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AND  
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NATIONALISM  
1930–1957**

edited by  
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# Filling the Power Vacuum: 1945 in French Indochina, the Netherlands East Indies and British Malaya

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by Stein Tønnesson

In 1930 French Indochina, the Netherlands East Indies and British Malaya formed three separate European colonies each with its own institutional mixture of European rule, traditional rulers, and elements of popular representation. In all three colonies, young elites with a blend of traditional and European education had embraced the nationalist principle and were propagating the ideas of 'Vietnam', 'Indonesia' and, to a lesser extent, 'Malaya'. Communist parties had been founded in all three colonies, but the communist-led rebellions against the Dutch in 1926–27 and the French in 1930–31 had both been crushed.

Two and a half decades later, in the mid 1950s, the three colonies had been transformed into several independent states with different political systems and ideological orientations. In Laos and Malaya, the rulers who had been under colonial protection, retained their paraphernalia, while in Cambodia and the State of Vietnam, the former kings (Sihanouk and Bảo Đại) had become modern heads of state. Monarchical institutions had been supplanted or supplemented with institutions of national sovereignty. From the mid-fifties, Indonesia was a radical actor on the international scene with a leading role in the new movement of non-aligned states and a strongly nationalist regime. Vietnam had been split into two halves, one a communist nationalist dictatorship with close relationships to China and the Soviet Union, the other a US-sponsored rival nationalist dictatorship based on a Catholic minority and a French-trained anti-communist army. In Malaya, the predominantly ethnic Chinese Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had been almost extirpated by British forces, while the ethnic Malay had formed a nationalist party that through an ethnically-based alliance system would dominate independent Malaya from 1957, and later the Federation of Malaysia. In Indonesia the communists formed a strong

opposition even after having been suppressed at Madiun in 1948. They did not control any territory, but had millions of followers.

The political changes from the thirties to the fifties were momentous everywhere, but took different directions. How is it that the three European colonies were decolonised so differently, and with such divergent outcomes? Big questions like these have no simple answers. To be convincing, an explanation must combine multiple factors.

First, we have the purely geographical and demographic conditions: Indochina's border with China; Laos' and Cambodia's position as buffers between the states of the Viet and the Thai; Java's demographical weight within the Indonesian archipelago; the fragile ethnic balance in Malaya. All three colonial areas had an important Chinese population, but only in Malaya was it so great that the dominant ethnic group saw the colonial power as a counterweight to Chinese influence. Something similar, however, was the case in Cambodia and Laos, where the French presence was a counterweight, not to Chinese, but to Viet influence.

Second, there are the differences between the policies of the three colonial powers. Britain's colonial policy was culturally and politically less ambitious than the Dutch and the French, in that the British had fewer qualms about preserving traditional rulers and did less to teach the colonised peoples European values. Britain also lacked the French revolutionary tradition that came to inspire the colonial subjects who were fortunate enough to receive a French education. Dutch colonial policy was influenced by its much longer traditions and the strength of the Eurasian population. The Dutch, and also the French had, more actively than the British, recruited parts of the traditional elite into a modern state bureaucracy, but they had not, as had the British in India, given much say to representative institutions. The European and Eurasian populations were more important in Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies than in Malaya. Thus Dutch and French colonialism were more provocative and explosive than the British counterpart (at least in Malaya). The Dutch and the French pressured the local peoples to change old ways and pay heavy taxes to finance the building of a modern state, and at the same time provided the local intelligentsia with ideological tools to oppose colonial authority. The same ambivalence can be found in British policies, but to a lesser extent. It was only during World War II that Britain seriously planned to encompass the Malay federated and unfederated states and the Straits settlements in a Malayan Union. France had created its Indochina Union before the turn of the century. The Netherlands East Indies had been a unitary state under a Governor-General in Batavia (Jakarta) since it was taken over from the Dutch East Indies Company in 1799.

Third, there were different dynastical traditions in the countries themselves. Vietnam distinguished itself by a long history of independent

dynasties and also by late colonisation (the south had been lost to France in the 1860s, but the Vietnamese heartlands were colonised only in the 1880s). The 'raw material' for a modern national identity was stronger in Vietnam than in other parts of Southeast Asia—with the possible exception of Thailand. Laos, Malaya and Indonesia did not lack dynastic traditions, but as geographic entities they were shaped by the colonial powers. This forms a stark contrast to Vietnam, an old state that the French did their best to weaken, not only by encompassing it in the larger Indochina Union, but also by dividing it into three units (Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina). While 'unity' on the Malayan, Indonesian (and Indochinese) levels converged with colonial borders, 'unity' for Vietnam was an anticolonial project. In the interwar period, there were many Vietnamese intellectuals and politicians, both left and right, who adopted the French model of Indochina, but by insisting, after World War II, on maintaining an Indochinese Federation divided into five separate territories, the French obliged the Vietnamese nationalists (both communist and non-communist) to opt for a separate Vietnamese identity uniting the three countries dominated by the Viet, but excluding Laos and Cambodia. The British tried, from 1945 to 1946, to impose a Malayan Union on the Malays, thus making the Malay nationalists prefer a federation. The Dutch, as part of their attempt to regain control of the Indies after World War II, launched a federal formula, thus effectively ensuring that the nationalists would go for a unitary state.

Fourth, the political cultures differed. Most of Malaya and Indonesia had been Islamised before the European conquest, but their Islamic faith had been superimposed on older myths, beliefs and ceremonial practices with Hinduist and Buddhist elements, and their long-standing interaction with Chinese culture had introduced many Confucian elements in their moral order. In Vietnam it was mainly Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism that had been mixed with ancestor worship and other local traditions. It may be argued that differences in political culture involved variance also in concepts of power, and that cultural differences favoured a leadership style based on dramatic rhetorics in Java (Sukarno) and virtuous paternalism in Vietnam (Hồ Chí Minh). It has often been argued that the cultures most heavily impregnated with Confucian morality were particularly predisposed to the kind of patient discipline and organisational qualities required by communist parties.<sup>1</sup> It may also be argued that

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<sup>1</sup> For arguments at least partially based on political culture, see Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1990; Bernhard Dahm, *Sukarno and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1969, and 'Leadership and Mass Response in Java, Burma, and in Vietnam', in John D. Legge (ed.), *Traditional Attitudes and*

Vietnamese political culture comprised a tradition of resistance to foreign occupation. The French colonisation of Vietnam in the 1880s had been followed by a drawn-out resistance struggle which, in the 1940s, was still in old people's memory.

Fifth, the nationalist movements in the three colonies were already dissimilar before World War II. Indonesian nationalism developed around the idea of creating an independent Indonesian state in the whole territory of the Netherlands East Indies. During the Japanese occupation the option emerged of including British Malaya and the British parts of Borneo in a greater Indonesia—*Indonesia Raya*. The weaker nationalist movement in Malaya also aimed, during the Japanese occupation, at integration in a greater Indonesia (or greater Malaya—*Melayu Raya*). The traditional Malay aristocracy maintained control of their respective states, however, and in the Chinese community it was the Guomindang and the communists who fought for political hegemony. Malay nationalism was hampered by ethnic and administrative boundaries. The situation in Laos and Cambodia resembled that of Malaya, but in all three Viet states (Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin) nationalist movements emerged to regain Vietnamese unity and independence. None of them was strong in any of the three states. Non-communist Vietnamese nationalism was plagued with regional, religious and doctrinal divisions, as well as contradictions between those who sought Japanese and those who hoped for Chinese aid. For their part, the Vietnamese communists did not, as in Malaya, suffer from ethnic separation from the majority population, and gained from dissension and weakness among the non-communist, rival, nationalists.<sup>2</sup>

Sixth, during World War II, the Japanese did not pursue the same policy in all parts of their Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In French Indochina, the colonial administration was left intact until March 1945, complete with army, police and a French Governor-General.

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*Modern Styles in Political Leadership*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1973; Nguyen Khac Vien, 'Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam', in Nguyen Khac Vien. *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*, Berkeley CA, the Indochina Resource Center, 1974; Alexander Woodside, 'History, Structure, and Revolution in Vietnam', *International Political Science Review*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1989), pp. 143–57; Trinh Van Thao, *Vietnam du confucianisme au communisme*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1990. The problem with cultural explanations is that they are so flexible: opposite phenomena can be explained with reference to the same political culture through just slight shifts of emphasis. This is apparent when one reads the political culturalist Lucian W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Instead of reproducing the customary misleading distinction between communists and nationalists, this paper distinguishes between communist and non-communist nationalists. Although orthodox communism was inter-nationalist aiming at the establishment of cross-national class-based republics, most communists—and all the successful ones outside the Soviet Union—were in reality dedicated nationalists.



Indirectly, this meant a boost to the cause of the communists since they were on the 'correct' side in their struggle both against the French and the Japanese ('the double yoke'). The communists could fight both Japanese militarism, French colonialism and the 'puppet' monarchs. The collaboration of the latter with Japan made them less attractive clients in the eyes of the French; whereas in the eyes of their own subjects they lost legitimacy precisely because of their being clients of the French. Thus World War II made them loose on both fronts. Furthermore, until the spring of 1945 Franco-Japanese cooperation blocked non-communist nationalists from capitalising on the Japanese occupation to gain influence. On the other hand, the end of Franco-Japanese cooperation in March 1945 actually stimulated Tokyo to grant nominal independence to the three monarchs of Laos, Cambodia and Annam before it was ready to make a similar concession to Indonesian or Malay nationalism (Burma and the Philippines had been granted independence in October 1943). Nominal independence, however, was less important than the fact that the Japanese had trained an Indonesian *army*. The Indochinese did not get a Japanese-trained army. In Malaya, there was a short period in 1942 when a group of modern Malay nationalists were allowed to exert considerable influence, but then the Japanese found it unwise to dismantle the British administrative system and instead decided to work with British-trained officials and the traditional Malay rulers. Japanese policy varied in relation to each of the Malayan ethnic communities. They were harsh on Eurasians; their attitude to the Chinese varied from great brutality to courteous business contacts; the Indians were courted as friends in fighting the British rule of India, and the Malays were seen as potential allies in creating a pro-Japanese government.<sup>3</sup> Malayan independence, however, was only seriously discussed towards the end of the war, and then in the context of integration in Indonesia Raya.

