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“We Buried Imperialism Here Today”

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In contrast to the widespread violence and disorder in southern Vietnam and Indonesia, the Chinese occupation of northern Vietnam was remarkably peaceful and orderly. Chiang Kai-shek assigned the Yunnan warlord General Lu Han to direct the occupation of the north. Most of Lu Han's troops were scheduled for early redeployment to northern China and Manchuria, where they would be needed in the anticipated confrontation with the Chinese Communists.

Unlike their British and Dutch counterparts, French colonials in Vietnam had not been obliged to forfeit their comfortable lifestyles when Indochina came under the sway of Greater East Asia. Feeling militarily vulnerable and encouraged by Vichy to cooperate, the French colonial authorities had made progressively greater concessions to the Japanese, allowing them to station troops in Indochina and to use the ports, railroads, and airfields. In return for French acquiescence in this de facto occupation, the Japanese allowed the French colonial government, headed by Admiral Jean Decoux, to remain in place and carry on most of its day-to-day functions. The French flag still flew over Hanoi, Haiphong, and Saigon. French colonial police patrolled the streets and colonial society still gathered in the cafes, but 50,000 Japanese troops garrisoned the country, Japanese planes flew from the airfields, and the Japanese Navy established a base at Cam Ranh Bay.

This convenient arrangement continued until March of 1945. By that point the Japanese had become increasingly concerned about the possibility of an Allied invasion of Indochina. They were also aware that the French colonials, at the urging of General Charles de Gaulle's newly installed government in Paris, were busily reinventing themselves as an anti-Japanese maquis to impress the Allies. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese moved suddenly against French garrisons and forts all over Indochina. A few French soldiers offered brief resistance, but most were quickly disarmed and many French soldiers, police, and colonial functionaries found themselves locked up in their own jails.

With the French deposed, the Japanese called upon the hereditary emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai, to form a government for “independent” Vietnam. Bao Dai's government, headed by Prime Minister Tran Trong Kim, had no popular following and little real power, but the disappearance of the French security apparatus and the preoccupation of the Japanese with preparing for the anticipated invasion provided an opportunity for more ambitious political groups to organize and expand. The best positioned of these organizations was the Viet Minh, a coalition of nationalist and anti-French groups dominated by the Indochinese Communist Party. Its leader was Ho Chi Minh, a veteran revolutionary who had battled French colonialism for decades. A founding member of the French Communist Party, Ho had trained in Moscow during the 1920s and guided the establishment of a communist organization in Vietnam during the 1930s. A man of great personal charm and magnetism, he combined tenacity of purpose with flexibility in action.

With the Japanese takeover the Viet Minh saw their opportunity. Viet Minh propaganda teams, proclamations, and underground newspapers told the people that the Japanese were now

the major enemy and would be vanquished like the French. Vietnamese soldiers of the former French colonial army and militia were encouraged to defect to the Viet Minh. Government officials, educators, and professionals in northern Vietnam secretly began to align with the Viet Minh. Mass front groups, such as the Women's National Salvation League and the Peasants Salvation Association, were quickly established. During the spring and summer of 1945, a devastating famine, caused by bad harvests and requisitions by the Japanese military, swept through northern Vietnam. The Viet Minh saw the famine as an opportunity to organize to seize the rice granaries of the colonial regime and direct popular resentment and anger against the French and Japanese.

Besides their success in infiltrating and mobilizing the population, the Viet Minh benefited from a unique advantage among Vietnamese nationalists, their association with the victorious Allies. Since 1944 the Viet Minh had been involved in the recovery and rescue of American aviators whose planes had been brought down over Indochina. After the Japanese takeover in March, the Viet Minh became the sole source of reliable intelligence for the Allies. In July 1945 the OSS chief of intelligence for Indochina, Major Archimedes L. Patti, met with Ho Chi Minh and agreed to send an OSS training team to arm and train the Viet Minh for guerrilla operations against the Japanese.

When news of the Japanese surrender reached the north, the Viet Minh were ready. Within a few days most of northern Vietnam, Tonkin, and a large portion of Annam in the center were in the hands of the Viet Minh. Emperor Bao Dai abdicated in favor of the new government, and the Japanese remained discreetly in the background, handing over responsibility for police, public order, and utilities to the new regime. On Sunday, September 2, a crowd swollen to 300,000 or 400,000 by arrivals from the countryside gathered in Ba Dinh Square near the former governor-general's palace in Hanoi to hear Ho Chi Minh read Vietnam's Declaration of Independence.

