



INDO 1945-1954

From Haiphong to Dien Bien Phu



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While the "American" war in Vietnam has (deservedly) received great attention as one of the most important struggles in the "Cold War" period, the French Indochina War of the late 40s and early 50s has largely been overlooked - only the image of Dien Bien Phu as an example of utter defeat seems to have achieved any common currency.

This site is jointly written and maintained by Nowfel Leulliot (Paris, France) and Danny O'Hara (St Austell, UK). The authors both have long-standing interests in the Indochina War, and hope to bring various elements of this fascinating conflict to a wider audience. We are both wargamers as well as amateur military historians, and the intention is to include some overviews of the two military systems (French and Vietnamese) in action, with pieces on particular unit types, operations/battles, important factors controlling the actions of either side, specialist equipment/tactics developed during the war, and scenarios/ideas for wargaming the various aspects of the Indochina War. Please mail any comments, criticisms or ideas to the authors.

The site will obviously be somewhat limited initially, but it will grow as time permits. Here are the various parts which are planned for this site (look at the [site map](#) for detailed contents):

- **[What's New](#)** : So that you know what we're up to...
- **[History](#)** : This is the place where you will find the more general articles about the war.
- **[CEFEO](#)** : An overview of the French Far-East Expeditionary Corps.
- **[Viet Minh](#)** : An overview of the People's Army of Vietnam.
- **[Operations](#)** : Some of the major operations and campaigns conducted by the CEFEO and Viet Minh, 1945-54.
- **[Scenarios](#)** : Scenarios, both historical and generic, and ideas for war gaming the various aspects of the Indochina War.
- **[Terrain](#)** : Photos of representative terrain (not all of Indochina is jungle or rice paddies).
- **[Misc.](#)** : Various bits and pieces that don't really fit anywhere else.
- **[Links](#)** : Well, every site's got to have them even if there aren't that many.
- **[Site Map](#)** : Hopefully this should help you find your way about the site.

Much of the material presented here is translated from French sources, and several bits have not appeared in English before. It is hoped that some interest in researching and wargaming this war will be started by the various pages which we intend to publish, and if anyone does "borrow" text or images from the site, we would appreciate a mention!

SECTS, DRUGS & WARRIOR MONKS

Auxiliary Forces of the French in Vietnam, 1945-54



Unlike the conventional military strategy followed in Tonkin, French forces in Cochinchina undertook a more traditional pacification campaign which demanded more manpower and relied on local auxiliaries to a far greater extent. With a crippling man-power shortage, and rising commitments of both static and mobile forces, they were forced to seek alliances amongst the non-communist groups of Vietnam in addition to the direct recruitment of "partisans". While, to a large extent, the French pinned their hopes on the puppet-Emperor, Bao Dai (whom they expected, somewhat optimistically, to act as a rallying figure for the anti-communist Vietnamese nationalists), the poor results of this policy led them to look elsewhere for allies.

The rather complicated political situation in Cochinchina made this easier as the Viet Minh, whose power base lay in far away Tonkin, was a relatively minor nationalist group in the south. Thus the famous "Three Sects" (all were politico-religious bodies with paramilitary formations active in Southern Vietnam) became involved in the Indochina War, as well as the Catholic militias formed in both Cochinchina and northern Annam. However, all four groups were quite adamant to retain their independence and protect their own interests above all which made them uneasy allies at best.

Cao Dai

The most powerful sect in southern Vietnam was the very thoroughly organised and centralised Cao Dai cult. Founded in 1926, it claimed more than one and a half million adherents in Cochinchina, mainly in the Mekong Delta, Tay Ninh province, the Cambodian border and Saigon itself. Incorporating elements of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism and Spiritualism, the Cao Dai pantheon includes Buddha, Confucius, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Sun Yat Sen, Victor Hugo and Jean Jaurès among others. Their clergy are modelled on the Roman Catholic hierarchy, headed by a "pope" (Giao-Tong) and with a "Holy See" in Tay Ninh.

The sect became increasingly nationalistic during the 1930s and organised its own militias until a crackdown in 1938 disbanded its forces and sent Pham Cong Tac, the current "pope" into exile in Madagascar. They were involved in revolts against the French before and during WW2, co-operated with the Japanese and were allies of the Viet Minh early in the conflict. While still largely anti-French, the precarious situation of the Viet Minh in Cochinchina made them side with Emperor Bao Dai, for the time being at least...