Seventh and last, there is the factor which is the subject of this paper: the *power vacuum* of August–September 1945. We must examine the different ways in which the political leaders of the three colonies reacted to the Japanese surrender. The first six factors all had their role to play in the background, but the point in time when they crystallised into a moment of opportunity was August–September 1945. On 6 and 9 August, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by atomic bombs, and the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. On 14 August, the Emperor was heard on the radio, announcing Japan's capitulation. This happened well before the Allied forces were ready to reoccupy most of Southeast Asia. Thus Japanese authority ended without anything to replace it. There was a sudden absence

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<sup>3</sup> C. Mary Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei*, Singapore, Graham Brash, 1981, pp. 220–1.

of power, a void where local political forces had a chance to assert themselves. If we want to explain why decolonisation took such different paths in French Indochina, the Netherlands East Indies and British Malaya, we should look into the events of the three weeks that followed the Japanese surrender. The way local actors used this sudden opportunity did much to influence the future.

### What is a Power Vacuum?

In the words of Jan M. Pluvier, the delay in the Allied occupation of Japanese-held territories in Southeast Asia after the Japanese capitulation created 'what, seen from a colonial administrative point of view, was described as a "power-vacuum".' Bernhard Dahm also uses the term 'Machtvakuum'. Others have used different words. Merle Ricklefs speaks of a 'political hiatus', Cheah Boon Kheng of an 'interregnum'.<sup>4</sup> The expression used in Malay-language historical literature is *masa kosong* (empty period). Here we shall stick to the term 'power vacuum'. Even Pluvier uses it only reluctantly, however. It was not a 'power vacuum' in the opinion of the peoples and political leaders of Southeast Asia, he says, since authority, to be authentic, does not necessarily have to originate outside a region: 'To them it was not a "power-vacuum"; on the contrary, they viewed it as an opportunity to determine, for the first time, their own fate...'<sup>5</sup>

What Pluvier says is only true in a strictly terminological sense. It is true that what appears to those who lose power as a 'vacuum' will appear to those who seize power as an 'opportunity'. Thus in revolutionary discourse 'the power vacuum' of August 1945 is known as 'the favourable occasion' or 'the opportune moment'. But all three expressions cover the

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<sup>4</sup> Jan M. Pluvier, *South-East Asia from Colonialism to Independence*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 360–1; Bernhard Dahm, 'Der Dekolonisationsprozeß Indonesiens', in W.J. Mommsen (ed.), *Das Ende der Kolonialreiche. Dekolonisation und die Politik der Grossmächte*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1990, p. 76; Merle C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia: c.1300 to the Present*, London, Macmillan, 1981, p. 198, (2nd edition published in 1993, but references here are to the 1981 edition); Cheah Boon Kheng, 'Some Aspects of the Interregnum in Malaya (14 August–3 September 1945)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (March 1977), p. 48, note 1, and *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation, 1941–1946*, Singapore, Singapore University Press (2nd ed.), 1987, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> An authorised Indonesian secondary school textbook in history claims that the Indonesian declaration of independence did *not* take place in a *power vacuum* (using the English word), but was 'the peak of the Indonesian people's struggle'. Dodi R. Iskandar, *Penuntut Pelajar PSPB Untuk SMA Berdasarkan Kurikulum 1984*, Bandung, Ganeca Exact, 1988, vol. 1, p. 120.

same reality: that there was a moment when no one held either legitimate or physical power in the state. From the scholarly point of view, I think the term 'power vacuum' describes this situation best. Cheah Boon Kheng has defined the post-surrender interregnum as 'that short interval when no formal government existed ... following the collapse of the Japanese Military Administration until the return of the troops of the previous European colonial power.'<sup>6</sup> In my own book on the Vietnamese revolution of 1945, I defined the power vacuum which made that revolution possible as 'the absence of French and Allied forces, the lack of Japanese determination to remain in control until the arrival of the Allies, and the inability of the mandarins and their government to survive on their own.' This 'three-legged' definition includes two kinds of power with an origin outside the region and one with an internal origin.<sup>7</sup>

To arrive at a more general definition of a power vacuum, we need to define both 'vacuum' and 'power'. In physics a vacuum is defined as 'any region or space devoid of matter', but it is not normally required that the space should be completely empty, only as empty as can be. Similarly, a power vacuum should not be required to be completely devoid of power. Even in a power vacuum there are some who exercise power over others. But for a situation to merit the term 'power vacuum' there must be a general sense that no specific person or institution is in charge, and that power therefore is free to take for anyone who can make him- or herself obeyed. In physics, a 'vacuum' also has a strong attractive function. Surrounding matter is drawn into it the same way that potential power holders are attracted by the favourable opportunity presented to them by a political void.

The term 'power' does not need a sophisticated definition here. In the context of this paper 'power' means *governmental authority*, i.e., ability to take policy decisions and see to it that they are obeyed. Power can rely either on voluntary loyalty or on coercion—a well-established power-holder relies predominantly on the former. To seize power or stay in power, a ruler or government needs to establish both legitimacy and a monopoly of violence (control of the police and the armed forces). A power vacuum may thus be defined as a historical situation where no one has a monopoly on the means of physical power and where no one enjoys a generally recognised legitimacy.

It is necessary to distinguish between a power vacuum and a situation with *dual power*. When there is *dual power*, two governments or would-be-

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<sup>6</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, 'Aspects of the Interregnum', p. 48, note 1.

<sup>7</sup> Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War*, London, SAGE, 1991, p. 6.

governments compete for legitimacy and means of coercion; people then have to obey both governments to avoid negative sanctions (which is tricky since two rival governments will normally demand of the population that it refuse to recognise the other). A power vacuum may lead to dual power if more than one party makes a bid for power and does not give up. If such a situation prevails, war is all but unavoidable. After the power vacuum which gave rise to the Vietnamese and Indonesian republics, the French and Dutch returned to set up rival institutions, and for a number of years there was a situation of dual power, with wars of national liberation. Since parts of the local population actively supported the colonial power, these anti-colonial wars were also civil wars, which in turn were enmeshed in what Anders Tandrup calls 'village wars'.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to speak of 'power vacuum' or 'dual power' on several levels of authority: village, district, province, state, region. On the regional level, Southeast Asia can be said to have had a sort of 'dual power' in 1945, with the Japanese Southern Army under Field Marshal Terauchi at the apex of one hierarchy, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten at the top of the other. The areas under the responsibility of the two hostile commanders had not, however, coincided till after the Potsdam conference of late July. On the Allied side, Southeast Asia had been divided among three theatres: General MacArthur's South West Pacific Command, Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek's China Command (which included French Indochina) and Mountbatten's South East Asia Command (SEAC). In late July, however, the Allies decided to transfer most Japanese-held territory in Southeast Asia to SEAC (except Indochina north of the sixteenth degree northern latitude which remained under Chiang Kaishek, and Eastern Indonesia which remained in the hands of MacArthur's Australian forces). When peace 'broke out' in August, Mountbatten and Terauchi were thus for most purposes direct counterparts. But Mountbatten had not had much time to prepare for his occupational duties.

This essay, it should be emphasised, concentrates on the state (or 'national') level, which means that I shall have to focus on events in the actual or designated capitals, i.e., Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Saigon, Hué, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Vientiane, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Surabaya. In all of these towns there were Japanese headquarters and garrisons with officers and soldiers waiting, in late August and September 1945, to be relieved and repatriated by the Allies. Until the Allies arrived, they had little reason to take care of anything but their own security—which of course demanded

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<sup>8</sup> Of course a power vacuum may also be contested by three or more rivals, but then they will often either divide the disputed territory between themselves or form alliances that create a dual structure (cf. the shifting alliance patterns in southern Vietnam during the French Indochina War). For 'village wars', see Tandrup's essay in this volume.

a certain degree of law and order. The Japanese forces remained under the command of Field Marshal Terauchi, whose headquarters had been moved, in November 1944, from Manila to Saigon. One year later, in November 1945, well after the power vacuum had been filled in the main cities, Mountbatten moved his headquarters from Kandy in Ceylon to Singapore.

On the provincial and local levels, a power vacuum had in some places developed even before the Japanese surrender. In northern Vietnam and in several Malay states, news of Japanese defeats led people to shift their allegiances and to seek guidance from leaders who were—or were thought to be—in touch with the Allies. Japanese means were scarce, and had to be concentrated in the strategically and economically most important places. Thus many localities in Malaya and Vietnam were taken over by local committees or groups more or less closely affiliated with the communist-led Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) and the Vietnamese Independence League (Việt Minh). The former worked in cooperation with the British Special Operations Executive (Force 136), while the latter worked with Chiang Kaishek's Army Commands in Guangxi and Yunnan provinces, and with the American OSS in China. Meanwhile, the Japanese allowed various non-communist nationalist groups an increased freedom of action in the towns.

All of these developments had to do with the gradual sifting out of Japanese power.

