

This is an extract from Norman Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History* (revised 1988) which is now out of print.

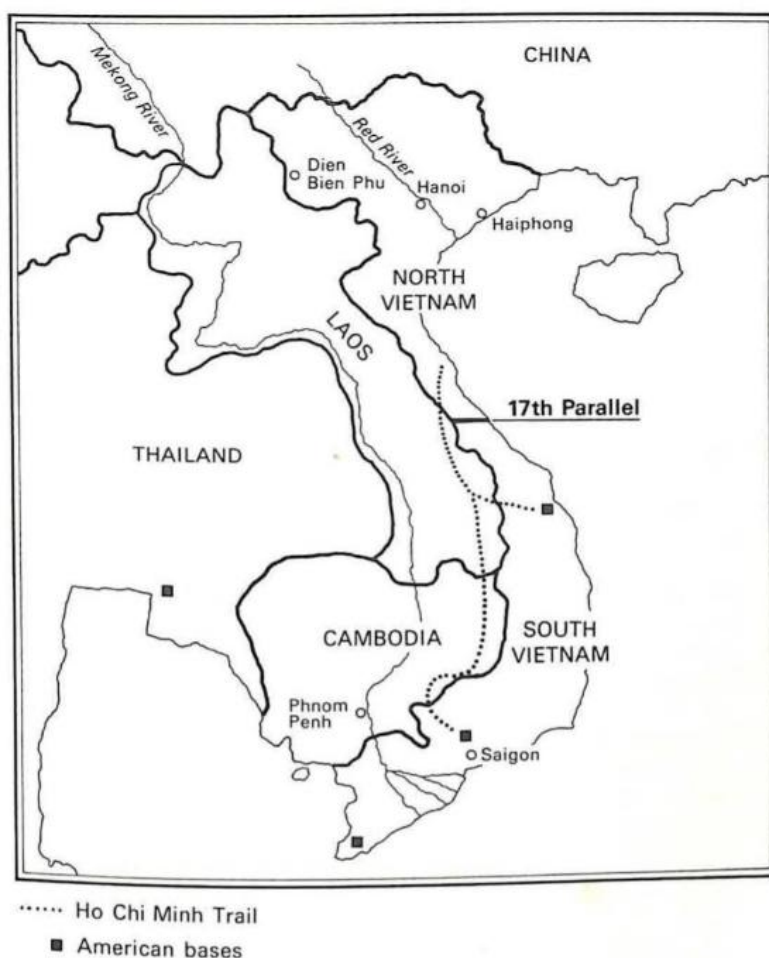
Norman Lowe was for twenty years Head of History at a tertiary college in Lancashire. The book was designed to be "in line with the latest GCSE syllabus requirements" and "suitable for GCSE, liberal and general studies courses, and as an introduction to A level".

THE WARS IN VIETNAM: 1946-54 AND 1961-75

(a) The First Indo-China War, 1945-54

From 1946 until 1954 the Vietnamese were fighting for independence from France. Vietnam together with Laos and Cambodia made up Indo-China which had been part of the French empire since the late nineteenth century. During the Second World War the area was occupied by the Japanese; resistance to both Japanese and French was organised by the League for Vietnamese Independence (Vietminh), led by the communist Chi Minh who had spent many years in Russia learning how to organise revolutions. The Vietminh, though led by communists, was an alliance of all shades of political opinion which wanted to see the end of foreign control. At the end of the war in 1945 Ho Chi Minh declared the whole of Vietnam independent; when it became clear that the French had no intention of agreeing to full independence, the Vietminh attacked the French in Hanoi, beginning an eight-year struggle which ended with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu (May 1954).

Fig 17.3 the wars in Vietnam



The Vietminh were successful partly because they were masters of guerrilla tactics and had massive support from the Vietnamese people and because the French, still suffering after-effects of world war, failed to send enough troops. The decisive factor was probably that from 1950 the new Chinese communist government supplied the rebels with arms and equipment. The USA also became involved: seeing the struggle as part of the Cold War and

the fight against communism, she supplied the French with military and economic aid; but it was not enough. By the Geneva Agreement (1954) Laos and Cambodia were to be independent; Vietnam was temporarily divided into two states at the 17th parallel: Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh government was recognised North Vietnam; South Vietnam was to have a separate government for the time being, but elections were to be held by 1956 for the whole country, which would then become united. Ho Chi Minh was disappointed the partition, but was confident that the communists would win the national elections. As it turned out the elections were never held and a repeat performance of the Korean situation seemed likely. A civil war gradually developed in South Vietnam which involved the north and the USA.

(b) What caused the war and why was the USA involved?

- (i) The South Vietnamese government under President Ngo Dinh Diem (chosen by a national referendum in 1955) refused to make preparations for the elections for the whole of Vietnam, and the USA, which was backing his regime, did not press him for fear of a communist victory if the elections were held.
- (ii) Although Diem began energetically, his government soon lost popularity: he came from a stealthy Roman Catholic family, whereas three-quarters of the population were Buddhist peasants who thought themselves discriminated against; they demanded land reform of the type carried through in China and North Vietnam, but none was forthcoming. He also gained a reputation, perhaps not wholly deserved, for corruption and was unpopular with nationalists who thought he was too much under American influence.
- (iii) In 1960 various opposition groups which included many former communist members of the Viet Minh, formed the National Liberation Front (NLF). They demanded a democratic national coalition government which would introduce reforms and negotiate peacefully for a united Vietnam. A guerrilla campaign was started, attacking government officials and buildings, while Buddhist monks had their own special brand of protest, committing suicide in public by setting fire to themselves. Diem's credibility declined further when he dismissed all criticism and opposition as communist inspired whereas the communists were only one section of the NLF; he also introduced harsh security measures. He was overthrown and murdered by an army coup (1963) and the country was ruled by a series of generals of which President Nguyen Van Thieu survived longest (1967-75). The removal of Diem left the basic situation unchanged and the guerrilla war continued.
- (iv) When it became clear that Diem could not cope with the situation the USA decided to increase her military presence in South Vietnam. Under Eisenhower she had been supporting the regime since 1954 with economic aid and military advisers and accepted Diem's claim that communists were behind all the trouble. Kennedy and Johnson saw it as another Korea: if a strong enough stand were made, South Vietnam could be saved from communism.
- (v) The Americans were strengthened in their determination by the knowledge that the Vietcong (as the guerrillas were now known) were receiving supplies, equipment and troops from North Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh believed that such aid was justified: given South Vietnam's refusal to agree to the national elections. Only force could unite the two halves of Vietnam.

