the "situation à Hanoi" 22.12.46; Note on the "Attaque vietnamienne de Hanoi" 23.12.46; Moret à DirSurFe 24.12.46, all in AOM, file PCE, Box "Renseignements 1946".

34. French translation of the letter in Délégué pour le Tonkin et le Nord-Annam à Haussaire no. 1746/DAP, 7.11.47, AOM, file CP-sup, Box 17, fld. 14.

35. Memo of a conversation between Lacoste, Lacy and Ogburn, 28.1.47, NADF 851G.00/1-2847.