### **Japanese Power Sifts Out**

Through most of the war for a Greater East Asia, Japan had resisted demands from its nationalist supporters in the Southern region for a greater say in national affairs and for nominal independence. There was a period just after the initial occupation when the Japanese to some extent relied on local nationalists, but as soon as Japanese power had been secured, Tokyo preferred to carry out its military rule through the utilisation of traditional authorities. As little as possible was changed from the prewar period in order to have as few instances as possible of social and political unrest. Everything was calculated in relation to what served the Japanese war effort, and little was done to implement the promises inherent in the slogan 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere'. In Indonesia and Malaya, Japanese replaced Dutch and British as the administrative language, but in Indochina even the language remained French until the summer of 1945; francophile Japanese officers and diplomats were more influential in Indochina than those who sympathised with the plight of their Asian brothers. Nationalists in all parts of Southeast Asia were thoroughly disappointed with Japanese policies.

When Japan came under pressure from advancing US forces, the policy towards Southeast Asia became more generous as far as promises of independence were concerned. The two countries under the most immediate threat, the Philippines and Burma, were given formal independence as early as October 1943, and from late 1944, there were intense discussions among the Japanese on whether and when to grant independence to the remaining countries.

The new-found generosity (which was strongly opposed by the Navy) had three aspects: First, it reflected just a little more influence on the part of Japanese civilians. Many Japanese businessmen and intellectuals stationed in Southeast Asia, and the Foreign Office in Tokyo as well, had for a long time advocated the cause of the local populations. These people felt uneasy about the conservatism of the Japanese military and its heavy-handed methods in exploiting the local populations (of course no one intended to give the occupied territories any *real* independence, at least not before the end of the war). Second, the new generosity aimed at preventing the best known leaders of the local populations from turning to the enemy for support. On this score, the policy was not very successful. Third, the new policy represented an attempt to strengthen the hands of the local nationalists in anticipation of the situation that would arise after the expected Allied invasion—any trouble encountered by the returning Allies would of course serve the Japanese war effort. Some Japanese also consciously tried to prepare the local populations for fighting the restoration of European colonialism after the defeat they could see would happen. They may have hoped for a resurgence of pro-Japanese sentiments some time in the future. As Lieutenant-General Teizo Ishiguro, Commander of the Japanese Army in Malaya said in his farewell message to the people of Malaya at the end of August: ‘Dear people of Malai, by the august command of Tenno Heika of Dai Nippon, we were ordered to cease hostilities as of Aug. 14, 2605 [1945]... We were quite ready to fight to the last soul and were waiting for the enemy’s attack prior to the receipt of the Imperial Command, which is absolute and irrevocable. Now and without hesitation, we shall obey the Imperial Command ... We firmly believe that some day we will visit Malai on a goodwill mission of peace and also as peace-time industrialists and work hand in hand with you. Our friendship will remain unchanged eternally...’<sup>9</sup>

In Java, an informal Indonesian nationalist leadership group had already been formed in 1942 by Hatta and Sukarno, both of whom were in permanent contact with the Japanese. The aim of the two leaders was to build a mass movement. In late 1943, a Central Advisory Board for all

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<sup>9</sup> *Malai Sinpo* (Kuala Lumpur), 23 August 1945, Arkib Negara Malaysia (ANM).

of Java was set up with Sukarno as chairman and with members also from other parts of Indonesia. In September 1944, a new Japanese cabinet promised independence for the 'East Indies' (*To-Indo*), and in March 1945, an Investigating Committee for Indonesian Independence was formed in a deliberate attempt by the Japanese to make sure that the independence movement remained under the control of responsible leaders.

That same month, Japan abolished the French regime in Indochina. Tokyo had discussed, in advance, whether to install a military government, to allow the formation of a pro-Japanese Vietnamese government under Prince Cường Đê, a long-standing pretender to the Annamite throne who for several decades had been domiciled in Tokyo, or to let Bảo Đại, the French puppet emperor, remain. The decision was the latter, in order not to disrupt things unnecessarily. Not only Bảo Đại, but King Sihanouk of Cambodia and King Sisavang Vong of Laos as well, would retain their thrones on the proviso that they abrogated all treaties with France and declare their country's independence. Bảo Đại complied immediately, Sihanouk a few days later, but the Lao king deferred the action for almost a month. Bảo Đại's cabinet resigned, however. An attempt to offer the post of Prime Minister to the Catholic leader Ngô Đình Diệm was unsuccessful, and a new government was formed by Trần Trọng Kim, a much respected Confucianist scholar whom the Japanese had kept for some time in Singapore and Bangkok to prevent his arrest by the French. All three states thus declared their independence from France, but they were not formally recognized by Japan.

The Trần Trọng Kim government instituted a number of reforms, but generally failed to assert itself, mainly because it had no means to alleviate the devastating famine that struck northern Vietnam in the summer of 1945. The government was also weakened by the fact that it had no armed forces, and that a group of young ministers sympathised more and more openly with the Việt Minh. Trần Trọng Kim's greatest achievement was to obtain from the Japanese Governor-General, in early August 1945, a permission to include Cochinchina in the Empire of Việt Nam. A *Khâm Sai* (Imperial Delegate) for Nam Kỳ (Cochinchina) was appointed on 14 August, but when he got to Saigon, the city was in political turmoil. In the meantime, Sukarno and Hatta had been in Saigon to hear Marshal Terauchi's instructions as to how to achieve Indonesian independence.

In the summer of 1945, the independence movement in Indonesia rapidly gained momentum, just like in Vietnam, and particularly among the young. The Japanese felt they could no longer control the movement without making radical concessions. Thus, on 17 July 1945, Japan officially promised to give Indonesia its independence, and on 5 August, Marshal Terauchi was instructed from Tokyo to wait no longer than till September with the formal transfer of sovereignty. On 7 August, Terauchi instructed

Jakarta to prepare for the transfer of sovereignty to a new Indonesian government, and on the same day a new committee was set up with Sukarno as chairman. A massive propaganda campaign followed: in the Japanese-controlled press of Indonesia and Malaya the news of impending Indonesian independence was accentuated even more than the atomic bomb and the Soviet attack on Manchuria.

Attempts were made to further the cause of radical nationalism not only in the former Netherlands East Indies but in the Malayan peninsula as well, on the basis of the community of blood that linked all ethnic Malays together.<sup>10</sup> A new political organisation, the Union of Peninsular Indonesians (KRIS) had been formed in July 1945, with Ibrahim Yaacob as its main leader. The aim of this organisation was inclusion of the Malayan peninsula (but not Singapore) in an independent Indonesia. On 9 August, the leading members of the preparatory committee for Indonesian independence were taken by plane from Jakarta to Saigon for talks with Terauchi. On their way, they stopped over in Malaya for talks with Ibrahim Yaacob. Thus, the Japanese actively boosted Indonesian (and *Melayu*) nationalism right up to the end of the war. It was expected on the Japanese side that the new Indonesian republic would declare war on Britain, the Netherlands and the USA.<sup>11</sup> From the Dutch point of view, the Japanese had done what Van der Plas—their best informed Indonesia specialist—had predicted as early as February 1944: ‘when an evacuation approaches ... [the Japanese] will suddenly grant independence to some sort of Government of Quislings...’<sup>12</sup>

By mid-August, the long-held dream of Indonesian independence seemed finally to have come true, but then for the first time the Emperor addressed his subjects on the radio and declared the surrender of Japan.

## V for Vacuum

By 10 or 11 August, shortly after the atomic explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet attack on Manchuria, top level decision-makers

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<sup>10</sup> ‘The inhabitants of Malai belong to the same stock and race as the Indonesians. Now that their brethren are to be bestowed independence the Malaians must also join in the rejoicings of their compatriots in Indonesia... The Malais must also adopt a new outlook of their being inter-related by blood in the establishment of a new State of sixty million people.’ Statement by the Commander-in-Chief of the Nippon forces in Malaya (Itagaki), 8 August 1945, *Malai Sinpo* (Kuala Lumpur), 10 August 1945, ANM.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Allen, *The End of the War in Asia*, London, Hart-Davis/MacGibbon, 1976, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, 1945–1946*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1987, p. 77.



all over the world realised that Japan might be on the verge of surrender; and in the following two days rumours of an impending capitulation circulated in Southeast Asia. After the night between 14 and 15 August, when the Emperor had made his broadcast, the surrender could no longer be held in doubt, and on 17 August Marshal Terauchi instructed his subordinates to obey imperial orders for capitulation in full.<sup>13</sup> By then, the power vacuum had reached the stage where it was most devoid of power. After 17 August it would gradually be filled up again with new power, first local, then Allied.

Those areas which had been occupied by the Allies before the Japanese surrender never had any power vacuum. In Manila, the Japanese forces remained in place until MacArthur's army had finally crushed them on 23 February 1945. After the US occupation, a new government was installed to supplant the one instituted by the Japanese in 1943. Almost the same applies to Rangoon, which was occupied by British and Indian forces on 2 May 1945, after the Japanese had been tied down by a Burmese rebellion since Aung San shifted sides on 28 March. Burma did not therefore have a power vacuum; independence was acquired after a short period of 'dual power' by virtue of a British decision.<sup>14</sup>

However, on 15 August 1945, when the Emperor made his broadcast, the greater part of Southeast Asia was still under the command of Marshal Terauchi: Indochina, Thailand, Malaya and—apart from New Guinea and some areas in Borneo which had been occupied by Australian forces—the whole of the Netherlands East Indies. With the exception of Thailand, this constitutes the area of the power vacuum. Bangkok had no power vacuum. Its prewar monarchy and the basic structures of its government survived through the whole of World War II by shifting its allegiance at the proper moment; in August 1944, the pro-Japanese Pibul Songkhram—as he is usually known—had lost power whereafter the Thai regent, Pridi Phanomyong, a politician with secret contacts to the Allies, ruled from the shadows.<sup>15</sup>

The power vacuum thus depended on three factors: 1) the delay in the Allied reoccupation of the Japanese-controlled former European colonies; 2) the lack of Japanese determination to maintain full control until the arrival of the Allies; and 3) the inability of existing local institutions to control political affairs.

