

Vietnam 1946: How the War Began

Stein Tønnesson

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A book review by [Danny Yee](#) © 2010 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Vietnam 1946 is a political history of Vietnam in 1946 which foregrounds the French-Vietnamese relationship and emphasises two key events, the agreement of March 6th and the outbreak of war on December 19th.

The year opened with southern Vietnam (Cochinchina) under French control and northern Vietnam controlled by an uneasy combination of the newly proclaimed Vietnamese government and Nationalist Chinese troops who had liberated it from the Japanese. The French government was in a state of uncertainty, with de Gaulle resigning on January 20th but many key officials in Indochina still looking to him for leadership and advice.

The March 6 agreement came about when some of those French officials attempted a coup de main through a landing at Haiphong. They had failed to get Chinese support, however, and when Chinese artillery fired at the landing force, which had insufficient drinking water to withdraw, the French were forced into accepting a peace settlement with the Vietnamese, whom the Chinese also put pressure on.

"the signing of the Franco-Vietnamese agreement of March 6, 1946, recognising Vietnam as a 'free state,' did not result from any temporary pragmatic, liberal, or moderate ascendancy among French colonial decision-makers. ... the French sailed into a Chinese trap. Peace was imposed by China, which forced the two sides to sign a deal on terms neither really wanted."

With the Chinese gradually withdrawing, French-Vietnamese negotiations at Fontainebleau dragged on without success, eventually coming to an ambiguous "modus vivendi" agreement on September 14th. There was general opposition by French decision-makers and politicians to full Vietnamese independence, with only the French Communist Party, of which Ho Chi Minh was a founding member, providing lukewarm support. (For both the United States and the Soviet Union, the situation in France took precedence over Vietnam.)

A French attack on Haiphong started on November 23rd. Tønnesson describes the background of economic threats and disputes over customs and traces the escalation of tension over several days. With thousands of Vietnamese deaths, mostly civilian, following the use of heavy artillery on civilian areas and refugee concentrations, Tønnesson suggests this can reasonably be called a massacre. He also looks at events elsewhere and considers the responsibility of the participants.

No immediate wider conflict followed, but the French took an increasingly aggressive stance, hoping to elicit a response. They were under orders not to attack, but that wasn't known to the Vietnamese, who stumbled their way into an attack that went off half-cocked. Tønnesson's second major thesis is that:

"the outbreak of war on December 19 was not a premeditated and well-coordinated Vietnamese act of aggression as some recent accounts, both Vietnamese and Western, say. ... Something went wrong at the Vietnamese headquarters that day. Either the leaders were not in control of their forces or they made a momentous blunder — or both. ... Leon Blum's new French government had decided to send Moutet on a peace mission to Hanoi. Thus Giap saved High Commissioner d'Argenlieu and General Valluy from what they feared most: a resumption of talks between the French and Vietnamese governments over their heads. Regardless of whether or not Giap ordered or authorized the attack at 8 p.m., or just lost control, he fell into a French trap made in Saigon."

He also discusses the role of small nationalist parties, some strange events surrounding the sabotage of the power station, and possible provocation by French intelligence.

The final chapter goes through the actors and attempts to assign responsibility for the slide into war. There is no attempt to consider longer-term alternative histories of Vietnam.

Key Vietnamese sources are not public, so Tønnesson's account is written primarily based on French sources, with a certain amount of indirect inference and speculation about the meetings and decisions of Ho and Giap and other Vietnamese leaders. (At one point he falls back on French intelligence reports, albeit it with many warnings about their use.) The history of 1946 will need to be rewritten, and Tønnesson's theses reconsidered, when or if the Vietnamese archives are opened up.

Tønnesson conveys the contemporary tension well and makes his narrative compelling without resorting to dramatisation or reconstruction. His subject may seem narrow, but he makes a good case for it encompassing at least two pivotal historical moments. *Vietnam 1946* is accessible to non-specialists as well as historians, and may also interest students of French foreign policy.

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