The Viet Minh knew that their new regime was in a race against time. Chinese occupation troops would arrive in a few weeks. The French were determined to regain control of their colony. The attitude of the Allies was uncertain. Widespread starvation remained a threat. Rival nationalist and anticolonial groups like the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD, or Vietnamese Nationalist Party), the formerly pro-Japanese Dai Viet, and the Chinese-backed Dong Minh Hoi were in temporary eclipse due to the Viet Minh's superior organization and its association with the Americans, but these groups retained a large following together with their own newspapers, radio stations, and armed militias.

The Viet Minh government did what it could to eliminate its opponents. Hundreds of nationalists were tried as "counterrevolutionaries" or disappeared into the hands of specially formed "honor squads for the elimination of traitors." Ngo Van Chieu, who had joined the Viet Minh in the spring of 1945, was in charge of soliciting "contributions" from wealthy Hanoi Vietnamese to help support Ho's new government. Potential beneficiaries who hesitated to contribute were imprisoned by the militia. Their wives were then notified that their husbands were sick and that they needed to pay 500 piasters a day to help restore their health. Prominent members of Bao Dai's government were executed at the time of the emperor's abdication. Decrees issued on September 5 and 12 outlawed the Quoc Dan Dang Party and the Dai Viet. Yet the Viet Minh could not go too far since some of its rivals, especially the Dong Minh Hoi, had close ties to the Chinese.

General Lu Han's occupation army advanced slowly into Indochina and did not reach Hanoi until September 14, 1945. "All day and all night the troops kept pouring into the city," recalled one Vietnamese observer. "They shocked everyone including the local Chinese community which had organized a formal welcoming committee for them. . . . The troops wore shoes of woven straw cloth or rubber cut out from tires or even went barefoot. They had tattered uniforms and looked tired and thin. Each unit was accompanied by cooks laden with pots and pans making a racket."

Accompanying Lu Han were American liaison teams of the Chinese Combat Command, an American military advisory organization that had been training Chinese troops in southern China when the war ended. The teams were under the command of Brigadier General Philip E. Gallagher, Lu Han's advisor. Major Patti was already in Hanoi with a small OSS team and had witnessed the independence ceremony. Ho treated Patti as a confidant and addressed messages through him to Washington, appealing for US support of Vietnam's independence.

Although the presence of these Americans in Hanoi appeared to be evidence of high-level interest in the fate of Indochina, their actual assignments were far more prosaic. In the case of Patti's OSS team, the principal mission, in addition to collecting general intelligence on Indochina, was to locate and assist Allied prisoners of war and internees, investigate war criminals, and assist in preparations for the surrender and disarmament of Japanese forces. General Gallagher's orders limited him to "advising and assisting the [Chinese] central government military forces during their movement to their areas of occupation" and providing necessary supplies and support.

The United States had never had a clearly defined policy toward Indochina, although President Roosevelt had been outspokenly critical of colonialism in his private comments and discussions. With his death in April 1945, the United States virtually ceased to take any active role in discussions of Indochina's future.

Nevertheless, many Vietnamese viewed the handful of Americans in Hanoi as a symbol of support for their independence, while the French viewed the Americans with suspicion as part of a conspiracy to displace them in Vietnam. Colonel Jean Sainteny, de Gaulle's representative in Hanoi, reported that "the role of mediator in this conflict has been conveniently assumed by the Americans who are especially interested in establishing future commercial relations."

The French expected to be treated as one of the victorious Allies in Asia just as they had been in Europe. Never mind that the French colonial regime had collaborated with the Japanese for almost five years—the de Gaulle government insisted that the brief, disorganized response to the Japanese coup of March 1945 constituted "resistance" and France had a right to expect its allies to help it regain its rightful position.

The Chinese were little inclined to cooperate. Lu Han was no Patton, and his army may have lacked spit and polish, but he knew a good deal when he saw one. Hanoi was virtually undamaged by the war. Its shops, businesses, and small manufacturers were still intact. The French-owned Bank of Indochina held thousands of piasters. The French garrison was still locked in the Citadel, an eighteenth-century fortress to which the Japanese had confined them after the March takeover.