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<sup>13</sup> 'Japan's Surrender Manoeuvres', PSIS 400-29, 29 August 1945 (Report based on Top Secret Ultra intelligence), SRH-090, Record Group 457, US National Archives (USNA), Washington, D.C.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of that decision, see Anthony Short's chapter in the present volume.

<sup>15</sup> For Pridi's role in securing Pibul's succession and in managing secret relations with the Allies during the following months, see Judith A. Stowe, *Siam Becomes Thailand: A Story of Intrigue*, Honolulu HI, University of Hawaii Press, 1991, pp. 288ff.

Why did it take so long for Allied forces to arrive? There seems to have been five main reasons:

First there was the war's sudden end. In Asia, it did not end with the collapse of the Allies' main enemy, as it had done in Europe. Nor did the war end with a negotiated truce between armies with a clear front line, such as on the European West Front in World War I. The war in Asia ended with a sudden announcement by the Emperor, resulting in a situation that resembled that of Central and Eastern Europe when the German and Austrian empires collapsed in 1918. What would happen in Southeast Asia? Would the Japanese maintain administrative control until the arrival of the Allies? When would they arrive—and would they be British, Australian, American, Chinese, Dutch or French? Would Bảo Đại, Sihanouk, Sisavang Vong and the Malay and Indonesian Sultans retain their formal positions? Would pro-Japanese or anti-Japanese native groups organise demonstrations and create political chaos? Actors in many quarters pondered such questions. On the European side, there was a clear perception of impotence or incapacity due to bad preparations and few means of transportation.

The bad preparations had to do with the second reason for the delay of the Allied occupation: a lack of understanding as to what was going on in Southeast Asia under Japanese rule. There was what we can call an 'ignorance ladder': the higher up you went, the greater the ignorance. On the first step of the ladder were those British, Dutch and French who knew Southeast Asia from before and kept directly or indirectly in touch with the Southeast Asian countries during the war. They sometimes produced alarming reports on 'xenophobia', Sukarno's ability to stir up ignorant masses, etc., but still tended not to notice how dramatically attitudes had changed. This may be ascribed to their overestimating the influence of the older generations whom they knew from before the war, and also to a general assumption that a simple demonstration of power could restore *status quo ante*. No one seems to have understood the importance of the new youth movements until after it was too late. On the second step of the ladder were government officials on the Southeast Asia desks in Europe. They tended to give priority to military or diplomatic considerations and to neglect keeping themselves informed of political developments inside the former colonies. On the third and highest step were the main political decision-makers in the metropolitan capitals who all had far too many other preoccupations.

Third, there was general uncertainty as to which Allied commander would be responsible for the various territories. The British were certain that they would themselves be occupying the British colonies, and could plan how to do it in advance. But the same was not the case for the Dutch and the French. Since most of Indonesia was in General MacArthur's South West Pacific Theatre, and since he delegated operations in Borneo, Timor and New Guinea to Australian forces, the Dutch had established their

services in Australia and were contributing to the Australian war effort. Then, in the final stage of the war, Indonesia was suddenly transferred to SEAC, and the Dutch had to deal with Mountbatten whom they barely knew at all. This was the shock of a lifetime for the Dutch. The situation of the French was somewhat different. They had been left completely in the dark as to whether Indochina would be in the theatre of Mountbatten, Chiang Kaishek or MacArthur; thus they tried to establish missions at all three headquarters. This led to an incredible bureaucratic imbroglio with officials and officers spending much of their time trying to sort out proper lines of authority. When the Potsdam conference decided to divide Indochina, allocating the north to Chiang Kaishek and the south to Mountbatten, the US and British failed to inform the French government of the decision. There is evidence that as late as 12 August the French Chief of Staff was unaware of what had happened.<sup>16</sup> Admiral Mountbatten planned to see de Gaulle on his way back to Kandy from England, probably in order to discuss Indochina, but Attlee refused to allow this diversion and ordered the Admiral to proceed directly to his headquarters.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence, French uncertainty lasted well into the vacuum.

Fourth, in his capacity as Supreme Commander Allied Powers, General MacArthur did not see any necessity of an immediate presence of Allied representatives in the main Southeast Asian centres after the announcement of Japan's surrender. He feared that premature landings might provoke Japanese resistance, and therefore deliberately held Mountbatten back. A few parties of British and French intelligence officers were parachuted into Malaya and Indochina from SEAC before MacArthur's order arrived, and Mountbatten activated a plan adopted on 8 August under the code name Tiderace for landing forces as soon as militarily feasible in the area under his command, with the following order of priority:

- (i) Singapore-Malaya and Hong Kong.
- (ii) Siam and Java.
- (iii) Remaining areas of Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup>

But then Mountbatten received MacArthur's order that all regional and local commanders should await the formal signature of the surrender terms

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<sup>16</sup> Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 364.

<sup>17</sup> Minutes with illegible signature (J...B...t...), 12 August 1945. PREM 8/34, Public Record Office (PRO), Kew Gardens, London.

<sup>18</sup> 'Operations in the event of Japanese capitulation', JPS 181, 11 August 1945, WO172/1776, PRO. A more detailed order of priority in Mountbatten's plans for the reoccupation of Southeast Asia is cited in Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace*, p. 13: Malaya (Penang and Singapore), Saigon, Bangkok, Jakarta and Surabaya.

in Tokyo (which happened on 2 September) before landing troops in the vacuum area.<sup>19</sup>

The fifth factor was demonstrated by the fact that Admiral Mountbatten actually obeyed MacArthur's order although he resented it and dispatched a strongly worded protest: Mountbatten repeatedly showed great caution, and a general unwillingness to risk his forces in struggles with local nationalists.<sup>20</sup> This applies both to Indonesia and Indochina (although the British commander in the French colony, General Douglas Gracey, did not share the caution of the Admiral). Mountbatten had good reasons for his caution; many of his troops were Indian, they were war-weary and they were not many; and Mountbatten's own personal ambitions after the war did not include a role as reconquerer of Asian colonies. Mountbatten was strongly concerned with avoiding trouble, not only with the local nationalists, but also with the Dutch and the French. When his forces finally arrived in Jakarta and Saigon, he ordered them to move between the nationalist Scylla and the colonialist Kharybdis without choosing sides. His overriding concern was to avoid trouble.<sup>21</sup> Let me add that after his stay at the Potsdam conference, where he was told about the atomic bomb and thus should have been able to foresee if not the likelihood at least the possibility of a rapid Japanese surrender, Admiral Mountbatten had gone to England for talks and a holiday. He was still there when radio Tokyo broadcast the speech of the Emperor. It thus seems safe to say that Mountbatten's cautious conduct did not shorten the power vacuum.

The next fundamental question is: Why did the Japanese not maintain political control until the arrival of the Allies?

No focused study of Japanese surrender policies in Southeast Asia seems yet to have been published—at least not in English. Such a study would form an invaluable contribution to our understanding of a fundamental turning point in Southeast Asian history. Without access to such a study, the following points must be tentative. It must also be said that to some extent the Japanese *did* remain in control. In Malaya, since no one tried to seize power on the national level, the Japanese Army remained in control of all key buildings and functions. In no part of

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<sup>19</sup> Pluvier, *South-East Asia*, p. 359.

<sup>20</sup> It must be admitted, however, that MacArthur's order was quite explicit. His final words on hearing of Mountbatten's protest were: 'Tell Lord Louis to keep his pants on or he will get us all into trouble.' Minutes from SAC's (Misc.) 17th Mtg, 20 August 1945, WO172/1777, PRO.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace*, p. 87, argues in the same direction. Mountbatten's biographer, Philip Ziegler, takes the opposite view: '... it would have been unlike him to try to avoid responsibility, particularly since, like it or not, it would be attributed to him in the end.' Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography*, Glasgow, Collins, 1985, p. 335.

Southeast Asia did the Japanese allow themselves to be disarmed by local guerrilla or nationalist forces. On the contrary, between 18 and 26 August, the Japanese in Sumatra and Java disarmed and disbanded the Indonesian auxiliary armies (*Heiho* and *Peta*). On 18 August, they also issued a proclamation in Jakarta, forbidding the Indonesian population to carry arms and to hold any form of assembly or parade. In Malaya, strong warnings against supporting the 'bandits' (MPAJA) were issued after the Emperor's surrender, and in some places Japanese troops clashed with the guerrillas. The Japanese also refused to relinquish control of key institutions in Vietnam, such as the Bank of Indochina, and protected their numerous European prisoners from being attacked by mobs or taken hostage by insurgents. Most Japanese units remained intact when the Allied forces arrived to disarm and repatriate them. On the other hand, some Japanese did hand over arms and ammunition to local nationalist groups both in Java and southern Vietnam, and several hundred officers with good native connections, primarily from the intelligence services, deserted their ranks and served various nationalist groups as instructors.<sup>22</sup> To add further to the imbroglio: after the vacuum, from October to December, Japanese units loyally followed British orders to 'maintain law and order' on Java and serve as frontline soldiers for the counter-revolution in southern Vietnam. With astounding alacrity the Japanese fought their own clients in the service of their former enemy.

The main question, however, is why the Japanese allowed the Indonesian and Vietnamese revolutions to happen in the first place. This may also have five main explanations:

First, the announcement of the surrender came as a great shock. It provoked immense sadness and grief and must have led to a general feeling that local events were no longer of concern to Japan. What counted was only to take care of the Army's own security and prepare for surrendering in a dignified manner. After having received the Emperor's definitive order, the main Japanese commanders had to make up their minds whether or not to commit hara-kiri. Some did. In such a situation, it would have been awkward for them to engage their forces and spill the blood of Japanese troops in a move to prevent the Indonesians and Vietnamese from taking over their own countries. On whose behalf would such action be taken?

