

Fact Sheet 3: the history of Vietnam up to the end of the Second World War

The first Vietnamese state developed around the Red River Delta (in the north) around 207 BC. In 111 BC it was conquered by China and ruled by the Chinese until 938 AD. During this time the Vietnamese rebelled and tried to win back their independence. In 967 AD the first Vietnamese Emperor began his rule. Eventually all of the territory of modern Vietnam was included in this empire. Buddhism flourished and became the state religion.

In the 16th century Europeans made their first contact with Vietnam. During the 19th century the French in particular sought to influence the Vietnamese people. Portuguese and French Catholic missionaries tried to convert many Vietnamese to Christianity. The French gradually increased their influence and by 1890 controlled the entire region known as Indochina.

The French wanted to exploit the natural resources of Indochina while at the same time providing a market for goods made in France. Vietnamese peasants were put to work in factories, zinc mines and copper plantations. Many lost control of what little land they had and thousands died from malnutrition, malaria and dysentery. The Vietnamese staged revolts against the French but were unable to win back their independence.

France ruled Vietnam until it was defeated by Nazi Germany in 1940. Japanese troops then entered Indochina. The Japanese initially allowed the local French authorities to continue governing the region. In March 1945 the Japanese ousted the French government in Indochina. The Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai was allowed to rule in part of the country but the Japanese retained control.

In 1941 the Viet Minh (Vietnamese Independence League) was formed. Led by Ho Chi Minh, this was a nationalist organisation that was dominated by communists. The Viet Minh developed their own army and aimed to remove all foreign control from Vietnam. When Japan surrendered to the allies in August 1945 the Viet Minh launched the August Revolution. Emperor Bao Dai abdicated and Ho Chi Minh announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on 2 September 1945.

The DRV was short-lived. The major powers – the USA, Soviet Union, Britain and China – had other plans. They had agreed – without consulting the people of Vietnam – that when Japan was defeated Vietnam would be divided. The north would be occupied by Chinese nationalist (non-communist) forces and the south by the British. Britain had decided that they would clear the way for the French to return to their former colony. As the British wanted to resume control of their own imperial possessions like Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore they could hardly have done otherwise.