Ignoring French protests and demands, the Chinese quickly came to a working agreement with Ho. French soldiers remained locked in the Citadel. The Viet Minh were not disarmed. Ho

was pressured but not compelled to include members of the Chinese-supported nationalist parties in his government. The price paid by the Viet Minh for this arrangement was high. The entire cost of the Chinese occupation forces in the north was to be borne by the Vietnamese, to be compensated later at a “fair” rate of exchange. The exchange rate between the almost worthless Chinese dollar and the Vietnamese piaster was arbitrarily set at 14 to 1, thus making the Chinese dollar worth three times more in Vietnam than in southern China.

Millions of Chinese dollars began to arrive in Indochina. In one instance \$60 million was reported on a single flight from Kunming. Lu Han’s officers, Major Patti recalled, “quickly organized themselves into tightly knit syndicates to buy out at ridiculously low cost every profitable enterprise they could. . . . Front companies and trusts were quickly formed to acquire outright ownership of or controlling interests in Vietnamese or French owned plantations, farmland, buildings, mines and factories. Even the small merchant was not spared. If they protested or dared to resist any offer made by the syndicate, the military had ways to persuade.” With their bargain shopping and other business activities, the Chinese, according to one estimate, managed to extract some 400 million piasters from the poorer half of a country whose total gross national product in 1939 had been 1.1 billion piasters.

In return for these concessions the Chinese dealt with the Viet Minh as the de facto government of Vietnam. Many Chinese officers had long-standing grudges against the French and were in no hurry to see them returned to power. When the French government sent General Marcel Alessandri as the official representative to the Japanese surrender ceremony, Lu Han refused to allow him to participate because of his “unclear position.” Nor would the Chinese general allow the French flag to be flown with those of the other Allied nations.

Yet while Lu Han and his generals were happy to give the back of their hand to the French in Hanoi, Chiang Kai-shek’s government was more than willing to negotiate a return of the French to northern Indochina in exchange for the surrender of the last remaining French concessions and special privileges in China. On January 8, 1946, the French and Chinese governments officially opened talks on the withdrawal of Chinese troops.

Since October, Ho and Sainteny had been meeting for secret talks in a villa off Paul Bert Square in central Hanoi. Sainteny was accompanied by Leon Pignon, a veteran colonial bureaucrat, and Ho by Hoang Minh Giam, the minister of culture. Sainteny recalled that while he talked, Ho “smoked continually—Chinese cigarettes, American cigarettes and the strong Gauloise cigarettes. Pignon smoked even more. . . . Our talks ended late at night in an atmosphere as thick with smoke as an opium den but without the euphoria.” The talks took on added urgency when the French negotiations with the Chinese government became known and as the French assembled an invasion force in the south to reoccupy northern Vietnam. The main point of contention in the talks was Ho’s insistence on explicit French recognition of Vietnam’s independence and unity.

While the talks dragged on, Ho took what steps he could to strengthen the Viet Minh’s position. The Indochina Communist Party was officially disbanded (to be replaced by a “Marxist Study Group” through which the party continued to function). To placate the Chinese and broaden popular support, Ho opened talks with the opposition nationalist parties for a broad coalition government, with elections to be held in January and with the VNQDD guaranteed 50 seats and the Dai Viet 20 seats in the new 350-delegate National Assembly.

The Viet Minh swept the subsequent elections. No voting took place in provinces such as Vinh Yen, Viet Tri, Yen Bay, and Lang Son where the nationalist parties predominated, but the Viet Minh candidates for these areas were nevertheless declared winners as well. Altogether the Viet Minh won 300 of the 350 seats, or 280 after the VNQDD and Dai Viet had received their guaranteed quota. The national elections gave prestige and legitimacy to the Viet Minh and enabled them to represent themselves as the authentic representatives of the Vietnamese people.

Having prevailed in the elections, the Viet Minh turned to neutralizing their Vietnamese opposition. Some of the opposition nationalist parties enjoyed the support of the Chinese. They also controlled an articulate and influential press, including two leading newspapers that regularly attacked and denounced the deeds of Ho's government and accused it of readiness to compromise with the French. The VNQDD also operated its own radio station.

Yet the parties were not united and all proved vulnerable to infiltration and disruption by the Viet Minh, who controlled the municipal police and the security services in the large cities and many parts of the provinces. The armed forces and the militia were also firmly under Viet Minh control. These organizations were used to control and disrupt nationalist activities and to infiltrate their leadership. Nationalists who appeared susceptible were pressured to defect to the Viet Minh through persuasion and propaganda, family pressure, blackmail, kidnapping, or torture.