Second, until 27 August, when Terauchi's personal representative had been flown into Rangoon to receive Admiral Mountbatten's instructions, the Japanese had not received any precise directives from the Allies. From

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<sup>22</sup> 'Les Japonais en Indochine depuis le 15 août 1945', notice technique de contre-ingérence politique, no. 635/238/239.5.2./BA. L/00.002/SD, Paris 23 January 1947, dossier 1249, Cartons 138-9, Indochine Nouveau Fonds (INF), Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (AOM), Aix-en-Provence.

then on, however, it was clear that they were responsible for law and order during the interregnum. This led to a somewhat more active Japanese posture in defending the positions they still held, but by then the Indonesian and Vietnamese republican governments were already being established. Any Japanese attempt at this stage to resume control of the administrative machinery would have been met with strong resistance and would thus have disrupted rather than contributed to law and order. To some extent the new Vietnamese and Indonesian governments had already become the best instruments available of restoring law and order. This was soon understood by Mountbatten, if not by the Dutch and the French.

Third, if the Japanese had actively engaged in preventing Sukarno and Hồ Chí Minh from establishing independent governments, the Dutch and the French would no doubt have been grateful, but they would never have shown their gratitude in public. Instead they would have used this as a further argument in their anti-Japanese propaganda and as a means to win back native loyalty to the colonial power. The Japanese were in a Catch 22 position in relation to the European powers. If they tolerated the local revolutions, they would be accused of having stimulated them. If they suppressed them, they would be accused of violently oppressing the natural aspirations of the local peoples. The Japanese decision-makers probably understood as much and found passivity the better choice.

Fourth, some Japanese were genuinely committed to the cause of Asian nationalism and also personally committed to defending those nationalist leaders who had supported the Japanese war effort. Sukarno had been loyal to Japan throughout the war, and when he pushed for independence amidst the Japanese surrender, he first consulted his Japanese friends; indeed the Indonesian declaration of independence was written in the house of a Japanese admiral. Emotional 'Asianness' may have played a certain role even at the highest Japanese level. On 22 August, two leading communists in Saigon went to see Marshal Terauchi to probe his attitude before launching their revolution. They bluntly told the Marshal of their intention to seize power. One of them asked Terauchi to order his troops to stay calm: 'You have been defeated by the whites, now we shall continue your struggle; please hand over to us the arms you have taken from the French.' In return the two communists promised that their troops would not touch the Japanese. One of them remembers how Terauchi responded with a short and moving speech, accepted the proposal, said he would now be able to desist from his intention of committing *hara-kiri*, and even offered the two communists a sword and a silver pistol.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Trần Văn Giàu in Hồ Chí Minh City, 24 November 1989; David G. Marr's interview with Trần Văn Giàu, 12 February 1990; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 387.

Fifth, the Japanese were committed to defending traditional native institutions. They had reconfirmed Emperor Bảo Đại, as well as King Sihanouk of Cambodia and Sisavang Vong of Laos on their thrones. The Japanese had also sustained the authority of the Islamic Sultans throughout Indonesia. In Malaya, not one of the nine local rulers had followed the British into exile in 1942; the Japanese had even reinstalled the rightful heir to the throne of Selangor, whom the British had bypassed as crown prince before the war. It thus seems likely that the Japanese attitude to the proclamation of the Indonesian and Vietnamese republics was influenced by the views of the traditional rulers.

This leads us to the last of the three fundamental questions: why did the traditional rulers support the proclamation of the new republics rather than try to prevent a development that would inevitably reduce their own authority? In Java, all four sultans in Yogyakarta and Surakarta quickly endorsed Sukarno's proclamation of independence (although some of them changed their minds when the Dutch returned). And in Vietnam, Emperor Bảo Đại voluntarily abdicated on 22 August and subsequently accepted an appointment as supreme advisor to the new republican government in Hanoi.<sup>24</sup>

Before discussing why, it must be said that the whole question is irrelevant to the case of Malaya since no Malayan republic was proclaimed during the interregnum. However, it is highly probable that the Sultans and their Malay subjects would have tried to resist violently if the MPAJA had attempted to establish a republic. In that case they would probably also have received Japanese support. This seems to be confirmed by an episode in the state of Pahang. Here the Sultan had been summoned to the Japanese headquarters in Kuala Lipis and was there when the news of the Japanese surrender arrived. A representative of the local Malay resistance movement Wataniah contacted the Sultan and asked him to accept their protection; they feared he might be captured and killed by the Chinese guerrillas. But the Sultan insisted on going home to join his family. On his way back, however, he was stopped and taken away by an Allied unit who had been parachuted into the country from SEAC. Rumours quickly spread that the Sultan had been caught by the Chinese guerrillas. The Japanese apparently believed the rumours and reacted by launching gruesome reprisals against the local Chinese population.<sup>25</sup> If the Malayan Communist Party had tried to do the same as their comrades were doing in Vietnam, they would most probably have been met with violent repression first from the Japanese and

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<sup>24</sup> See Hans Antlöv's chapter in the present volume.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Tan Sri Muhammad Ghazali bin Shafie, former member of the Wataniah in Pahang and later Minister of Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, Kuala Lumpur, 2 November 1993.

later from the British (who had armed them); and the Japanese and British would no doubt have received full support from the Sultans and the Malay population. To most Malays, the Chinese guerrillas were the prime enemy, not the Japanese or the British. Only a tiny group of radical Malay nationalists were thinking of cooperating with the Chinese communists.

The question as to why the traditional rulers did not try to prevent the creation of the new republics is most pertinent in the case of French Indochina because the Emperor in Huế and the Kings in Phnom Penh and Luang Prabang were the only rulers with nominal authority throughout the territory of the emerging nation states.<sup>26</sup> Neither in Cambodia nor in Laos, however, did the coups and counter-coups in the autumn of 1945 involve any abdication. This happened only in Vietnam. Why did Bảo Đại not defend his empire against a revolution led by communists? One of the reasons is that he and his principal advisors shared the main goal of the new republican leaders, i.e., to prevent the restoration of French rule. To oppose the revolution would have meant to split the nation at a time when it stood a great chance of gaining independence. Another reason is that Bảo Đại would have depended completely on Japanese assistance. He did not have forces of his own. It was actively discussed in Huế whether or not to ask for Japanese protection against the Việt Minh, but it is unclear whether it was the Japanese commander, Bảo Đại himself or his Prime Minister who rejected the option.<sup>27</sup> The government which had been established in Huế under Japanese protection in April 1945, broke up in early August. Some ministers openly supported the Việt Minh, and the Prime Minister resigned amidst the revolution.

To conclude, both Bảo Đại and the Javanese Sultans were engulfed in a wave of enthusiasm which was unleashed among their subjects by the prospect of winning complete independence under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh and Sukarno. In the mood of August, no other course was psychologically conceivable for a ruler with concern for his reputation than to support the republic openly.

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<sup>26</sup> Under the French system, Bảo Đại was Emperor of Annam (central Vietnam) and Emperor also of Tonkin (northern Vietnam) where he was represented by a *Khâm Sai* (Imperial Delegate), but had no authority in Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), which was a French colony. By early August 1945, however, the Japanese conceded to a long-standing demand from Bảo Đại and his government that the South be included in his state. The King of Luang Prabang had been elevated to King of all of Laos (except the areas annexed by Siam) during World War II.

<sup>27</sup> Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 389, note 184.



### Filling the Vacuum 1: Non-Communist Nationalists

By 15–16 August, when it became general knowledge that Japan was about to surrender, a race started to fill the assumed power vacuum. The winning of the race by Sukarno and Hồ Chí Minh are what we call the Indonesian and Vietnamese Revolutions. But they made their bid for power only after initial hesitation. Older leaders are generally more concerned with securing alliance partners than are youthful activists. Both in Indonesia and Vietnam, the youth were pressing for action while Sukarno at first opted for continued cooperation with Japan, and Hồ Chí Minh, initially, for a more careful approach involving negotiations with France.<sup>28</sup> If we focus on the government level, the swiftest action came in Cambodia: in the night between 9 and 10 August (before there was reason to expect an imminent Japanese surrender), a coup d'état took place in Phnom Penh, leading to the establishment of a government under the nationalist leader Son Ngoc Thanh, who had returned from his Tokyo exile at the end of May.<sup>29</sup> Son Ngoc Thanh's cabinet was formed in Phnom Penh on 14 August, but his power base was weak. Once the French returned with British support to Phnom Penh on 15 October, Thanh was 'taken by the scruff of the neck' by a gunman, 'bundled into a car and off.'<sup>30</sup> The young King Sihanouk, however, who had declared Cambodia's independence from France in March 1945, was allowed to remain. In Laos the situation was so complicated with coups and counter-coups, with either French or Chinese backing, that I shall not go into detail here. In Malaya and Singapore no attempt was made by non-communist nationalists to establish a revolutionary government although Ibrahim Yaacob did approach the Chinese communists in the MPAJA with a view to joint action against the British.

The focus here will be on why non-communist nationalists successfully seized power in Indonesia, while they failed to do so in Malaya and Vietnam (for a short period they did seize power in Cambodia and Laos). What we should look at, then, is: 1) the strength and influence

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<sup>28</sup> Anthony Reid, *The Indonesian National Revolution, 1945–1950*, Hawthorn Vic., Longman, 1974, pp. 25–9; Bernhard Dahm, *History of Indonesia in the Twentieth Century*, London, Pall Mall Press, 1971, pp. 110–13; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, pp. 335–9, 344–6, 374–8.

<sup>29</sup> David P. Chandler, 'The Kingdom of Kampuchea, March–October 1945: Japanese-Sponsored Independence in Cambodia in World War II', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. XVII, no. 1 (March 1986), pp. 88, 92; David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1991, pp. 18–28; François Joyaux, *La nouvelle question d'Extrême Orient. L'ère de la guerre froide (1945–1959)*, Paris, Payot, 1985, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Chandler, *Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 26.

of youth movements; 2) the ability of the leaderships to unite and act decisively.