Under the leadership of Tran Quang Vinh, the Cao Dai had been sponsored by the Japanese as a "counter-revolutionary" force during WW2, which resulted in a major expansion of their paramilitary forces (numbering some 4,500 by 1946). By the end of World War 2, they were in fact the main nationalist group in Cochinchina and, in order to play down their association with the Japanese, decided to side with the Viet Minh, then a weak force which they thought would be easily manipulated. They were heavily involved in the nationalist uprisings in Saigon in 1945, but their alliance with the Viet Minh was, however, an uneasy one.



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In mid-1946, Tran Quang Vinh offered to side with the French and an agreement was reached in January 1947 by which they controlled Tay Ninh province (thus releasing CFEO troops for other purposes) while Pham Cong Tac returned from exile. In 1947-48, with French material support, the Cao Dai militia was raised to 3,300 troops organised in 55 "flying brigades", 1,500 men in "self-defence groups" plus another 2,500 "military partisans" in other areas of Cochinchina. These proved quite efficient and between January 1947 and December 1948, the Cao Dai militias had lost 400 killed and 500 wounded while inflicting serious losses on the Viet Minh and capturing 350 weapons. While the "flying brigades" had initially been recruited for use in Tay Ninh province, their effectiveness in pacifying Viet Minh areas led the French High Command to send half of them throughout Cochinchina. The Cao Dai leadership encouraged this trend which allowed them to spread their influence for, of course, the population was presented with a simple condition : the protection of Cao Dai militias was only afforded to Cao Dai converts.

This spreading territorial base allowed the Cao Dai to entertain hopes of becoming the dominant political movement throughout Vietnam, if not Indochina, and their political party, the Viet Nam Phu Quoc Hoi, soon became the most active in Cochinchina. Their reliability, however, remained doubtful until the end and they constantly undermined efforts to strengthen the Vietnamese government's hold over its provinces.

In June 1951, Cao Daist Colonel Trinh Minh The rebelled with 2,000 of his troops when General Minh, chief-of-staff of the Vietnamese army, proposed sending 15,000 Cao Dai troops to Tonkin. The following month, one of Pham Cong Tac's lieutenants had General Chanson, commander-in-chief of French forces in southern Indochina, and a Vietnamese governor assassinated. As a French staff officer commented : "its dialectics, as specious as those of communism, will always allow [the sect] to perform the most audacious reversals without damage. The Cao Dai have no enemies and no permanent friends, but they have permanent interests which are those of the sect."

Note : For some photos of the Cao Dai Temple at Tay Ninh have a look at [this site](#). There are several websites on Cao Dai beliefs, if anyone wishes to investigate these further.

Hoa Hao

Careful not to put all its eggs in the same basket and anxious to check the growing influence of the Cao Dai sect, the French decided to support another sect : the Hoa Hao. In 1939, a Buddhist *bonze* (wandering priest/monk) named Huynh Phu So began preaching against the "decadent" Buddhism then prevalent in Vietnam. From the village of Hoa Hao (in Chau Doc Province), his crusade grew rapidly. The Hoa Hao sect is to some degree nationalistic and xenophobic, and is strongest in the south-west of Vietnam, near the Cambodian border, where they live in their own communities.

Their Prophet, Huynh Phu So, had apparently suffered a major illness for most of his teenage and early adult years, and was known as the "Mad Monk". The French became concerned at the spread of his religion during the early 1940s, and had him placed under house arrest in the village of Nhon Nghia (Can Tho Province), then transferred him to Cho-Quan Hospital under "surveillance". The Japanese also do not seem to have known what to do with him - they used the Hoa Hao as auxiliaries, but held Huynh Phu So under arrest at the Kampetai HQ in Saigon.

In 1945 he was active in the formation of the "National United Front" (a nationalist, anti-French body including Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Binh Xuyen and Viet Minh), but the Hoa Hao soon came to blows with the Viet Minh whose encroachment in western Cochinchina was becoming a threat to the sect. However, the sect did not side with the French until Huynh Phu So was ambushed by the Viet Minh at Doc Vang (in the Plain of Reeds) on 16th April 1947, on his way to preach in the western provinces. His followers are still waiting for his return...

