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## **‘Kicking out the Vietminh’: How Britain Allowed France to Reoccupy South Indochina, 1945–46**

On 29 April 1953 a talk was delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society in London by retired American air force Colonel Melvin Hall about the ongoing French war in Indochina, the western colonial term for Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin, the three provinces which are now Vietnam, grouped together with Cambodia and Laos. During the ensuing discussion, a bluff ex-Indian army English staff officer present in the audience, Major-General Douglas D. Gracey (1894–1964), spontaneously recalled his own dubious reception eight years earlier in South Indochina (South Vietnam) when, on 13 September 1945, he became the first Allied commander to reach Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), newly liberated from the Japanese. ‘I went out there after the war and saw the French after they had been through a most uncomfortable time with the Japanese. . . . I was welcomed on arrival by the Viet Minh, who said “Welcome” and all that sort of thing’, Gracey interjected. ‘It was a very unpleasant situation, and I promptly kicked them out. They were obviously communists.’<sup>1</sup> In the immediate postwar period, however, the communist leadership of the Vietminh (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi or Vietnam Independence League), a broadly-based nationalist coalition formed in 1941 out of several Vietnamese political groups, was partially concealed by a nationalist front, in order to appeal to a broadly patriotic but still dormant ‘national liberation’ sentiment.

An efficient commander of the 20th Division during the reconquest of Burma, Gracey, a plain-speaking soldier with limited political experience, was delegated from late August 1945 to supervise the Japanese surrender and disarmament in Indochina below the 16th parallel. He had a tendency to make unconsidered remarks such as the above that were liable to be misinterpreted

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All WO, FO and CAB references are to the Public Record Office, Kew, London; GP refers to the papers of Douglas Gracey held in the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College, University of London; MP refers to the papers of Earl Mountbatten of Burma held in the Hartley Library, University of Southampton; USNA refers to State Department papers held in the US National Archives, Maryland, USA.

1 Colonel Melvin Hall, ‘Aspects of the Present Situation in Indo-China’, *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 40, 3 and 4 (July–October 1953), 213; Dennis J. Duncanson, ‘General Gracey and the Viet Minh’, *Royal Central Asian [Society] Journal*, 55, 3 (October 1968), 288–97, attempts to vindicate Gracey’s actions in Saigon.

by hostile commentators and also telescoped events ('promptly') that did not take place until ten days after his arrival. Yet British-Indian troops and foreign legionnaires under Gracey's overall command were indeed responsible, on 23 September 1945, for removing control of Saigon's main buildings, however insecure, from the communist-led Vietminh; actions that helped to facilitate the eventual French reoccupation of all of southern Indochina.

The major-general's collusion in the military coup that restored the French to power in Saigon, given its long-term effects and explicit support for French colonialism, has nonetheless invited various misconceptions, particularly among American commentators on Vietnam. 'General Gracey took it upon himself to restore Indochina south of the sixteenth parallel to the French and thereby engaged the British Government in a responsibility for the [French colonial] war which followed', according to historian Ellen J. Hammer, writing not long after the final collapse of the French on 7 May 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>2</sup> So did Gracey *personally* initiate the takeover in Saigon without first clearing it with the proper military and political authorities, as the preceding comment implies, or was he, as the local commanding officer, acting under orders from his more senior commanders in the region and the British government to 'kick out' the Vietminh?

Ten years ago, a celebrated article on 'the imperialism of decolonization' argued in passing that the previously anti-colonial Americans generously subsidized the British and French empires as the Cold War intensified after 1947 'to block Sino-Soviet expansion into territories on the rim of southern and western Asia'. What follows endorses a less familiar perspective that from the autumn of 1945, following the Japanese surrender, discredited French (and Dutch) imperial power in south-east Asia could not have been reconstituted, however provisionally, without the military intervention of the British. This article will closely examine the influences on and the choices available to British military and political decision-makers both in London and Asia in the crucial months before significant French re-entry into southern Indochina.<sup>3</sup>

In a largely face-saving exercise, the Allied Joint Chiefs of Staff, meeting at Potsdam, a Berlin suburb, in July 1945, had decided to divide responsibility for postwar Vietnam by asking Chiang Kai-shek's insecure nationalist China to occupy former French Indochina north of the 16th parallel and Britain's over-stretched South-East Asia Command (SEAC), led since 1943 by Vice-

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2 Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940–1955* (Stanford, CA 1966), 115. See also: Harold R. Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (Cambridge, MA 1967), 151; Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York 1967), 327; Theodore Draper, *Abuse of Power* (New York 1967), 21.

3 William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Decolonization', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22, 3 (1994), 468; Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War, 1945–1950* (Cambridge/New York 1998).

Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, south of it. The British were held responsible for Cambodia, Cochinchina and large sections of Annam and Laos below Hue because of American reluctance to become directly involved and also French inability to retrieve their former colonial possessions without immediate access to Allied troop-carriers. Even so, the arrival of SEAC's Allied, in fact British-Indian, troops under Gracey's command in the southern city of Saigon was regrettably delayed both by transport difficulties and by the insistence of the American Supreme Commander, General Douglas MacArthur, that SEAC must await the general Japanese surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945 before taking over locally-surrendered territories in south-east Asia. The hiatus between the initial Japanese surrender in mid-August and the arrival nearly a month later of Allied troops in the province of Cochinchina was critical. If not for MacArthur's ruling, Gracey's forces might have reached Saigon, with its strategic position near the Mekong delta, long before the Vietminh could have strengthened what tenuous power they already possessed.<sup>4</sup>

For 80 years Saigon, with its tree-lined boulevards and pavement cafés, had been the southern hub of French Indochina, but from 1942 to 1945 it also became the main wartime headquarters of the Japanese armies in south-east Asia. The city's tolerated Vichy-French collaborationist regime, under High Commissioner Admiral J. Decoux, had crumbled on 9 March 1945, offering little resistance to its final absorption by Japan, whose own demoralized troops awaited repatriation only six months later. Following a premature Vietminh independence celebration in Saigon on 25 August 1945, Ho Chi Minh ('He who enlightens', one of several aliases) made his famous declaration to 500,000 northerners in Hanoi on 2 September of an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), modelled on the American Declaration of Independence — the text of which had been supplied to him by an American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agent. This seizure of power by the communists to the north found the Vietminh in the south, led by the ruthless Tran Van Giàu, ill-prepared for self-government; in Saigon they were but one among a multiplicity of rival political and religious groups with private armies jockeying for power.<sup>5</sup>

A Vietminh 'provisional executive committee' had been hastily set up, nevertheless, to govern the two (virtually separate) cities of Saigon and the neighbouring, Chinese-dominated Cholon, while a 'committee of the South' was also in place to rule Cochinchina. The communists were soon wrangling with General de Gaulle's representative, Jean Cédile, the newly-appointed French commissioner for Cochinchina, parachuted into Saigon on 24 August

4 Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. V, *The Surrender of Japan* (London 1969), 224–6. SEAC headquarters were initially in Rangoon, Burma, then in Kandy, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and later in Singapore.

5 Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York 1991), 140; Peter Dennis, *Troubled Days of Peace: Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, 1945–46* (Manchester 1987), 35–6.

— over two weeks in advance of any SEAC presence — and briefly imprisoned, embarrassingly, by the Japanese. Meanwhile, stubborn French *colons*, former Vichy civilian residents in Saigon, afraid of losing their colonial privileges under Vietnamese rule, were bracing for a fight with local nationalists who they chose to believe were, without exception, mere agents of the Japanese. SEAC headquarters had been told, misleadingly, that ‘*deux coups de fusil*’ (a couple of shots) would soon disperse any anti-French resistance. During the intervening weeks before Gracey’s troops arrived, however, the Vietminh managed to consolidate their political and military position.<sup>6</sup>

Following a poorly-controlled mass demonstration in Saigon on 2 September 1945, Independence Day, that resulted in the shootings of both French and Vietnamese, the Vietminh acting provisional government had taken active measures to restore order and confidence. They arrested and executed Trotskyite leaders and also members of Saigon’s armed political or religious cults like the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, but the French civilian population remained highly nervous, combining an almost hysterical fear of the Vietnamese with an intense hatred and desire for revenge. Tensions escalated with the emergence of the Binh Xuyen, a mercenary gang of guns for hire which, until its violent elimination by Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955, would cheerfully serve the Vietminh or any other faction and even police south Indochina for the French in exchange for the franchise to manage brothels, casinos and opium dens. Violence grew as rival Vietnamese factions either fought each other or confronted the trigger-happy French settlers.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until 8 September 1945 that a small British advance party landed on Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut airfield to set up the Allied control commission, based on recent German precedent and pre-planned in Rangoon. Five days later, Gracey arrived from Rangoon to head up the commission, together with his Chief of Staff, Brigadier M.S.K. Maunsell, only to find the city and its surrounding area in chaos. The inadequate British-led Indian forces were not yet fully present and armed Japanese, who politely collected the Major-General from his plane, now ringed the airfield. Eyewitness accounts confirm that Gracey walked straight past the second-rank Vietminh delegation, led by Dr Pham-ngoc-Thach and Maître Phan van-Bach, waiting patiently at the airfield, and avoided meeting them thereafter. Gracey’s peremptory treatment of the nationalist welcoming committee and his impromptu comments cited at the outset indicate that, in the chaotic situation of a Saigon newly liberated from Japanese occupation, both the General and the Allied Command chose not to recognize the ‘precarious authority’ which the Vietminh were asserting,

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6 David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, CA 1995), 454–62; D.J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (Oxford/London 1968), chap. 4, for a detailed account of nationalist rivalries.

7 ‘Summary of Events in FIC Prior to Arrival of British Forces’, 4/8, GP; Marr, op. cit., 83–4; Karnow, op. cit., 164; Report of H.N. Brain, FO Political Adviser, 27 September 1945, WO203/5562.

based on evidence of messages broadcast over Radio Hanoi in the name of the self-proclaimed DRV.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Chinese forces arrived in north Indochina (Tonkin) in early September like a 'swarm of locusts' to pillage, rape and loot, the main fly-in of British-Indian troops into Saigon did not even begin until 11 September 1945, almost a month after Japan's capitulation marked the end of the second world war. The whole of the 80th Infantry Brigade of the 20th Indian Division was not fully established in Saigon until three days after the 23 September coup and, for reasons to be made clear, remained a solitary brigade of just 1800 British-officered Indian and Gurkha troops for several more weeks. The British Chiefs of Staff (COS) directive, issued through Mountbatten, requested Gracey to avoid interfering in Vietnam's internal problems and merely to organize the repatriation of prisoners of war and to enforce the surrender and disarmament of Japanese soldiers, of whom in the south there were about 40,000. In the Thu Duc-Bien Noa area north-east of Saigon and in the city itself, there were another 25,000 Japanese, nearly 2000 of whom had deserted, a committed anti-western minority joining the Vietminh resistance. Despite the much wider mandate of the Potsdam Agreement, Mountbatten was told repeatedly by the COS in London that SEAC should 'not occupy more of French Indo-China than is necessary to ensure the control of the headquarters [in Saigon] of the Japanese Southern Armies'.<sup>9</sup>