“One of Ho's favorite tricks was to catch opposition elements with counterfeit money,” recalled the American vice-consul at Hanoi, James O'Sullivan. “Everybody had counterfeit money because that's something the Chinese do well. If [Ho's] men picked up somebody he'd always be carrying counterfeit money. Or you'd read in the newspapers that the Tu Ve [militia] had raided some Quoc Dan Dang place and found counterfeit piasters. Then maybe they dug around and claimed they'd found skeletons. . . . It was part of a consistent pattern of eliminating the opposition. These guys would be arrested and disappear.”

Outside the cities the nationalists fought back with some success but were handicapped by disunity and lack of coordination. Their support from the Chinese was changeable and uncertain, while at the same time the French began to look on the Viet Minh as a faction with which they might make a deal. “Thank goodness Ho Chi Minh is the boss,” wrote one French general. “He wants to get rid of the VNQDD which can only aid our cause.” Sainteny observed that while Ho's nationalist rivals demanded total and immediate independence as a condition of any negotiations, Ho seemed to be more reasonable.

On February 2, 1946, the French and Chinese governments finalized their agreement on “the relief” of the Chinese occupation troops by the French. A French expeditionary corps under General Leclerc was already on its way north by sea. Yet Ho and Sainteny still had reached no agreement. Finally in the early morning hours of March 6 as the expeditionary corps prepared to land, the two concluded a deal. France “recognized the Republic of Vietnam as a free state having its own parliament, army and finances.” Questions concerning the unification of the three parts of Vietnam were to be settled by popular referendum. In return, the government of Vietnam agreed to “amicably welcome” the French army when it arrived to “relieve” the Chinese troops.

On March 18, 1946, General Leclerc led a long column of trucks carrying the troops of the French Second Armored Division in a parade through central Hanoi. French residents of Hanoi “who thought the city had been liberated” lined the parade route cheering enthusiastically. “What they did not realize,” observed OSS cryptographer George Wickes, “is that it cost Leclerc

considerable face before he was allowed to enter the city with a ‘guard of honor’ of 1,000 troops.”

One week later Ho met with Admiral Thierry d’Argenlieu, high commissioner for Indochina, aboard a French cruiser in Halong Bay. A former Catholic monk as well as a naval officer, d’Argenlieu was a fervent disciple of de Gaulle. In politics he stood slightly to the right of Louis XIV. Personally he was imperious, grandiose, and implacably stubborn. During World War II he had inspired homicidal thoughts among the American officers who had the misfortune to have to deal with him as Free French governor of New Caledonia. In a remark that was soon to become famous, d’Argenlieu declared, “I am amazed, yes that is the word, I am amazed that France has such a fine expeditionary corps and yet its leaders would rather negotiate than fight.” It took only a few hours of conversation with the admiral to convince Ho that any real progress would have to come from direct negotiations with the French government in Paris. Leclerc and Sainteny agreed with Ho’s insistence on direct talks, and on April 30 Ho and a Vietnamese delegation boarded a French airplane for the long journey to France.

After a few days’ rest at Sainteny’s villa at Biarritz, Ho went to Paris where he gave interviews, attended receptions, and drew large crowds of onlookers. The talks themselves soon bogged down. The unstable and changing French cabinets could give them little attention, leaving the actual negotiations to old hands of the colonial ministry. In addition d’Argenlieu did his best to sabotage the entire process by unilaterally organizing an “Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina,” then calling a conference of representatives from Annam, Cochin China, Laos, and Cambodia to discuss a future Indochinese Federation. When the French representatives in Paris refused either to set a firm date for a referendum on Cochin China or explicitly recognize Vietnam’s independence, the Vietnamese delegation broke off the talks and returned home. Ho remained behind in Paris and succeeded in negotiating a modus vivendi with Marius Moutet, the colonial minister, on September 15. The modus vivendi reaffirmed the March Agreement, and called for a cease-fire in southern Vietnam and a second round of negotiations in Paris in January.

At 4:00 p.m. on October 20, 1946, the sloop Dumont Durville steamed into Haiphong Harbor flying the red flag with gold star of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam next to the French tricolor on its mast. The ship sounded a long blast from its siren and was answered a few moments later by a siren blast from the municipal theater. Ho Chi Minh stepped ashore to be met by French and Vietnamese dignitaries and an honor guard while a band played the Vietnamese and French national anthems.