There were about one million Hoa Hao in 1945, with a militia of some 2,000 men under the military command of Ba Cut (who was captured and publicly guillotined in 1956 by the Diem government of South Vietnam). The Hoa Hao militia may have numbered as many as 15,000 men at points but, after Huynh Phu So's execution the sect rapidly broke down into a myriad of clans headed by local warlords. None of these recognised the authority of the sect's nominal leader, self-proclaimed "General" Tran Van Soai (pictured right, incidentally he is said to have found his *képi* in the Saigon Municipal Theatre). As a result, Tran Van Soai power's didn't reach outside of his Caicon fief where his wife led a *dai doi* of 250 amazons tasked with guarding the sect's coffers.



Like the Cao Dai, the sect had its own political party, the Dan Xa, although it was never as powerful as the Viet Nam Phu Quoc Hoi and was soon in conflict with Tran Van Soai over the political leadership of the sect. Again, like its rival, the Hoa Hao were very concerned by the fact that the French were turning more and more provinces to the vietnamese government and "General" Tran Van Soai warned clearly that if the western provinces were turned over, the sect would have no choice but to rebel, either through a massive uprising or through guerrilla warfare.

Note : *As with the Cao Dai, there are several Hoa Hao websites available if anyone wishes to find out more about their religious beliefs.*

Binh Xuyen

Cochinchina in the 1920s and 1930s featured a criminal underworld based in and around the marshy lowlands southeast of Cholon. This area was traditionally infested with river pirates, bandits and assassins. Their place of refuge was the Rung Sat or "Jungle of Killers" region, from which they launched their sorties. Here gangs and criminal families held absolute sway, forging links through intermarriage, criminal association and anti-French activities with Chinese Triads and Vietnamese secret societies.

Several notable gangs and criminal families were located in the region of Binh Xuyen hamlet, to the south of Cholon. In the early 1920s these personalities, together with escaped contract laborers from the rubber plantations (on the Rung Sat's northern fringe) and Cholon street thugs, formed a loose coalition some two to three hundred strong. These forces ultimately came under the patronage of a powerful underworld figure named Duong Van Duong, also known as Ba Duong or Bac Ba ("Uncle Three") who made his home in Binh Xuyen. Thus was the "Binh Xuyen" criminal collective born:

"Armed with old rifles, clubs, and knives, and schooled in Sino-Vietnamese boxing, they extorted protection money from the sampans and junks that traveled the canals on their way to the Cholon docks. Occasionally they sortied into Cholon to kidnap, rob, or shake down a wealthy Chinese merchant. If too sorely pressed by the police or the colonial militia, they could retreat through the streams and canals south of Saigon deep into the impenetrable Rung Sat Swamp at the mouth of the Saigon River, where their reputations as popular heroes among the inhabitants, as well as the maze of mangrove swamps, rendered them invulnerable to capture."

In the late 1920s or early 1930s a young street hoodlum from the outskirts of Cholon named Le Van Vien ("Bay" Vien) entered the Binh Xuyen milieu and gradually came to prominence under Ba Duong's influence. Hunted by the French in the 1930s and 1940s, Bay Vien and a number of his cohorts were eventually captured and sentenced to confinement in the penal colony on Con Son Island. Ba Duong, meanwhile, had become a labor broker for the Japanese and entered into a relationship with the Japanese secret service.

Arrangements were made for the *kempetai* (Japanese "Gestapo") to free Binh Xuyen personel from Con Son in 1941. Thereafter, under Japanese patronage the Binh Xuyen rapidly grew both in organization and influence. Bay Vien escaped Con Son in early 1945 and returned to Saigon where he engaged in insurgent politics in collusion with Ba Duong and the Japanese. When the Japanese took over from the Vichy administration in 1945, jailing all French police, the Binh Xuyen were given amnesty and Bay Vien was installed as a police official by the newly established government of Emperor Bao Dai.

In August 1945 the Viet Minh's chief of Cochin China, Tran Van Giàu, formed an alliance with Bay Vien and Ba Duong against the French. When the Viet Minh called a mass demonstration on August 25, 1945 (when British General Gracey was forced to declare martial law and use Japanese POWs as a police force!):

"...fifteen well armed, bare chested bandits carrying a large banner declaring 'Binh Xuyen Assassination Committee' joined the tens of thousands of demonstrators who marched jubilantly through downtown Saigon for over nine hours."