So from September 1945 until January 1946 Gracey was responsible for both the Saigon Control Commission and Allied Land Forces French Indochina (ALFFIC) below that territory's 16th parallel. These two pivotal commands made him a reluctant but critical player in tumultuous events not limited to his appointed task of enforcing Japanese surrender and disarmament. As head of the Commission, Gracey was directly responsible to Lord Mountbatten as Supreme Allied Commander South-east Asia (SACSEA), yet as Commander-in-Chief of ALFFIC below the 16th parallel he also answered to General Sir William Slim, Commander-in-Chief of Allied Land Forces South-east Asia (ALFSEA). Adding to the confusion that already existed, Slim had also given Gracey much wider *military* terms of reference. An ALFSEA directive issued on 28 August 1945 instructed Gracey to 'secure the Saigon area', disarm the Japanese, rescue Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and, crucially, to 'maintain law and order and ensure internal security'. He was also told, and this is key, to 'liberate Allied territory in so far as your resources permit'.<sup>10</sup>

8 Peter M. Dunn, *The First Vietnam War* (London 1985), 152, 364–5. Based on a PhD thesis by a former US air force colonel, this is both a detailed study of and extended apologia for Gracey's actions in Cochinchina.

9 Dennis, *op. cit.*, 36–8; Dunn, *op. cit.*, 171; Chiefs of Staff to SACSEA, 13 August 1945, COSSEA 314, CAB 105/165.

10 SEAC Joint Planning Staff Force Plan 1, 'Occupation of French Indo-China', 31 August 1945, WO203/5444; ALFSEA Operational Directive No. 12, 'Masterdom', 28 August 1945, GP and WO 203/2066. 'Masterdom' was the ALFSEA code name for the Allied military occupation of south Indochina.

Relations between Gracey and the French Commissioner in Saigon, Jean Cédile, remained cordial, although the former refrained, initially, from any direct political intervention. Yet Cédile seemed confident on 17 September, writing unofficially to General Jacques-Philippe Leclerc, Commander of all French Armed Forces in Indochina, both that a French takeover was imminent and that it would receive British backing:

Until now, I have had excellent relations with Major-General Gracey and his officers. It is clear that, above all, he wants to sort out the Japanese question. Then only, and when he has sufficient forces, we will work to establish French authority. Equally, without doubt, the English are refraining from and will refrain from all political action. They will maintain 'law and order' [in English in original] but they will leave to us the business of sorting out all the other questions. I think that in about a week a French administration will be established in Saigon.

Intriguingly, Cédile also alluded to a dozen OSS officers, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Dewey, whose ubiquitous presence in Saigon 'seems to have annoyed the English'.<sup>11</sup>

A determining event for the evaluation of whether or not Gracey acted independently of Mountbatten's SEAC directives took place only six days after his arrival. On 19 September 1945, he delegated Brigadier Maunsell, as Chief of Staff of the Control Commission, to hand to Tran Van Giau and the Vietminh provisional government occupying the Hotel de Ville a copy of a declaration that Gracey intended to publish and enforce two days later. This document imposed a ban on all demonstrations, processions and public meetings; prohibited the carrying of arms; imposed a stricter night curfew, and demanded the closing down of all Vietnamese newspapers (rescinded under protest). On 21 September, and without receiving Mountbatten's prior approval, Gracey formally issued this announcement — effectively of martial law in Saigon. His authority supposedly came from Mountbatten, who had delegated to him, according to the proclamation, 'the command of all British, French and Japanese forces and all police forces and armed bodies in French Indo-China south of 16° latitude with orders to ensure law and order in this area'. In face of the unruly situation in Saigon, perhaps Gracey did not have the time to refer his statement beforehand to SEAC. He apologized that same evening, none the less, for having gone beyond Mountbatten's instructions: 'I would stress that though it may appear that I have interfered in the politics of the country, I have done so only in the interest of the maintenance of law and order and after close collaboration with the senior French representatives.'<sup>12</sup>

11 Jean Cédile to General Leclerc, 17 September 1945, 4, MBI/C158, MP (trans. Prof. Terry O'Keefe, University of Ulster). On the OSS and Dewey: Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service* (Cambridge 2000), 346–9; Dunn, op. cit., 155–6.

12 Dennis, op. cit., 39–40, 169; Gracey to Mountbatten, COS 21, 21 September 1945, WO203/5562. The signal form is marked in pencil: 'The question is whether Gen. Gracey has not exceeded his authority in para.1 of the proclamation.'