(c) The phases of the war correspond to successive American presidencies which each saw the introduction of new policies:

- (i) **Kennedy** (1961-3) tried to keep American involvement down to an anti-guerrilla campaign. He sent about 16,000 advisers plus equipment and helicopters and introduced the 'safe village' policy, in which local peasants were moved en masse into fortified villages, leaving the Vietcong isolated outside. This was a failure because most of the Vietcong were peasants who simply continued to operate inside the villages.
- (ii) **Johnson** (1963-9) was not deterred by reports from American advisers in 1964 that the Vietcong and the NLF controlled about 40 per cent of South Vietnamese villages and that the peasant population seemed to support them. He assumed that the Vietcong were controlled by Ho Chi Minh and decided to bomb North Vietnam (1965) in the hope that he would call off the campaign. Over the next seven years North Vietnamese cities suffered an even greater tonnage of bombs than the Germans during the Second World War. In addition over half a million American troops arrived in the south. In spite of these massive efforts the Vietcong still managed to launch an offensive in February 1968 which captured something like 80 per cent of all towns and villages; although much ground was lost later, this offensive convinced many Americans of the hopelessness of the

situation, and great pressure was brought on the government to withdraw from Vietnam. This Johnson had no intention of doing, though he did suspend the bombing of North Vietnam (March 1968).

- (iii) **Nixon** (1969-74) realised that a new approach was needed since public opinion would hardly allow him to commit any more American troops (early in 1969 there were 500,000 Americans, 50,000 South Koreans and 750,000 South Vietnamese against 450,000 Vietcong plus perhaps 70,000 North Vietnamese). His new idea was Vietnamisation: the Americans would rearm and train the South Vietnamese army to look after the defence of South Vietnam; this would allow a gradual withdrawal of American troops (in fact about half had been sent home by mid-1971). On the other hand Nixon began the heavy bombing of North Vietnam again and also began to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia along which supplies and troops came from North Vietnam. All was to no avail: at the end of 1972 the Vietcong controlled the entire western half of the country. By now Nixon was under pressure both at home and from world opinion to withdraw; apart from the terrible bombing of North Vietnam, the use of chemicals to destroy jungle foliage and of inflammable napalm jelly which burned people alive, plus the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians, caused a revulsion of feeling against continuing the war. Even Russia and China who were helping the Vietcong with supplies and equipment were looking round for a way out. Consequently a cease-fire was arranged for January, 1973. It was agreed that all American troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam and both north and south would respect the frontier along the 17th parallel. However, the Vietcong continued their campaign and without the Americans, President Thieu's government in Saigon soon collapsed. In April 1975 Saigon was occupied by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong: at last Vietnam was united and free from foreign intervention – under a communist government. In the same year communist governments were also established in Laos and Cambodia. The American policy of preventing the spread of communism in south-east had ended in complete failure and humiliation.

(d) Why did the Americans fail?

- (i) The main reason was that the Vietcong and the NLF had widespread support among ordinary peasants who had genuine grievances against an inefficient government which failed to introduce necessary reforms. When the NLF was formed in 1960 the communists were only one of several opposition groups; by ignoring the rightness of the NLF case and choosing instead to prop up such an obviously deficient regime in their obsession with the fight against communism, the Americans actually encouraged the spread of communism in the south.
- (ii) The Vietcong, like the Vietminh before them, were experts at guerrilla warfare and were fighting on familiar territory; the Americans found them much more difficult to deal with than the conventional armies they had faced in Korea: with no distinguishing uniform, guerrillas could easily merge into the local peasant population. It proved impossible to stop supplies and reinforcements moving down the Ho Chi Mi. Trail.
- (iii) The Vietcong received important help from North Vietnam in the way of troops. while China and Russia supplied arms. After 1970 the Russian contribution was vitally important and included rifles. machineguns, long-range artillery, anti-aircraft missiles and tanks.
- (iv) The North Vietnamese were dedicated to eventual victory and the unification of their country and showed amazing resilience; in spite of appalling damage and casualties during the bombings, they responded by evacuating City populations and rebuilding factories outside the cities.

The effects of the war were wide-reaching: Vietnam was united but the problems of reconstruction were enormous, and the new government's policies had unpleasant aspects such as concentration camps for opponents, and loss of freedom of speech. As well as being a blow to American prestige, her failure had a profound effect on American society: involvement in the war was seen in many circles as a terrible mistake and this together with the Watergate which forced Nixon to resign (August 1974), shook confidence in a political system which could allow such things to happen. Future American governments would have to think carefully: before committing themselves so deeply to any similar situation. The war was a victory for the communist world, though both the Russians and Chinese reacted with restraint and did not boast about it to any great extent, indicating perhaps that they wanted to relax international tensions; however, the communist world now had another powerful military force in the Vietnamese army.