Following the British supported French counter coup in September, 1945 the Viet Minh withdrew from Saigon, leaving Bay Vien as military commander of Saigon-Cholon with a force of a hundred men. Bay Vien promptly formed an alliance with Lai Van Sang's two thousand man student group, the Avant-Garde Youth. Together with a

number of Japanese deserters, they engaged the French. By the end of October, they were pushed back to the Rung Sat in a waterborne retrograde action which displayed as a key element the deployment of some 250 stay-behind agents.

The Binh Xuyen stay behind agents promptly engaged in a ruthless campaign of terror and extortion. A constant influx of men, money and materiel quickly established the Binh Xuyen as a well-armed, disciplined force of approximately 10,000 men.

A dispute arose between Ba Duong and the Viet Minh in January 1946 and in February 1946 Ba Duong was killed in strafing raid by French aircraft. Sensing a shift in the political tide, Bay Vien seized the opportunity to consolidate his hold on the Binh Xuyen and achieve dominance. Thus, in the wake of Ba Duong's death, Bay Vien began secret negotiations with the French Deuxième Bureau (Military Intelligence) for exclusive rights to territory in Saigon, ultimately leading to a March 1948 agreement which was formalized on June 16, 1948 (the VM attacked the Binh Xuyen in the Rung Sat during mid-1948, forcing them out of their bases – which pushed the gang further into the French camp). The French government announced that it "...had decided to confide the police and maintenance of order to the Binh Xuyen troops in a zone where they are used to operating." Thereafter the French turned over Saigon block-by-block and by April 1954, Lai Van Sang was director-general of police and the Binh Xuyen controlled not only the Saigon-Cholon capital region but a sixty-mile strip between Saigon and Vung Tau, exercising full political and economic control. United States observers of the process laconically refer to the Binh Xuyen in this era as a:

"...political and racketeering organization which had agreed to carry out police functions in return for a monopoly on gambling, opium traffic and prostitution in the metropolitan areas."

For the French, this free hand given to the Binh Xuyen proved to be profitable in more ways than one. As Colonel Lansdale, a US intelligence "observer", remarked :

"The French accepted the arrangement because Bay Vien offset the Viet Minh threat to Saigon. By 1954, Vien was operating 'Grand Monde', a gambling slum in Cholon; 'Cloche d'Or', Saigon's pre-eminent gambling establishment; the 'Nouveautés Catinat', Saigon's best department store; a hundred smaller shops; a fleet of river boats; and a brothel, spectacular even by Asian standards, known as the Hall of Mirrors...He ruled Saigon absolutely; even the Viet Minh terrorists were unable to operate there."

Thus, the Viet Minh was unable to conduct a single terror bombing in Saigon between 1952 and 1954. What's more, the Binh Xuyen offered a solution to a problem which had recently beset French intelligence. From 1951, under the aegis of the GCMA, French intelligence had tried, very successfully, to establish maquis in the Highlands of Laos and Tonkin. In order to guarantee the loyalty of the Highland populations, the GCMA had to buy their only cash crop : opium. Since the colonial administration had abolished its own Opium Monopoly in 1946, the Binh Xuyen provided an obvious outlet. Furthermore, this also solved most of the clandestine funding problems since both the Deuxième Bureau and the GCMA received a "cut" of the proceeds.

The Binh Xuyen controlled Saigon until purged by the Diem government in 1955, when Vien fled to France with many of the Binh Xuyen leadership (and apparently many of the Saigon police files!). At its height, the Binh Xuyen was believed to have around 25,000 armed troops.

The Catholic Militias

Largely due to the activities of the French missionaries from the Seventeenth Century onwards, Vietnam has a large Catholic minority of 1,700,000 people (about 6% of the population in 1945). These tended to live in their own, separate communities (notably in Phat Diem) and were thought to be more pro-French than many groups in Vietnam. Two of the most notable experiences with catholic militias were those of Bentre province in Cochinchina and the Phat Diem bishoprics of northern Annam.

In Bentre province, where about 400,000 Catholics lived, a Eurasian French army officer, Captain Leroy, organised the first "Catholic brigades" on An Hoa island in 1947 with spectacular results. These "brigades" of 60 men later became the building blocks of the *Unités Mobiles de Défense de la Chrétienté* (UMDB - Mobile Christian Defense Units) a province-wide regional force supplemented by Bao An (Peace Guardians) local self-defense groups. Given control over all the UMDC in 1949, Leroy was put in command of the whole province the following year when all French forces were withdrawn from the area. Within a year, the whole of Bentre province had been completely pacified !