Mountbatten claimed in Section E of his report as SACSEA to the combined Chiefs of Staff, written in 1947 but not allowed publication in its entirety until 1969, that the 21 September proclamation was contrary to government policy. Hence Gracey was warned 'that he should take care to confine operations of British/Indian troops to those limited tasks which he had been set'. What Mountbatten and his Foreign Office advisers principally objected to was not Gracey's declaration of martial law but that it had been set in the context of his authority *over the whole of* French Indochina south of 16° latitude. 'We are, therefore, perforce left in a situation in which we must remain legally responsible for law and order throughout South Indo-China until the French take over', commented a report by the Joint Planning Staff that went before the British Cabinet Defence Committee on 5 October 1945. 'In view of the situation which has arisen, our responsibilities for the maintenance of law and order have become much greater than we wished.' The Saigon proclamation also ran entirely contrary to Gracey's most recent ALFSEA directive, as amended by Slim under Mountbatten's orders on 12 September 1945, just before the Major-General left SEAC in Rangoon on his way to Saigon.<sup>13</sup>

The ALFSEA document limited British authority only to certain 'key areas' necessary for control of the Japanese southern army's former headquarters in Saigon, 'and any other areas vital to the rescue of allied prisoners or the disarming of all Japanese'. There remains some doubt as to whether or not this revised directive was ever received by the Control Commission headquarters in Saigon *before* Gracey decided to issue his proclamation. 'You are not to employ British forces outside the Saigon area and must rely on the Japanese and French forces to enforce your orders', Mountbatten urgently cabled on 24 September. 'If the French call upon you to send forces outside your key areas the request must be referred to His Majesty's Government through me.' In taking the Potsdam Agreement at its face value, Gracey's assumption of responsibility for civil and military administration throughout *the whole of* southern Indochina would have required the use of at least a full British division, until the arrival of sufficient trained French soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

On 21 September 1945, meanwhile, once martial law had been declared in Saigon, Gracey, with only three infantry battalions of British, Indian and Gurkha troops at his disposal, lacked the muscle to enforce his proclamation. Hence the subsequent and infamous coup engineered to restore French colonial rule in the city was the outcome of a combined Anglo-French operation. The preliminary steps were taken almost exclusively by the 80th Infantry

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13 Vice-Admiral, the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Post-Surrender Tasks: Section E of the [1947] Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, 1943-1945* (London 1969), para. 26; Report by the Joint Planning Staff, 'French Indo-China — Measures for Responsibility for Internal Security by SACSEA (Annex 1)', Cabinet Defence Committee, 4 October 1945, FO371/46308/ F7695/ 11/G.

14 ALFSEA to Saigon Control Commission, 12 September 1945, WO203/5644; Mountbatten to Gracey, info. Slim, 24 September 1945; Mountbatten to Cabinet Offices, SEACOS 490, 24 September 1945, WO203/5562.

Brigade, such as the gradual takeover from armed Vietnamese police of commissariats, ammunition dumps, banks, pumping stations, hotels, the treasury and the Maison Centrale. As the Control Commission later informed SEAC, 'Indian and Gurkha troops took over the security of important positions before the coup, otherwise it would not have succeeded, nor would it have been attempted'. Encouraged by Cédile, on 22 September British-Indian soldiers released and rearmed several hundred excitable French troops, mostly foreign legionnaires imprisoned by the Japanese in Saigon jail (including some former Waffen SS recruited from the French *milice* who had enlisted as an alternative to being sent to POW camps in Europe).<sup>15</sup>

The desperate Vietminh leaders thereupon started to mobilize a massive protest demonstration, designed to cause casualties by provoking British and French reprisals that would attract world press attention. French soldiers pre-empted this tactic when, in the early hours of the day after their release, 23 September, they took over the aforementioned British-occupied positions, effectively ousting the Vietminh's provisional government, and then raised the tricolour from the rooftops of police stations and government buildings. 'Recently re-armed, untrained and undisciplined [sic] French Troops indulged in many FEU DE JOIE [the firing of guns in token of group rejoicing] which gave wrong impression of battle in progress', signalled Gracey to SEAC, feeling let down by French excesses and reprisals. Their ranks swollen by angry French civilians, the legionnaires were 'unnecessarily provocative and undisciplined', despite pleas for calm from Gracey and Cédile, appalled by events that they had themselves initiated. 'It was a tragic blunder, grievously compounded by the brutal and hysterical behaviour of the French', according to the author of an early disclosure of the British role in Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

'The [Saigon] proclamation followed by the eviction of the puppet [Vietminh] government saved a massacre!' Gracey exclaimed just over a year later, convinced that his 'strong action' had prevented many future casualties. The General's not entirely convincing defence of his 21–23 September 1945 actions, volunteered in response to a draft account of events intended for military dispatches, clarifies his imperial frame of mind. On arrival in Saigon, 'the situation was appreciated afresh', he claimed in retrospect:

It was quite evident that unless the puppet government was evicted and the French government reinstated almost immediately, in fact strong measures taken, not only would the puppet government's hold on the country be consolidated and their plans for subversive action and hooliganism be made firm, but also the landing by air and sea of [British] troops and supplies would become daily more hazardous.<sup>17</sup>

15 Control Commission to SEAC, 4/8, Brigadier Taunton, 'Build-Up of 80 Ind. Inf. Bde. at Saigon', 14 November 1945, 4/12, GP; Dunn, op. cit., 146, 173, fn. 8, 177.

16 Dennis, op. cit., 46–7; Dunn, op. cit., 193–6; Isaacs, op. cit., 153; Christopher Buckley, 'British Bringing Peace to Saigon', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1945, 3; Gracey to Mountbatten, 23 September 1945, WO203/5562; George Rosie, *The British in Vietnam: How the 25 Year War Began* (London 1970), 65.