In all three colonies, *youth organisations* were of crucial importance to what happened during the power vacuum. In his classic study of the revolution on Java, Benedict Anderson found that its main characteristic was the preponderant role of the youth.<sup>31</sup> This, however, was also the case elsewhere. It had several reasons. First, it had something to do with a generation gap. The younger generation had its outlook formed by the experience of the European defeats in 1942. This generation was much less cautious than the older nationalists. Second, the Japanese made a considerable effort to organise the youth in the occupied territories with a view to using them as auxiliaries in the war effort. This meant that a great many of young Indonesians, Malays and Vietnamese acquired organisational skills and armed training. In Malaya, a Volunteer Army (*Giyu Gun*) and a Volunteer Corps (*Giyu Tai*) were formed as early as 1943 to assist the Japanese war effort. Ibrahim Yaacob accepted the position as their commander in the hope that they could be turned into a nationalist force. Originally, the Japanese had intended these youth organisations to be multiethnic, but in reality they became entirely Malay. Similar organisations were set up in Sumatra and Java, to supplement an armed force which had already been established directly under Japanese command in 1942 (*Heiho*). In 1943 a new volunteer army (*Peta*) was formed with troops both in Java and Sumatra. In 1944 a more political youth organisation, the Vanguard Column (*Barisan Pelopor*), was founded, which in May 1945 began armed training and at the end of the war was said to have 80,000 members in the former Netherlands East Indies. A Japanese attempt in July 1945 to unify all these youth organisations in a single New People's Movement (*Gerakan Rakyat Baru*) failed, however. The French regime in Indochina had formed its own youth and sports movement, led by a naval officer, Maurice Ducoroy, in an attempt to draw the youth away from nationalist activities. This organisation became a great success, but when the French regime was ousted in March 1945, the youth movement turned into an openly nationalist force. In Cochinchina it became part of the basis for the Japanese-sponsored Vanguard Youth movement (*Thanh*

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<sup>31</sup> Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution: Occupation and Resistance, 1944–1946*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 1, opens with the following words: 'The central role of the Angkatan Muda (Younger Generation) in the outbreak of the Indonesian national revolution of 1945 was the most striking political fact of that period.' Anderson has been challenged on this point, however, by William H. Frederick in his *Visions and Heat: The Making of the Indonesian Revolution*, Athens OH, Ohio University Press, 1989. Frederick admits that the youth played an important role, but argues that the real decision-making was firmly in the hands of older leaders ('the new *priyayi*'). Anderson did his research mainly on Jakarta, Frederick exclusively on Surabaya.

*Niên Tiền Phong*), which recruited an incredible number of members in the Summer of 1945, but did not provide armed training. In Central Vietnam, the Trần Trọng Kim government's minister of youth formed another youth movement. Both movements became important in the mobilisation efforts during the August Revolution and also in preparing the later resistance against the French return. The auxiliary military force in Indochina was a continuation of a well-established French-led institution called the Indigenous Guard. Some units of this force continued under the Japanese period as a Civil Guard while others dispersed or joined the Việt Minh.

When the power vacuum came about, the role of the youth organisations was to put impatient pressure on the leaders for action, and to carry out insurrectionary and other activities. A crucial factor in determining the outcome of the power vacuum was the degree of hesitation, decisiveness and cohesion of the older nationalist leaders. In the non-communist nationalist camp, the situation varied greatly from Indonesia to Malaya to Vietnam. In all three countries there were important groups which had collaborated with Japan, but if we make an exception for the ethnic Chinese communities, this did not deprive them of much popular backing. Yet, to have supported Japan was a clear liability when it came to getting Allied recognition as genuine representatives of the local populations. The need to get rid of a pro-Japanese taint in the eyes of the Allies was one of the reasons why activists in Jakarta forced Sukarno to abandon his loyalty to the Japanese and unilaterally proclaim independence on 17 August. For the same reason, Ibrahim Yaakob tried to obtain an alliance with the MPAJA. And in Vietnam, a strong but divided non-communist nationalist movement temporarily accepted communist leadership. The great problem for the non-communist nationalists in Vietnam was their almost complete lack of cohesion. There simply were no non-communist nationalist leaders with a popularity like that of Sukarno and Hatta or an integrity like that of Sutan Sjahrir. The government in Huế entered a crisis of confidence just as the power vacuum opened up. Emperor Bảo Đại launched an appeal to the Allied powers for recognition of Vietnam's independence, but soon afterwards his cabinet resigned, and he was unable to form a new one. In Hanoi, his *Khâm Sai* soon lost control of the situation and let Việt Minh youth groups dominate the streets. Several groups who had worked with the Japanese formed a united front in Saigon and vied with the local communists for power, but some of them were waiting for Prince Cường Để to return by plane from Tokyo, and when he did not come, they lost much of their will to power.<sup>32</sup> Eventually, it was an amalgam of youth organisations, revolutionary committees and communist-led groups who

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<sup>32</sup> For further reasons why the Cao daists were unable to seize power in Saigon, see Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, pp. 373–4.

seized power in all three parts of Vietnam. Virtually all of them adapted the label Việt Minh. But in the South, the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo sects received a significant quantity of arms from the Japanese and retained their own military forces. For a long time they also accepted communist leadership, and when the British and French started their counter-insurgency warfare after the French coup in Saigon on 23 September, these operations targeted the non-communist forces as much as the communist ones.

The journey of Sukarno and Hatta to Terauchi's headquarters in Saigon started in Jakarta on 9 August, almost simultaneously with the explosion of the second atomic bomb and the Russian attack against Manchuria. Ironically, this meant that Sukarno was far away from the centre of national decision-making during the first days of the power vacuum. In Jakarta the initiative was thus, for a few days, left with youth movements and lower ranking cadres. On 11 August, Sukarno's delegation met Terauchi at Dalat. The latter promised them independence for the whole of the Netherlands East Indies, but vetoed the inclusion of Malaya and the British areas of Borneo.

On the following day, Sukarno and Hatta, on their way back from Saigon to Jakarta, stopped over in Taiping on the west coast of Malaya to convey the results of their meeting to Ibrahim Yaacob. It seems unclear whether they told him about Terauchi's veto. Ibrahim had staked his career on the idea that 'peninsular Indonesia' should be fused with the archipelago in *Indonesia Raya* (or *Melayu Raya*). Now that the Japanese were preventing this from being realised, and the Indonesian leaders were abandoning the joint cause, Ibrahim either had to give up or redirect his movement towards the goal of self-sustained Malayan independence. But then he would face a two-front struggle against the British and the MPAJA. Indeed, Ibrahim's position was hopeless. A decisive meeting of his KRIS committee was held on either 15 or 16 August. This meeting actually decided to take all necessary measures for establishing an independent Democratic People's Malaya to later become part of Indonesia. It was also decided to prepare the youth for resisting the British return. After the meeting, Ibrahim Yaacob went to Singapore, presumably to lead the struggle. On the next day, however, it was learned that Indonesia's independence had been proclaimed without any reference to Malaya. In the words of Cheah Boon Kheng, uncertainty now set in and 'inhibited initiative'.<sup>33</sup> Ibrahim Yaacob instructed some of his troops to contact the MPAJA and propose a joint defence against the British, but the MPAJA were unwilling to co-operate with groups of 'collaborators' and instead disarmed them. Subsequently, Ibrahim's organisation collapsed. On 19 August, he left for

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<sup>33</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya*, p. 121.

Jakarta on board a Japanese aircraft, only to be told by Sukarno that it would be unwise to fight the Dutch and the British at the same time.

The reason why there was no attempt to seize power in Malaya was not necessarily that national consciousness was less developed among the Malays on the peninsula than among their fellow Indonesians on Java. It was as much due to the circumstances of the moment. Malay nationalists were handicapped in two ways: first, their colonial power was a war-winning power with ships and troops not far away at all, whereas it would take some time before the Dutch and French could return in force to their colonies. Second, the Malay nationalists had to face a well-armed Chinese guerrilla army. In the choice between the British and the Chinese evil, most Malays would prefer the British. There was also a lack of charismatic leaders. The Sultans, for their part, worried mainly about their own small states and had little concern for Malaya as a whole. Thus, Malayan nationalism was marginalised. Ibrahim Yaacob took the consequences and did not return to Malaya. Six months later, however, when the British had resumed control of the peninsula and tried to impose on the Malays a modern constitution with full citizenship rights for Chinese as well as Indians, Malay nationalism resurged under new leaders in a political struggle to defy that constitution. But by then the power vacuum had been filled, and the Malaysians had to wait another decade for an independence granted voluntarily by Britain.

In 1945 the non-communist nationalists failed to fill the power vacuum both in Vietnam, Laos and Malaya. Only in Cambodia and Indonesia did they actually seize power, and in Cambodia Son Ngoc Thanh's government was shortlived indeed. The one successful national revolution, undertaken by leaders who had collaborated with Japan, happened in Indonesia, but it was not really a result of hard-boiled decisive leadership. Sukarno and Hatta returned to Jakarta by plane on 14 August, just before the Emperor announced the Japanese surrender. The news struck Sukarno like a blow to the head; he could no longer obtain independence with the help of Japan. The next few days were characterised by dissension and hesitation. Sukarno and Hatta were uncertain what to do and feared conflict with the Japanese if they acted on their own. The youth leaders wanted an immediate declaration of independence in defiance of the Japanese. The Japanese feared chaos above all and were willing to look the other way if independence was declared under a responsible leadership, i.e., leaders who would do their best to ensure law and order. This was what happened when, on 17 August 1945, Sukarno read his brief, matter-of-fact declaration of independence from outside his private house. The text had been composed the night before.<sup>34</sup>

A government was formed, and a constitution which had been written during the summer, was adopted. The new revolutionary government was

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<sup>34</sup> Dahm, *Sukarno and the Struggle*, p. 313.

at first accepted by all the traditional rulers of the four Javanese principalities as well as of Bali, but not by all *raja* in the outlying islands. By the end of August, most of Java, including the main cities and towns, was in the hands of the insurgents, who commanded numerous, if poorly trained, troops, possessing lots of arms obtained from the Japanese. The railway station, tram stations and radio station in Jakarta were taken over from the Japanese army by Indonesian youths between 3 and 11 September without resistance. During September, the rest of the Javanese towns were taken over in a similar manner. The Indonesian 'revolution' started with a declaration in Jakarta, then spread to the rest of Java and later to outlying regions.