Pham Quang Le, a young engineer from France who had accompanied Ho back to Vietnam, found “the situation very tense. The French colonialists had gone back on their undertakings. The people were in a fighting mood. They hated the enemy and were ready to die for their country, though insufficiently armed.”

While the negotiations had proceeded in Paris, the Viet Minh at home had taken advantage of the departure of the Chinese to complete the destruction of the rival nationalist parties. Nationalist groups such as the Quoc Dan Dang, the Dong Minh Hoi, and the Dai Viet still had considerable forces and held some important towns, but the factions, even when they were not fighting one another, seldom cooperated or coordinated their efforts.

The Viet Minh forces were better armed and disciplined, and they had the acquiescence and sometimes the support of the French, who were happy to see the defeat of the nationalist parties,

which they regarded as more dangerous than the Viet Minh. A French report noted that the Viet Minh “were able to eliminate the parties of the opposition who were hindering their efforts, thanks to our indifference and in some cases, our aid.” Between June and November 1946, Viet Minh forces seized the nationalist strongholds at Viet Tri, Lao Cai, Lang Son, and Phu Yen. Some nationalist adherents retreated to southern China. Others were “converted” to the cause or executed.

The National Assembly convened at the end of October and approved a new cabinet in which Viet Minh ministers occupied all key positions. Ho was named prime minister as well as president. A draft constitution that declared the complete independence of Vietnam without reference to the French Union was approved two weeks later.

By then there had already been trouble with the French. At the port of Haiphong the French had continued to behave as if they were in total control, ignoring Vietnamese customs authorities and stopping shipping they believed to be carrying smuggled goods. On November 20, fighting broke out when a French patrol boat attempted to seize a Chinese junk that had already cleared Vietnamese customs. High-ranking French and Vietnamese officers managed to impose a cease-fire the next day, but the French authorities in Saigon had already decided to force a showdown. General Jean Valluy, the French commander in chief and acting governor-general, believed that “it is absolutely necessary to take advantage of this incident to ameliorate our position in Haiphong.”

General Louis Moliere commanded in Hanoi. He was an old soldier who had previously encountered Vietnamese only as servants or troops in the prewar colonial army, but he believed that France could live with an independent Vietnam and that to force a showdown “would end up in a complete rupture of the March 6 Agreement and the spread of fighting to all our garrisons in Tonkin.” Valluy, however, had already issued orders to Colonel Pierre Debes, who commanded the French forces in Haiphong, to demand that all Vietnamese military forces withdraw from the Haiphong area. On the evening of November 22, Debes issued an ultimatum to Vietnamese authorities calling for all Vietnamese military forces to evacuate the city. Shortly after 10:00 the next morning, French heavy artillery began their bombardment of the Vietnamese quarters of the city. The Viet Minh government in Hanoi was not even informed of the ultimatum until after the French had opened fire. “That the French could seriously have wished for a favorable reply to their ultimatum is incredible,” observed Vice-Consul O’Sullivan.

French 105 and 155 mm artillery, mostly acquired from the United States by Lend-Lease, blasted the Vietnamese quarter, causing heavy casualties among those civilians who had not evacuated the area. Vietnamese fighters stubbornly held out for two days before being forced to withdraw. Many of the civilian refugees gathered in the village of Kien An just outside the city. Yet Kien An offered little protection when Debes’s artillery, supplemented by air strikes and naval gunfire, was turned on the village in what Vice-Consul O’Sullivan called “a terroristic measure.” At least three thousand Vietnamese were killed in the course of the French operations at Haiphong.

Although after Haiphong war appeared inevitable, both sides hesitated to commit themselves to an all-out struggle. The French were concerned about the safety of French civilians in isolated parts of Hanoi and the weakness of some of their outlying garrisons in Tonkin. Ho Chi Minh and a few other leaders still hoped for a negotiated solution, but the Viet Minh continued to prepare for war.

By now the armed units of the Viet Minh had been expanded and reorganized into the People's Army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Vo Nguyen Giap, a former lawyer and history teacher and a self-taught military strategist and tactician. A longtime nationalist whose wife, father, and sister had all died in French prisons, Giap had been a close associate of Ho since the late 1930s. A French general observed that "Giap incarnated to the highest degree the traditional virtues of the Vietnamese people: a tenacious energy, patience and subtlety. . . . In contrast to Ho Chi Minh who retained the appearance of an old Vietnamese man of letters, he seemed a modern Europeanized Vietnamese with his jacket, tie and soft hat. His full round face conveyed the impression of a powerful personality."