17 Gracey to Recorder for SEAC, Rawalpindi, 3 October 1946, 2, 4/8, GP.



Gracey seems unable to distinguish here between military operations necessary to fulfil his instructions to disarm and remove the Japanese and those, as Peter Dennis has pointed out, that not only directly assisted the French in their struggle with the Vietnamese but also had the effect of postponing completion of the Japanese surrender task that had brought him to Indochina in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

As an Indian army officer, Gracey was convinced beyond doubt that the French had a moral and political right to re-establish themselves in their former colony, 'and there is equally no doubt that a commander-in-chief with a more even-handed approach would have acted differently', argues historian John Saville. Given the Major-General's limited political experience, lack of informed advice perhaps helps to explain the precipitate action taken on 23 September. Gracey had not been accompanied from Rangoon by a Foreign Office political adviser and had to manage as best he could for some ten days until Harry N. Brain (later Sir Norman Brain) of Mountbatten's political affairs staff reached him not long after the coup.<sup>19</sup>

Responding to the French frenzy in Saigon, meanwhile, the Vietminh leaders launched a general strike on 24 September 1945, interpreted by some historians as the opening act of the long-drawn-out war to prevent restoration of French colonial rule. Saigon-Cholon was paralysed by morning with electricity and water supplies halted. Twenty thousand French civilians, 13 per cent of a total population of about 150,000, barricaded their houses or fled in panic to the security of the old Continental Palace Hotel, the attractive billet for French and British officers. 'The crackle of gunfire and the thud of mortars soon resonated through the city, as armed Vietminh squads attacked the airport, burned the central market and stormed the local prison to liberate hundreds of Vietnamese inmates', writes Stanley Karnow. In the Cité Hérault, a north-central residential suburb, Binh Xuyen bandits, possibly led by Vietminh or, more likely, Trotskyite agents, slipped past Japanese guards at dawn on 25 September and massacred between 150 and 300 French and Eurasian civilians, sparing neither women nor children. Communist historians predictably omit any mention of this atrocity in their accounts of the period. Two days later, Dewey of the OSS, accidentally killed in a maverick Vietminh ambush near the Saigon golf course, was the first of nearly 60,000 Americans eventually to be killed in Vietnam. The fighting that took place between British-Indian troops, Japanese and Vietnamese nationalists in and around Saigon, before French troops arrived in large numbers, has been dubbed by one historian as, post-1945, the first Vietnam war.<sup>20</sup>

On 28 September 1945 Mountbatten, as Supreme Allied Commander, airlifted Gracey, Cédile and adviser Brain from Saigon to Singapore to discuss the situation with J.J. Lawson, the visiting British Secretary of State for War.

18 Dennis, *op. cit.*, 171.

19 John Saville, *The Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945-46* (London 1993), 192; Dunn, *op. cit.*, 177-8.

20 Rosie, *op. cit.*, 67; Karnow, *op. cit.*, 165.

Gracey was asked why he had issued his martial law edict of a week before, dealing with the whole of Indochina south of the 16th parallel, after having been confined by his ALFSEA directive to the key areas in and around Saigon. He vigorously defended himself by pointing out that this did not absolve him from responsibility for ensuring order throughout the rest of the command, if necessary by using Japanese forces. Gracey then confronted his chief about the withholding of the remaining brigades of the 20th Indian Division, promised before he left Rangoon. Mountbatten smoothly claimed that he had denied Gracey the entire division promised for the Saigon area 'because he felt that the only way to avoid the embarrassment of being unable to comply with French demands . . . was to maintain there the absolute minimum number of British/Indian troops'.<sup>21</sup>

Enlarging on the Labour government's policy in Indochina, Mountbatten alluded to General Scobie's pushing the communists out of Athens late in 1944 with severe British casualties, pointing out that 'as a result of what had occurred in Greece, the British government was determined that British troops should not incur casualties in carrying out operations which were not primarily a British responsibility, nor should they intervene in the internal politics of a foreign country'. So the Athens operation and subsequent Greek civil war not only influenced SEAC's reluctance to become involved beyond Saigon and the dispatch of the last-minute amendment to Gracey's ALFSEA directive but also, in all probability, the Major-General's under-strength and hence circumscribed Allied command. Equally, Mountbatten could ill afford to send extra troops, influenced by the 'disparity between massive [British] responsibilities and limited resources', without serious consequences for Britain's own colonial reoccupation plans in Malaya, Singapore and elsewhere in south-east Asia.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately persuaded that more British troops were required, Mountbatten finally relented and instructed Slim to complete the build-up of the division with the proviso that Gracey take action to facilitate contact between the French and the Vietminh. On his return to Saigon, Gracey insisted that Mountbatten had decided to relieve him of his command, until both Slim ('If he goes, I go!') and General Leclerc — a devout Catholic aristocrat with whom Gracey had bonded — forcefully intervened to prevent his dismissal. As the man-on-the-spot, Gracey received Mountbatten's official support even so, but he was reprimanded in that British responsibility was in future to be limited only to the 'key areas' outlined in Slim's amended directive of 12 September. All other areas were to be turned over to the only French troops available and relatively close at hand in Ceylon: the 5th Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale (RIC), with a strength of less than 1000 under Leclerc. Precipitating the break-

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21 Minutes of SAC's 31<sup>st</sup> Misc. Meeting and 286th Meeting, Singapore, 28 September 1945, WO203/5608.