Yet, the foundations of his success were to cause his downfall for his method was simple : "the Viet Minh promises much and I deliver it". Accordingly, his first step had been to reduce the rates tenant farmers paid to their landlords while taxing the landowners for the upkeep of his militia and the funding of public works such as schools, markets and bridges. Furthermore, local affairs were dealt with by councils which were nominated at first and later elected by the population. Obviously, quite a few feathers were ruffled in Saigon where landowners (both secular and religious) did not appreciate the prospect of winning the war against the Viet Minh by applying its program. By late 1951, his 80 "brigades" of 3240 well-armed, motivated and experienced men and were far more effective than the

mere 5840 of the Vietnamese Armed Forces which did nothing to endear him to the Vietnamese generals. In 1952 Leroy was promoted out of the way, the UMDCs were disbanded in May 1952 and the province turned over to the Vietnamese army with the expected results.

The case of the Phat Diem and Bui Chu bishoprics was quite different for in the late nineteenth century, a Vietnamese priest, Tran Van Luc, had obtained from the King of Annam the title of "baron" of the Tham Hoa to Phat Diem area which was populated by a large number of Catholics (800,000 by 1945). His successors, Le Huu Tu (bishop of Phat Diem) and Pham Ngoc Chi (bishop of Bui Chu), thus became autonomous "prince-bishops" wielding both temporal and spiritual power, raising taxes and militias in their own lands. In each village, dominated by fortified church, the local priest would take care of his flock's



salvation, administer public affairs and lead the self-defense force. In 1945, the Catholic community of Annam, still bearing the burden of having favoured the French conquest in the 19th century, had no wish to be seen as the agents of the returning French and initially cooperated with Viet Minh government. Le Huu Tu, a prickly nationalist who had his own arsenals and even a personal radio station to stay in contact with the Vatican, even became one of Ho Chi Minh's "advisors" (along with Emperor Bao Dai) and General de Lattre would later say of him that "his crosier is made of the wood which is used for truncheons".

However, rising Viet Minh influence in his land soon alienated Le Huu Tu who increased the size of the self-defence groups and raised mobile regional forces which he led in person, quickly imitated by Pham Ngoc Chi. Thus the bishoprics became a neutral zone, both anti-French and anti-Communist, acting as outlets for contraband to and from the Viet Minh-controlled areas to the mutual financial benefit of both parties.

This arrangement worked until October 1949 when the Viet Minh massed seven battalions of regulars to occupy Phat Diem and Bui Chu. This led Le Huu Tu to ask discreetly for French assistance. In order to protect the bishop's nationalist credentials however, some mock fighting was arranged between the French forces tasked with occupying the bishoprics and the Catholic militias. The area stayed relatively autonomous though as French forces withdrew rapidly and left the bishops in charge of the area's defence after providing weapons for two Autonomous Mobile Groups, nominally part of the Vietnamese Armed Forces but under local control. This allowed the bishops kept all their future options open by recognising the Bao Dai government while ignoring its authority and maintaining political and commercial relations with the Viet Minh. Still, they had, if unwillingly, become allies of the French. Catholic autonomy would last another two years. In late 1951, after Catholic troops had put up only token resistance against the Viet Minh's offensive on the Delta, General de Lattre had Phat Diem and Bui Chu permanently occupied by Franco-Vietnamese troops and the bishops stripped of their administrative functions. In 1954, cooperation with French forces, reprisals from the Viet Minh and intense propaganda would prompt a massive flight of the northern Annam Catholics to Cochinchina and their bishop would have no choice but to follow their flock.

In the main, the Catholic community kept to its tradition of withdrawing unto itself while taking care of its own security and its hierarchy remained uncommitted as long as possible. Although the Catholic League under Ngo Dinh Diem (later premier of South Vietnam) initially co-operated with Bao Dai, it too would quickly distance itself from the puppet-leader.

Overall, alliance with these various groups suited the French for it did provide tangible results in that whole areas were pacified and became off-limits to the Vietminh. However, since each of these feudal factions protected its own interests above all, they proved quite fickle and further weakened the efforts to set up a Vietnamese government which would be palatable for international opinion, let alone for the local population. Amid the gangs and religious cults, Bao Dai's "independent" State simply appeared as yet another faction.