Sukarno's unchallenged position as Indonesian leader at this stage, despite the fact that he was an unacceptable 'quisling' to the Dutch, was based on his long political record, his oratorical talents and his principle of religious neutrality. His relationship with the Japanese must be understood in the light of what he saw as the ultimate danger: the return of the Dutch. He was the only one who could unite the nation. In addition, Sukarno enhanced his position by being the one who had formulated an ideology of five principles under the slogan *Panca sila*. Sukarno's leadership position also rested on his partnership with Hatta, who served as guarantor for the Islamic element in the nationalist movement and with Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX, who provided an element of traditional authority to the newly formed republic. The position of Sukarno and Hatta in August 1945 is summed up by Ricklefs in his history of modern Indonesia: '... no one dared move without Sukarno and Hatta.'<sup>35</sup> It was of tremendous importance for the success of the Indonesian revolution that these two men managed to cooperate between themselves and, at least for the time being, with the other main leaders. As long as the older leaders kept united, the youth (*pemuda*) could only put pressure on them, not defy them.

## Filling the Vacuum 2: Communists

Despite French and Japanese repression, the communist movements emerged from World War II as a dominant political and military force among the Viet population in Indochina and the Chinese population in Malaya. Not so in Indonesia. Why were the Indonesian communists so weak at this stage? There was nothing in Indonesian political culture that precluded the emergence of a strong communist movement. The Indonesian

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<sup>35</sup> Ricklefs, *History of Modern Indonesia*, p. 198.

Communist Party had been strong before and later became strong again. But in 1945 it was weak. The two main reasons are, firstly, the logistical difficulties in establishing contact between Allied commands and local resistance forces and, secondly, the more or less pro-Japanese attitude of large sections of the population, which made it excessively difficult to operate resistance networks. It is noteworthy that the power vacuum of August 1945 emerged at a time when the Indonesian communists were in no position to take advantage of it. The main leaders were all abroad, and when the renegade communist, Tan Malaka, returned to Java during the war, he lived in anonymity, working in a mine, until he reappeared as a leader after the revolution. Among the other prewar communist leaders, Sardjono and Alimin returned in 1946, Musso only in 1948. Some communist leaders were also flown in from the Netherlands in 1946. They were generally anti-Republic, considered Sukarno a fascist and were initially opposed to a break with the Netherlands.<sup>36</sup> There existed a communist underground in Indonesia during the war, but it does not seem to have had access to arms or Allied assistance. Generally, the communist organisations had to be rebuilt from scratch after the power vacuum had been filled by Sukarno, Hatta, Sjahrir and the various youth movements.

The situation was entirely different in Malaya and northern Vietnam. When the Japanese attacked Malaya in December 1941, the MCP offered the British full support. Consequently, an important number of communists were released from British custody. After the British defeat, they set up the MPAJA which, from 1943, received arms and instructors from SEAC. The Malayan communists were subject to extreme repression from the Japanese, who destroyed the Central Committee of the Singapore Party and almost all of the Central Committee of the MCP, except secretary general Lai Tek (who informed on the others, both to the British and the Japanese), but the MCP still emerged much strengthened from the war. Indeed the Malayan communists were better armed and better integrated in the Allied war effort than their Indochinese comrades—but certainly not better led. Their dependence on the British for arms and radio communication would probably have worked to their disadvantage had they decided to set up a republic and resist the British return in August–September 1945.

In Indochina, the southern branch of the party, which had been the strongest in the 1930s, was all but destroyed by French repression in 1940–41, but scattered groups survived. In the north, where a new Central Committee had been organised after the defeat of the southern insurrection in November 1940, a more elaborate party organisation continued to exist, and in the border region to China, a small guerrilla army was built up

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<sup>36</sup> George McT. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia*, Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1952, pp. 159–60.

which operated under the guise of a national front organisation which for some years had existed among Vietnamese exiles in China: the Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh, or Việt Minh. The top leader of this organisation was a formerly unheard of figure with the name Hồ Chí Minh, although after the war people gradually realised that he was identical with the prominent prewar communist leader Nguyễn Ái Quốc. As from 1942, Việt Minh propaganda gradually penetrated southwards while Hồ Chí Minh—eventually with success—strove to ingratiate himself with the Chinese warlord of Guangxi province.

The communist position in Indochina remained precarious until the Japanese ousted the French regime in March 1945. This event enhanced the communist fortunes more than anything else. The Japanese were not prepared to take over the French role in repressing communism, and indeed allowed the Trần Trọng Kim government to release a significant number of communists from the prisons where the French had kept them. During the summer of 1945, the ranks of the communist-led Việt Minh front thus swelled, and this happened at a time when the front benefited both from Chinese and US help. The Việt Minh took over the French administration's former role in supplying intelligence for US services in China. To the Việt Minh, it had a clear propaganda value to be attached to the Allied cause. Boosted by its image of representing the victorious Allies, and enhanced by unity of action under a programme for national independence, the Việt Minh's slogans and flag became rallying points for the politically conscious in many villages throughout central and northern Vietnam.

During the same period, the Communist Party was being reconstructed in the south, but under an independent leadership which had not adopted the Việt Minh formula. The southern leadership chose a political line not entirely dissimilar from the one pursued by Sukarno and Hatta in Jakarta. The communists in southern Vietnam infiltrated and came to dominate the Japanese-sponsored Vanguard Youth movement, and used this organisation as its vehicle. The main leader of the youth organisation, Phạm Ngọc Thạch, was an undercover communist enjoying friendly relations with the Japanese governor.

When the war ended in August, it was impossible for Malayan and Indochinese communists, despite their strength, to act as quickly as those nationalists who were closely in touch with Japanese authorities. The latter had an advantage at first since they were concentrated in the main towns and could find out from their Japanese friends what the Japanese intended to do. The main communist leaders lived clandestinely, most often in the countryside. The sudden end of the war caught them, like everyone else, by surprise. The communists in Malaya and northern Vietnam had been preparing for assisting an Allied invasion and for utilising the prestige thus gained in furthering their political aims. Now they suddenly faced an



opportunity to seize power in a territory where the Japanese remained nominally in charge, but could no longer be expected to have the will to rule. With the exception of the communist leadership in Saigon, the communists do not seem to have been directly in contact with the Japanese authorities before August. The communists therefore had to calculate carefully the risk of violent Japanese repression in case of an insurrection. In all parts of Japanese-held Southeast Asia, the communists must have held heated discussions over whether or not to launch a general insurrection, about the choice of alliance partners, and about the correct way to receive the Allied forces.

As far as Indonesia is concerned, I'm not aware of any discussion within the communist underground of what to do if the Japanese suddenly surrendered. In Malaya a conscious decision seems to have been made by MCP Secretary-General Lai Tek, to abstain from seizing power and welcome the British colonialists back. It had been discussed, of course, to establish a revolutionary government and present the British with a *fait accompli*, and the goal of creating a Malayan Democratic Republic was included in the Party's 'nine principles' of February 1943.<sup>37</sup> But most of the genuine revolutionaries in the MCP leadership had been killed. Under Lai Tek's leadership, the MCP tried to seize control of as much as possible of the countryside, perhaps in the hope that this would be an asset when the British returned to institute a democratic constitution. In December 1945, under order from Mountbatten, the MPAJA laid down a great part of its arms, so when Lai Tek was unmasked as a British agent in 1947 and a new leadership was established, much of the advantage gained during the war had been lost.<sup>38</sup>

Why did the Chinese youth and the MCP cadre accept their leaders' astounding passivity in August 1945? Although there was a general relief at getting rid of the Japanese yoke, there must have been frustration with not being allowed to take revenge and seize power. This may help to explain the communal violence that erupted in various parts of the country. Even in Singapore, the communist presence was very much felt during the power vacuum. The Japanese garrison in Singapore numbered more than 27,000 troops. Most of these troops were moved out of the city several weeks before the British arrived. When this became known, MPAJA forces

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<sup>37</sup> A focused discussion of why the MPAJA did not make a bid for power during the August-September 1945 'interregnum' can be found in Cheah Boon Kheng, 'Aspects of Interregnum'. See also Cheah Boon Kheng, *From PKI to the Comintern, 1924-1941: The Apprenticeship of the Malayan Communist Party*. Ithaca NY, Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1992, pp. 38-40, 99-100.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948-60*, London, Frederick Muller, 1975, pp. 34-5.

crossed over to the island and established headquarters in the city. For more than a week, there was a reign of terror with Chinese guerrillas taking revenge against those who had collaborated with the Japanese.<sup>39</sup> By the time British forces finally arrived in Singapore on 5 September to relieve the Japanese, authority in the city centre had collapsed, with widespread violence, raids, attacks on individual Japanese and killing of collaborators.<sup>40</sup> Communist guerrillas had sequestered certain buildings, but no attempt was made to organise massive demonstrations, take over the most important public buildings or set up a revolutionary government. Moreover any such act was expressly forbidden by Japanese proclamations of 3 and 4 September and, of course, by Mountbatten's proclamation of military administration, which was issued well before the British arrival.<sup>41</sup>

Mountbatten's staff had foreseen trouble from the Malay communists, but had not apparently paid much attention to any similar risk in Indochina.<sup>42</sup> French Indochina, however, was quickly engulfed in a revolution that caught everyone by surprise, not the least those who emerged as its leaders. It happened in all three parts of Vietnam between 18 and 25 August, but not in Cambodia or Laos. The communist party had few Khmer and Lao members, so these countries just had coups and incidents of infighting between various elite groups. Thus the revolution in Indochina led to the establishment of a purely *Vietnamese* republic whose independence was proclaimed by Hồ Chí Minh at an enormous rally in Hanoi on 2 September. Whereas the Indonesian Revolution started with a declaration in Jakarta and then spread out in the country, it was rather the other way round in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese August Revolution has traditionally been presented as a movement unleashed and led by the Party and Việt Minh leadership. More recent studies have shown that the revolution was far less co-ordinated than has hitherto been assumed.<sup>43</sup> At the time of the Japanese surrender, all the most important Party leaders were assembled in a far off-place in the northern countryside which they called Tân Trào. The congress

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<sup>39</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya*, p. 140.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142–3. A less dramatic account is given in C. Mary Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819–1975*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 217–8.