22 Ibid.; Hugh Tinker, 'The Contraction of Empire in Asia, 1945–48: The Military Dimension', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 16, 2 (January 1988), 223.

down of a British-Vietminh truce, this French expeditionary force did not arrive in Saigon until 5 October 1945, after first breaking a Vietminh blockade around the city, then driving through the Mekong delta, constantly harassed by enemy guerrillas, and up into the highlands.<sup>23</sup>

Gracey had earlier delivered an ultimatum to the Japanese commander, Field Marshal Count Terauchi, that his men had to be co-operative in maintaining order in and around Saigon or he would be held as a war criminal. Because the British-Indian occupying force was expected to suppress the Vietnamese uprising in Saigon-Cholon, it had to make extensive use of the Japanese military, not only in support and auxiliary roles but also as active combat units, often, though not always, under the command of British officers. Japanese troops would not, in any case, obey French officers, whom they associated with Admiral Decoux's disgraced Vichy regime. Gracey's operational employment of 'surrendered' Japanese troops in Cochinchina went almost entirely unnoticed by British public opinion, whereas reliance on the Japanese to re-occupy nationalist-held towns in the former Dutch East Indies, also subject to SEAC, received extensive publicity; nearly all of it unfavourable to the British as imperialist aggressors. Yet ALFFIC were steadily increasing the role that Japanese soldiers played in restoring French control over southern Indochina throughout October and November 1945, at a time when British newspapers were retailing the horrors inflicted by the Japanese upon prisoners of war and civilian internees throughout south-east Asia. Several hundred Japanese soldiers deserted to join the Vietminh and other nationalists but the majority co-operated with Allied troops and were used extensively to control insurgents. The official history of 20th Indian Division noted that: 'All the dirty work, to fight and disarm the Annamites (Vietnamese), was assigned to the Japanese troops', thereby reducing casualties among British-Indian troops. Gracey's estimates up to the end of January 1946 gave 3 British soldiers killed, 37 Indian or Gurkha, 106 French, 110 Japanese and 3026 Vietnamese (of whom 1825 were reported as killed by the French, 651 by Indian or Gurkha troops and 550 by the Japanese).<sup>24</sup>

Then, on 1 October 1945, the British Chiefs of Staff abruptly changed their collective ruling and finally authorized Gracey to assist the French in the interior. For at the Singapore summit meeting a few days earlier, Gracey had made it quite clear that Japanese soldiers would alone be held responsible for the

23 SACSEA to Cabinet Offices, 29 September 1945, F3071/46308/F7651; Dunn, op. cit., 230, 232, fn. 12.

24 Gracey to Terauchi, 24 September 1945, WO203/5608; Phil Kaiserman, 'Saigon '45: With the Japs in Vietnam', *Journal of Unconventional History*, 9, 2 (Winter 1998), 12–13; official history cited: Saville, op. cit., 199; 'List of casualties inflicted and incurred in the (British) occupation of Southern Indochina up to 27 Jan. 1946', 4/8, GP; 'Official casualties, mid-Oct. 1945 to mid-Jan. 1946', *Foreign Office Documents on British Involvement in the Indo-China Conflict, 1945–46* (London 1965), xviii.

safety of Allied nationals outside Saigon-Cholon, at least until the build-up of French troops ensured that no outside British help would be required. There was no real fear that the self-regard of the French would allow them to call on British-Indian forces for military aid much beyond Saigon and such proved to be the case. A left-wing member of an RAF servicing commando unit who, from mid-October, took part in 'security sweeps' of the countryside surrounding Saigon airfield, searching villages for hidden 'terrorists', weapons and ammunition, recalls despondently that 'the majority of the Squadron saw nothing wrong in what they were being asked to do'.<sup>25</sup>

Earlier, the American army liaison section in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) had accurately reported via New Delhi to the State Department in Washington that, because of unavoidable delays in the arrival of French troops, the British COS had sent new instructions to SEAC, placing a definite emphasis 'on maximum practicable support of the French and on the maintenance of law and order rather than on a narrow limitation of British responsibility and strict non-intervention in the internal affairs of Indo-China as advocated by Lord Mountbatten'. The Americans, perhaps briefed by SEAC, considered that this shift of emphasis was particularly interesting and speculated that it may well have resulted from French government pressure on the British. So Gracey was now officially authorized to assist the French in maintaining order *outside the key areas*, provided that he could do so without prejudicing the military discharge of his primary responsibility in the Saigon area.<sup>26</sup>

The political and diplomatic dilemma for the British was that Gracey, and by extension SEAC and ALFFIC, could not continue to support the French in Indochina without alienating nationalist China and anti-colonial American opinion. Yet precipitate retreat from Saigon would certainly anger the French and perhaps encourage nationalist revolt in Britain's own reoccupied south-east Asian colonial possessions like Burma. French troops had to be sent to southern Indochina with the utmost dispatch, advised the Far Eastern experts at the Foreign Office, so that British troops could be withdrawn as soon as possible. Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), took a less urgent view, given the early October negotiations Gracey had been obliged to open between the French and Vietnamese leaders and a temporary ceasefire in and around Saigon (abandoned on 6 October). CIGS recommended to the British Cabinet Defence Committee meeting on 5 October 1945 that 'the situation was not at present sufficiently serious to pay the expense [a delay in the naval repatriation of 12,000 Indian soldiers] involved in speeding up the arrival of the extra French [colonial] division by one month only'.<sup>27</sup>

25 Mountbatten to Chiefs of Staff, 28 September 1945, WO203/5562; Kaiserman, op. cit., 14.

26 Yost, Kandy, Ceylon, to Terry, War Dept., New Delhi, India, 2 October 1945, 851G 00/10-2345, USNA.

27 'Situation in Indochina', Minutes of Meeting, Cabinet Defence Committee, 5 October 1945, PREM 8/63 and CAB 69/7; SACSEA to Cabinet Offices, 22 October 1945, WO203/5608; F.S.V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943-46* (London 1956), 409.