Giap's army numbered less than 70,000 regulars. The best-trained were former soldiers of the French colonial "Garde Indigene Indochine," former members of military auxiliaries organized by the Japanese, former Viet Minh guerrillas of 1945 (some of whom had been trained and armed by the OSS), and a number of repatriates who had acquired military training and experience in France and China. The remainder were young recruits who had joined since the August revolution. The Tu Ve or militia numbered over 100,000, but not all were combat troops and many were armed only with swords, pikes, and antique firearms.

To train the expanding army, three military schools were established in March 1946 in northern and central Vietnam, where officer candidates received basic infantry training, learned small-unit tactics and guerrilla warfare, and were drilled on party theory and doctrine. Each regiment of the army also established its own basic training school.

As in Indonesia, the services of a relatively small number of Japanese deserters proved invaluable in helping the new army master basic skills and military techniques. Somewhere between one thousand and three thousand Japanese soldiers deserted their units during August and September 1945 and joined the nationalists. A few Japanese joined out of conviction: men who wished to continue to fight for greater East Asia or could not accept the idea of defeat. Captain Kanetoshi Kobayashi found defeat "unthinkable." He could not bear the thought of returning to Japan when so many of his comrades had died for the empire.

A larger number of Japanese deserted because they suspected they might have to wait years for repatriation to Japan or saw no economic future for themselves there even if they did return. Others had married or were involved with Vietnamese women. Some Japanese had been in Vietnam before the war and desired to stay. Mr. Takahata, a Japanese businessman in Hanoi, had been called up for army service in 1944 and served as an army translator. Following the Japanese surrender he had joined the Viet Minh and become a company commander.

Japanese officers and NCOs trained Vietnamese in the use and maintenance of weapons, small-unit tactics, and communications. Specialists provided training in field medicine, staff work, and administration. Junior officers were trained in company and battalion exercises. The Japanese introduced the Vietnamese to the guerrilla tactics they had intended to employ against the superior Allied invaders in the last months of the war. Japanese advisors aided in planning and sometimes led Viet Minh forces in battle. Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai, a former Viet Minh fighter, recalled that her platoon had a Japanese advisor known as "Brother Hai" and had been armed by the Japanese one day after the surrender. A French intelligence report concluded that Japanese "cadres, specialists and instructors were of very great combat value" to the Vietnamese. "As fighters they represent the most aggressive and formidable elements among the rebels."

There was no shortage of volunteers for the People's Army, but there was a serious shortage of weapons. Even with weapons acquired from the Japanese after the surrender, American M-1 rifles supplied by the OSS in the final weeks of the war, and other weapons smuggled in from China and Thailand, French intelligence estimated that the Vietnamese had only one rifle for every two combatants. There were only about a thousand automatic weapons and fifty-five light caliber artillery pieces. In December 1946, Ngo Van Chieu's "section" of sixteen men had between them "three English guns, two old hunting guns, four French rifles, and one revolver." In his entire unit only a platoon-sized force of former Japanese-trained Vietnamese auxiliaries, led by a Japanese officer, were relatively well armed with rifles, a machine gun, and a small mortar.

The young engineer, Pham Quang Le, was appointed head of the Armaments Department of the Defense Ministry. First priority for the new arms agency was the production of grenades and grenade launchers, mines, and mortars. "There was virtually no gunpowder to speak of. The little that came from shells captured from the enemy had to be used for bazooka ammunition. So we turned to another source—black powder, no longer in use in other parts of the world. . . . There was a great need for mortars but we did not have the means to make them in the usual way. Our workers had to make 50.8 mm mortar tubes by hand and from rails. For bigger guns we used sawed-off oxygen containers." Beginning in the fall of 1946 the Viet Minh began moving their improvised armaments factories to the area of northwest Tonkin known as the Viet Bac, from which the Viet Minh had originally waged guerrilla war against the Japanese.