<sup>41</sup> Proclamation no.1, British Military Administration. Malaya, no. 295/CA, 24 August 1945, WO172/1778, PRO.

<sup>42</sup> 'Action to be taken by clandestine organizations and indigenous resistance movements in the event of Japanese capitulation', Conference Secretariat Minute 5/235/1, 15 August 1945, WO172/1777, PRO.

<sup>43</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, forthcoming; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*.

at Tân Trào had most probably been convened in order to adopt a programme and strategy for how to participate in the Allied invasion of Indochina, seize power behind enemy lines with a proper timing, establish a preliminary government, and use the participation in the Allied war effort to extract as many concessions from the 'new France' as possible. Thus the policy of the Indochinese communists was not wholly dissimilar from that of their Malayan comrades. The Malayan communist leaders were constantly in touch with British authorities through Force 136. The Vietnamese communists were mainly in touch with Chinese and US services, but in the final days before the Congress at Tân Trào, messages were also exchanged with the French mission in China with a view to arranging a meeting between Hồ Chí Minh and a French representative.<sup>44</sup>

Then came the news of the atomic bombs and the Soviet declaration of war. Priorities had to be changed, and after some deliberation the Congress came out with a somewhat equivocal call on 16 August for a general insurrection.<sup>45</sup> It was, however, technically impossible to communicate this resolution to the local cadre. It was brought to the various parts of Vietnam by couriers who arrived only after the revolution had happened. The reality of the Vietnamese August Revolution is that all the main party leaders were completely on the sidelines at the time when the revolution took place. General Võ Nguyễn Giáp, for instance, spent his time on a, by then, quite irrelevant attack on the Japanese garrison of Thái Nguyên. Generally, the initiative was left to local cadre throughout the country, the names of whom are known only to specialists. Just as in Indonesia, a crucial role was played by a Revolutionary Military Committee which was established in Hanoi on 15 August by those among the local cadre who had not gone to Tân Trào. During the next couple of days, they tested the resolve of the Japanese and of the Emperor's *Khâm Sai* in the north by making Việt Minh's presence felt in the streets. They found that the *Khâm Sai* had no resolve at all, and that the Japanese did not seem to react. Then they decided to use the chance presented to them. On 19 August the Hanoi youth went into action. The revolution happened in a haphazard manner with a crowd moving from one public building to another. The Japanese prevented the seizure of the Bank of Indochina and the radio station, but otherwise decided not to intervene. With no bloodshed whatsoever, Hanoi was taken over by the communists who hastened to make their exploit known via telephone. Similar revolts were by then already happening in other parts of Vietnam, and they were further inspired by the news from Hanoi. When the top Việt Minh leaders finally

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<sup>44</sup> Philippe Devillers, *Paris-Saigon-Hanoi*, Paris, Gallimard/Julliard, 1988, pp. 63–7.

<sup>45</sup> Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 377.

arrived in Hanoi on 25–26 August, they were handed *Độc Lập* on a golden platter. Hồ Chí Minh could expand a government which had already been formed for him, await the results of a delegation which had been sent to demand Emperor Bảo Đại's abdication in Huế, and prepare his declaration of independence.

The only place where a high-ranking party cadre had not gone to Tân Trào and was thus able to effectively control the revolutionary forces was in Saigon. For this very reason, the Saigon youth was not, initially, allowed to act. A secret meeting of the Party Committee on the night between 16 and 17 August failed to obtain the required unanimity for launching an insurrection which was therefore delayed a whole week. Only after it was known that most of Vietnam was already engulfed in revolution did the Saigon leadership unanimously agree to follow suit. Saigon was taken over in a delayed, but well-prepared action on the night between 24 and 25 August.<sup>46</sup>

What comes out of this account, both the non-communist and the communist part of it, is again the importance of circumstance. The power vacuum created a pull that inspired youthful action and compelled reluctant leaders to seize power long before they had expected to be able to do so. In Malaya and Singapore, however, Ibrahim Yaacob and Lai Tek resisted the temptation.

### Filling the Vacuum 3: Colonialists

Only one of the three colonial powers was able to fill the power vacuum before it had been filled locally: the British. On 5 September, British forces landed in Singapore with great fanfare and started their work to reinstate law and order. The French and Dutch colonies had lower priority. British advance parties landed in Saigon on 5 and in Jakarta on 8 September. The first British forces were flown into Saigon on 13 September, and *HMS Cumberland* arrived at the port of Jakarta (with the high-ranking Dutch official Van der Plas on board) on 15 September.

With respect to the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina, Mountbatten and his two local commanders, Philip Christison in Indonesia and Douglas Gracey in Indochina, were in a difficult dilemma. With limited resources, their mission was to liberate and provide for prisoners of war, ensure basic law and order, concentrate and repatriate the Japanese forces, and prepare for being themselves relieved by French and Dutch forces. They either had to find some working arrangement with the revolutionaries

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<sup>46</sup> Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, pp. 382–8.

as a *de facto* power or insist on reestablishing the sovereignty of the colonial powers and then rely on Japanese forces to suppress the revolutionary groups. In September, Christison and Gracey made opposite choices when trying to interpret Mountbatten's orders. While Christison angered the Dutch by establishing a relationship to the local 'quislings' and urging the Dutch to do the same, Gracey satisfied the French by quelling the local revolution and re-establishing colonial power in Cochinchina and Cambodia.<sup>47</sup>

How can the difference between the British approach to Java and southern Indochina be explained? The three possibilities are that France was more important to Britain than the Netherlands, that the Indochinese communists were seen as a greater threat to European interests in the region than the Indonesian nationalists, or that the whole difference stemmed from the different attitudes of Gracey and Christison. The latter seems the most plausible explanation. It should be remembered that Christison's approach did not last long (although it triumphed in the end, after UN and US intervention).

Both in Indonesia and Indochina the British avoided as much as possible to be directly engaged in the suppression of armed revolutionary groups. In the first stage, the dirty work was left to the Japanese who followed British orders with surprising diligence, inflicting and suffering heavy losses in fights with revolutionary groups in both Java and the southern half of Vietnam. In the next stage, the responsibility was gradually transferred to the Dutch and the French, but as late as November 1945, British Indian troops had to fight the battle of Surabaya alone. The first Dutch forces landed in Jakarta in December. By then, French forces were actively engaged in suppressing the revolutionary armies in southern Indochina, but Mountbatten did not relinquish his responsibility for the area till March 1946.

In late September 1945, after the power vacuum had been filled, the result was that colonial power had successfully returned to Malaya, while a complicated situation of dual power had arisen in Indonesia and southern Vietnam, with an even more complicated situation in the Chinese-occupied north—including Laos. The main lasting importance of the power vacuum resides in the effect it had on the fortunes of Indonesian nationalism and Vietnamese communism.

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<sup>47</sup> Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace*, pp. 94, 241. For a detailed account of Gracey's actions, see Peter M. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War*, London, C. Hurst, 1985.

## Conclusion

The power vacuum was important in Southeast Asian history for two main reasons:

- 1) It prevented the Netherlands and France from effectively recovering their overseas territories and thus from advancing their schemes for a modernisation and gradual democratisation of the colonies under a European-led federal model;
- 2) It provided Sukarno and Hồ Chí Minh with an opportunity to form governments, acquire arms and become leaders of a national *resistance* struggle against European colonialism.

In both states, a republic was formed with a territory and a capital. Hồ Chí Minh visited France as Vietnamese head of state in the summer of 1946 and, after his return, he remained in his capital Hanoi until war broke out in December 1946. The next time he returned was in 1954. Sukarno moved his capital from Jakarta to Yogyakarta in December 1945 and led the republic from there until he could return to Jakarta after the Dutch recognition of Indonesia in December 1949.

One important factor in explaining the ultimate success of the Indonesian and Vietnamese 'wars of resistance' is the position that Hồ Chí Minh and Sukarno had gained as national leaders by becoming Presidents in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Without the delay of the Dutch and French reconquest after the Japanese surrender and the legitimacy gained by Sukarno and Hồ Chí Minh in the eyes of the local populations, it is doubtful that Dutch and French colonial power could have been eliminated as rapidly as they were in the following years. There would of course have been revolts, and in the case of Vietnam, Chinese assistance might *perhaps* have led to a triumph at Điện Biên Phủ even if there had not been any 'August Revolution'. But in the case of Indonesia it is difficult to see how a revolt could have succeeded without the power vacuum of 1945. Without the power vacuum, the course of national liberation in Indonesia—maybe even in Vietnam—might have been closer to the one in Malaya.