Summing up the discussion, Prime Minister Clement Attlee noted that 'the situation in French Indo-China did not appear to warrant any precipitate action to alter the present scheduled movements for French forces to Indo-China'. Mountbatten, conversely, was finding it increasingly 'hard to counter the accusations that our forces are remaining in the country solely to hold the VietNam independence movement in check'. Despite disclaimers of any British political interest, as Gracey bluntly told Mountbatten on 9 November 1945, 'the Annamites (Vietnamese) have felt . . . that 20 Ind. Div. is being used as cover to allow French troops to be brought into the country; and, therefore, that in fact we are anything but impartial'. In any case, 4457 French soldiers had arrived ten days later with two armoured divisions but not until the end of December did the entire 9th Division d'Infanterie Coloniale (DIC), 17,000 strong, all white, and with American equipment, arrive in Cochinchina.<sup>28</sup>

Mountbatten himself flew into Saigon on 29 November 1945 to discuss with General Leclerc the eventual turnover of command, but was not best pleased when he found out that Gracey had been using Japanese forces *directly under British officers* to fight against the Vietnamese, 'for however good your reason this is a potential source of political trouble, and I found on my return [to Kandy] a telegram from Lord Halifax [British ambassador to Washington] saying how incensed American public opinion was at the British use of Japanese troops'. Pandit Nehru, soon to become the next Indian National Congress president, also raised the problematic issue of Indian troops being used to suppress fellow Asian nationalists. 'We have watched British intervention there [in the East Indies and Indochina] with growing anger, shame and helplessness that Indian troops should thus be used for doing Britain's dirty work against our friends [the nationalists] who are fighting the same fight as we.'<sup>29</sup>

Soon sufficient French troops were at last in the southern zone and the 20th Division could prepare to withdraw in mid-December, having cleared out the last remaining Vietminh stronghold in the Saigon-Cholon area. On 28 January 1946, just before his departure, Gracey was made a freeman, '*Citoyen d'Honneur*', of Saigon by Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, an arrogant and inflexible former monk made High Commissioner for Indochina, the equivalent of Governor, by de Gaulle. The British Control Commission in Saigon was finally wound up, leaving the French colonial authorities (now with almost 50,000 troops) and the Vietminh to settle their irreconcilable differences by themselves. Two months later, on 26 March 1946, the last remaining forces of Gracey's command left the Saigon area and evacuations of disarmed Japanese from the assembly point at Cap St Jacques began in earnest

28 'Situation in Indochina', op. cit.; Gracey to Mountbatten, 9 November 1945, MBI/C113/6-7, MP; SACSEA Joint Planning Staff, 'Turnover of Command', 19 November 1945, WO203/5608; Anthony Clayton, *The Wars of French Decolonization* (Harlow 1994), 41-5.

29 'Japanese forces are still operationally employed in the maintenance of law and order', Gracey to Mountbatten, 9 November 1945, MBI/C113/7, MP; Mountbatten to Gracey, 4 December 1945, MBI/C84, MP; Nehru speech, *The New York Times*, 1 January 1946, cited in Hammer, op. cit., 119-20.

in May. 'I am rather proud of French Indo-China', Mountbatten congratulated himself, 'since I think I have succeeded in carrying out the British commitment with more success than any of the prophets forecast.'<sup>30</sup>

The complex demands made upon the man-on-the-spot, General Gracey, involved in 'a somewhat tricky form of international quadrille' with the Vietnamese, the French and the Japanese, are undeniable and have impressed scholars of south-east Asia such as Anthony Short:

Between the Japanese and the French (Gaullist and Vichy), not to mention the Vietminh, the American OSS, governments in India and in Britain anxious to bring their troops home, and Mountbatten anxious to maintain an immaculate record, Gracey would have been hard pressed even if his orders had been transparently clear.<sup>31</sup>

Yet the Allied Commander for SEAC in the former Netherlands East Indies, Lieutenant-General Philip Christison, faced similar problems in trying to 'hold the ring' in Java and Sumatra between the returning Dutch, the defeated Japanese and the nationalist Indonesians, while making much greater efforts to encourage negotiations. Gracey took no political initiative of even the most basic kind to arrange talks between French representatives and the Vietnamese nationalist leaders, until ordered after the 23 September coup by his senior commander to bring the opposing sides together. Christison, on the other hand, continuously interceded between Indonesian republicans and returning Dutch colonialists, to the extent of refusing to allow poorly-trained Dutch troops to land in Java, as well as confining those recently released from imprisonment by the Japanese to camps outside Batavia (Jakarta).<sup>32</sup>

It was certainly the Labour government's policy, under Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, to assist in the recovery of French 'sovereignty' or colonial rule over Indochina, whatever pretence of disinterested neutrality was communicated to the international media. When the Chinese ambassador visited the Foreign Office in September 1945, Bevin told him: 'We naturally assumed that Indo-China would return to France.' Seven months earlier, Mountbatten's shrewd but, on occasion, personally unpopular chief political adviser, Esler Denning, based at SEAC headquarters in Rangoon, had requested the guidance of his Foreign Office masters in handling French colonial affairs in his area. The head of the Far Eastern department at the Foreign Office, J.C. Sterndale-

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30 Dennis, *op. cit.*, 179; Mountbatten to Tom Driberg, 17 December 1945, MBI/C91, MP. In 1947 Gracey became Chief of Staff to the army of the new Pakistan and then Commander-in-Chief from 1948 until his retirement in 1951.