At the end of November 1947, both sides were preparing for war. General Moliere had about 4,500 troops in Hanoi plus artillery and two squadrons of tanks. The Viet Minh had over 10,000 troops, of whom about 2,500 were regulars. But the regulars had only about 1,500 rifles with fewer than a dozen bullets per rifle, a bazooka, and four machine guns. The Tu Ve had about 1,100 rifles for all of its 80,000 militia. The Viet Minh artillery at Hanoi comprised about half a dozen Japanese 75 mm guns.

Hanoi in early December was quiet, but the atmosphere remained tense. Vietnamese troops and militia began to erect barricades and roadblocks at key points. Adjoining houses had holes knocked in their walls so that fighters could move from house to house without being exposed to enemy fire. The Vietnamese government began to evacuate all civilians able to leave. Consul O'Sullivan recalled that with the passing of each day, there appeared to be fewer Vietnamese left in Hanoi. Many French civilians and foreign residents also began to stream out of the city.

Most of the Viet Minh army redeployed to the suburbs. Viet Minh government officials began to sleep outside the city, and one by one the ministries began to move their offices and records out of the capital. Hospitals and clinics were emptied of drugs and medical supplies, which were carted off to the Viet Bac. Along with them went many Vietnamese nurses, pharmacists, and doctors. Even some faculty of the Hanoi medical school slipped away to join the Viet Minh. Radios, telephones, and generators, even the French broadcasting system's transmitter, disappeared into the countryside. Students quietly scooped up paper, ink, and even printing presses for the new government headquarters.

From the French came a steady stream of demands that the Vietnamese referred to as ultimatums. They began to refer to Moliere as "General Ultimatum." First the French demanded that the Vietnamese dismantle their barricades and roadblocks. If they failed to comply, the French would clear them away. The same day a French officer transmitted a statement that, since

the Vietnamese police had shown themselves to be incapable of maintaining law and order, the French would take over that responsibility. Two days later, on December 17, came a demand that the Vietnamese militia disarm and that the Vietnamese cease all preparations for war.

Ho addressed a final appeal to Leon Blum, the famous leader of the French Left who had just taken office as prime minister. Blum had recently published an article calling for “an agreement on the basis of independence” with the Vietnamese and an end to control of Vietnam policy “by military authorities or civilian settlers in Indochina.” In the meantime the People’s Army finalized its plans for war. Ho asked Giap how long the Viet Minh could hold out in Hanoi should fighting break out. About a month, Giap replied. Ho dryly remarked that he would be satisfied with a week.

Vuong Thua Vu, who with his political officer Tran Do would command operations in the Hanoi area, planned to initiate surprise attacks on key points in the city with five battalions of the People’s Army reinforced by about nine thousand Tu Ve. They would do as much damage as possible to French forces and installations in the city before withdrawing to the suburbs. One People’s Army battalion and most of the Tu Ve would remain behind in the Sino-Vietnamese Quarter for a final stand. The men and women of the Tu Ve who had been left behind to defend Hanoi, most of them young, had only pistols, grenades, and about one rifle for every two combatants, plus only two light machine guns and little spare ammunition. Most lacked any type of combat experience.

On December 13, 1945, Giap issued final orders to regional commanders for the impending hostilities. By this time bridges and roads in the Hanoi area had been mined or rigged for demolition. Tunnels had been dug beneath the city, and holes had been bored into large trees so that they could receive explosives to blow them down and block the roads. Viet Minh leaders held a final meeting in the village of Van Phuc about ten kilometers from Hanoi, a place long known for its fine silk weaving. On December 18, near the market where, decades later, busloads of twenty-first-century tourists would crowd in to shop for bargains, the Viet Minh made the decision to begin what would become a seven-year war.

A little after 8:00 p.m. on December 19, the power supply in Hanoi was suddenly cut. General Moliere ordered an aide to phone the power station. The aide’s call was taken by a Vietnamese. The Viet Minh had already seized control of the telephone exchange. “What do you want?” demanded the operator. “I want to find out why the lights went out,” said the aide. “That’s the least of your worries,” was the reply.

Tu Ve units attacked French positions throughout the city. About two hundred French and foreign civilians were taken as hostages and a few were brutally murdered. The Vietnamese attacked the French military mess at the Hotel Metropole, the French high commissioner’s office, the Paul Doumer Bridge spanning the Red River, and the Shell Oil storage facility, along with other targets. They attempted to isolate the French troops stationed in the Citadel by bringing in “a large train loaded with rocks and all sorts of debris. They stopped it where it blocked all the crossings. . . . Well, one of the French officers happened to know how to run a locomotive.” While the Citadel garrison traded shots with the Vietnamese, the officer climbed aboard the locomotive and moved the train clear of the crossings.