31 Christopher Buckley, *op. cit.*, 3; Anthony Short, review of Dunn, *op. cit.*, in *History*, 27, 234 (February 1987), 152.

32 John Springhall, 'Disaster in Surabaya': The Death of Brigadier Mallaby during the British Occupation of Java, 1945-46', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24, 3 (September 1996), 422-43; General Sir Philip Christison, *Life and Times of General Sir Philip Christison*, unpublished MS, Imperial War Museum Library; Dennis, *op. cit.*, 169.

Bennett, claimed: 'We want to see French Indo-China restored to France, not merely as part of our general policy of building up a France friendly to us, but in the interests of stability in the Far East.' A less senior Whitehall official further minuted that:

Our main reason for favouring the restoration of Indo-China to France is that we see danger to our own Far Eastern colonies in President Roosevelt's claim that restoration depends upon the United Nations (or rather the United States) satisfying themselves that the French record in Indo-China justifies the restoration of French authority.

Another official added that, for essential reasons of Europe's postwar security, it was British government policy 'to help France to recover her former strength and influence and to cultivate the closest possible relations with her'. Foreign Office officials considered a strong and friendly France, therefore, as a *sine qua non* for postwar British security. The newly-elected government's approval was hence given to the restoration of Indochina to French colonial rule. Britain's own colonial interests and good relations within Europe took precedence, that is, over any socialist gesture of support for rising Vietnamese nationalist sentiment.<sup>33</sup>

The drawback to this policy, as Dening pointed out, was that 'at the very outset' in Saigon objection was taken by the Vietminh 'to the presence of British troops as supporting French imperialism'. Brigadier J.E. Hirst, who early in October 1945 attempted to negotiate a truce with the Vietminh, privately admitted that the nationalists had some justification in claiming that 'although we say we have no political interest in this country [south Indochina] and are impartial, we are in fact being used to cover the concentration of large French forces'. For several vital months Gracey commanded the only Allied troops in south Indochina, during which time British forces created a shield in Saigon behind which French forces could progressively reoccupy the country. Attlee's government was consequently open to attack from anti-colonial American opinion, what Dening referred to as 'the accusation that we are assisting the West to suppress the East', as British-Indian, French and Japanese forces in and around Saigon attempted to suppress anti-colonial insurgency. The French, on the other hand, would have interpreted a policy of complete non-intervention as a further step towards Britain's alleged long-term objective of pushing them out of their colonial territories. The British Foreign Office gave a high priority, meanwhile, to getting French troops into 'Indochina' and, after turning power over to them, wanted to withdraw British forces as speedily as possible. Yet British military occupation was prolonged

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<sup>33</sup> Bevin to Sir H. Seymour (Chunking), 17 September 1945, FO371/F800/461; Dening to J.C. Sterndale-Bennett, 16 February 1945, Sterndale-Bennett to Dening, 14 April 1945, FO371/46304/F1269/11/G; L.H. Foulds and R.M. Speaight, minutes, 5 March 1945, FO371/46304/F1261/11/61; Saville, *op. cit.*, 182–3, 190; Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944–1947* (Providence, RI 1996), 273–7.

because of urgent priorities for Allied shipping other than transporting French troops.<sup>34</sup>

Major-General Gracey, an old-school conservative, held the paternalistic view that 'natives' should not defy their European rulers. Yet he also sharply reproached newly-arrived French officers and their troops, through Leclerc, for indiscriminately treating his cherished Indian and Gurkha soldiers merely as if they were 'blacks'. Despite Ho Chi Minh's assertion of Vietnam's independence from the French, Gracey, before leaving for Saigon, had publicly affirmed stated Allied policy that the government of southern Indochina would remain exclusively French and that the latter were expected to reassume control in a matter of weeks. In 1953, after years of vicious colonial warfare, Gracey still felt that the French were doing 'a magnificent job of work', despite the 'almost impossible situation' and the receipt of an 'awful lot of criticism . . . which is absolutely unfounded'. Gracey has been unreasonably accused, however, of violating orders received from Mountbatten and SEAC by taking it upon *himself* to restore southern Indochina to the French. The available evidence suggests that tacit support for the recovery of their Asian colonies by European allies was already a prerequisite of British foreign policy. Gracey has become a convenient scapegoat for those whose misplaced hostility could be more appropriately directed towards the determined post-1945 reassertion of European colonialism in south-east Asia.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Denning to FO, 9 and 19 September 1945; Sterndale-Bennett to Price, 25 September 1945, FO371/46308/ F7161/11/61; H.N. Brain to E. Denning, 'Report on Political and Economic Conditions in Saigon Region', 8 October 1945, WO203/5562; Brigadier Hirst to Gracey, 10 October 1945, 4/18, GP.

35 Gracey to Leclerc, 12 December 1945, 4/10, GP; Dunn, op. cit., 362, 367; Colonel Melvin Hall, op. cit., 213; Dennis, op. cit., 170; John Springhall, *Decolonization since 1945: The Collapse of European Overseas Empires* (Basingstoke 2001), 31–64; Tarling, op. cit.