Throughout northern and central Vietnam, French garrisons came under attack. The old imperial capital of Hue was garrisoned by a battalion of the Twenty-First Colonial Infantry under Colonel LaCoste. The battalion, with a total strength of about 750 men, held out against the Viet

Minh during a forty-seven-day siege. According to one story, Colonel LaCoste's fiancée, a beautiful young French woman, had been captured, raped, and brutally murdered by the Viet Minh. This made the colonel "an even more determined defender of Hue." In the course of the fighting the entire French section of the city was destroyed along with most of the Vietnamese neighborhoods, bridges were blown, and the imperial palace of the Nguyen dynasty "reduced to rubble." The siege was finally lifted by the arrival of a battalion of the Twenty-Third Colonial Infantry, though some reports attributed the "liberation" of Hue to a battalion of the French Foreign Legion. The French high command, according to this account, withheld the true story in order to give credit to the French units.

South of Hue, where the coastal road to the port of Danang wound through the mountains, the Viet Minh were reported by the French to be entrenched "and from the vantage point of the mountains, come down to harass convoys and blow up bridges." Danang itself was described by an American correspondent as "a completely deserted village—except for the military. . . . Exploding grenades and small arms fire is heard in Tourane [Danang] almost nightly. In spite of the heavy guard around the city, the Vietnamese get inside the lines and toss grenades into the areas where the French soldiers are billeted."

In Hanoi heavy fighting continued. The Paul Doumer Bridge, which connected Hanoi with Haiphong and with the nearby airfield at Gia Lam, was briefly occupied by the Viet Minh, but their satchel charges failed to do much damage and they were driven off by French armored cars and tanks. On the second day of fighting the French mounted an attack on the *governor-general's* palace, the headquarters of the Viet Minh Central Committee. But the Central Committee, along with leading Viet Minh government figures, had already left the city.

At the palace, Le Gia Dinh ordered his Tu Ve company to withdraw while he remained behind with an explosive to detonate as the French entered the building. The explosive was a dud but Le Gia Dinh continued to hold out, eventually accounting for ten French soldiers before his death. Le Gia Dinh became a hero of the revolution. A street in Hanoi is named in his honor, and in 2000 he was posthumously awarded Vietnam's highest military decoration.

On Christmas Eve the Viet Minh opened an attack on the Gia Lam airfield which, with the road to Haiphong blocked, remained the only way for French supplies and reinforcements to reach the embattled capital. Viet Minh assaults on the airfield were repulsed, but the Vietnamese on the periphery of the field managed to shoot down several French fighter bombers. The airfield continued to operate, however, enabling French transport planes to bring in needed supplies. On some days there were as many as 150 landings at Gia Lam.

The bulk of the Viet Minh forces had by this time pulled back east of the Citadel to the Vietnamese-Chinese section of the city known as "Thirty-six Steps." This was an ideal area for defense, with narrow winding streets, many ending in cul de sacs. "Each house in the quarter was a fortress in itself," recalled a French officer. "The quarter had to be recaptured house by house and block by block." A French attack on the quarter on December 27 failed, at a cost of forty-five casualties. In the midst of the fighting the quarter's Chinese restaurants remained opened and did a brisk business.

Valluy believed, as at Haiphong, that the solution was more destruction. He ordered Moliere to "hit them hard with cannon and bombs" in order to crush the defenders "and to prove to our adversary the overwhelming superiority of our capabilities." Moliere ignored Valluy's bluster. He knew that the Chinese government was already strongly protesting the French use of heavy

firepower against parts of the city where thousands of Chinese civilians were trapped by the fighting. In mid-January the British, Chinese, and American consuls arranged a short truce which enabled about 6,500 Chinese and Vietnamese to leave the Thirty-six Steps. It took the French some sixty days to retake the quarter, at the end of which about two thousand Viet Minh fighters escaped from the city via a tunnel.

The last-ditch defense of the area had been carried out by the “Capital Regiment” composed of about a thousand male and female militia fighters. It included a “Children’s Guard” of eight-to-twelve-year-olds recruited mainly from children orphaned during the severe famine of 1944–1945. By the time the last Capital Regiment combatants withdrew across the Red River in mid-February 1947, the Children’s Guard had suffered casualties of close to 35 per cent dead.