The First Vietnam War

Background

1887: Napoleon 3rd ordered French troops to occupy Vietnam; resistance movements broke out; 1940: Japan invaded Indochina during WW2, but used the Vichy French administration as a puppet. The Vietnamese didn’t like either of the invasions, as they were treated like 2nd class citizens, alongside suffering many famines; 1941: Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Minh Front- umbrella group of all Vietnamese parties, but ended in a Communist controlled group since the majority, including Ho, was communist. They had a modest armed force and worked with US Office of Strategic Services to collect Japanese Intelligence. Other non-Communist parties from China also joined and established Guomintang backed armed forces; 1944-45: Vietnamese starved in their millions during Japanese occupation; Bao Dai remained the Emperor but was acting as a puppet; 1945: Japan surrendered to the Allies, and Vietnam turned into a power vacuum. Viet Minh launched “August Revolution” to seize government offices, and Emperor Bao abdicated on 25th. In September, Ho declared Vietnam was independent and was called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Ho was seen as the chairman, and a patriotic hero. BUT France wanted Vietnam back, and the US didn’t like the Communist Viet Minh, so US decided Vietnam should be given to France like a present, for friendships to remain in tact; 1947: Viet Minh fought back against US aided France, and France realised colonialism was ending. They fashioned a semi-independent State of Vietnam. They used Bao as a French puppet, so it seemed like the Vietnamese had independence, but Emperor Bao was merely fulfilling the orders of the French. The Government of Bao gained recognition from the US/UK.

Why did the US assist France?

Cold War: Humanitarian argument that Communism was evil, tyrannical and should be destroyed. The reign of Stalin in USSR and Mao Zedung in China boosted the US fear and hatred of Communism, and they tarred all countries with the same brush. They wanted to promote ‘capitalism’. This was one of the main reasons they stressed. They also wanted to keep the peace of SE Asia had a lot of valuable trading materials, but Communist countries didn’t trade with the Capitalists. The French also believed Ho to be part of a great USSR conspiracy and plot from Moscow, and was going to lead Stalin’s domination in Asia. Ho was seen as the ‘Kremlin puppet’. The containment issue also comes into play; Truman and Eisenhower: Truman was ignorant as to the outside world, and he simplified and misconceived foreign affairs. He relied on his advisors heavily, including Dean Acheson (Secretary of State in 1949), most of whom were anti-Communist. Domestic Reasons: McCarthyism was at its peak; public pressure increased; Presidents appeased the people to maintain popularity; France: an invaluable ally against Communism; important to Western alliance and stability in Europe/NATO; could form bonds with USSR and convert to Communism, thus spreading it; wanted to continue Capitalist support.

How did the US assist France?

Truman: $50mil economic/technical assistance, to win ‘hearts and minds’; for French so they could spend on medication and seeds; Eisenhower: $385mil armaments to help France attack and US bombers + 200 technicians; 1954: US paying nearly 80% of French bill. Aided ECONOMICALLY. No army.

Why did the French not win the first Indochina war?

Ho’s popularity/Bao Dai’s unpopularity: Bao Dai= French Puppet Emperor of SV never popular-1951 US official said [Bao Dai’s government] is in no sense the servant of the people...no grass roots...has no appeal whatsoever to the masses. They were too unpopular to remain in power; Ho, however, was seen as a patriot who cared about the ordinary people. The US official said Ho Chi Minh will remain a popular hero as long as ‘independence’ leaders with French support are simply native mandarins; Vietnamese Rebel Strength: Fight between an elephant and a grasshopper- the French seemed powerful, but Ho’s Vietminh proved elusive and determined- “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win”. French had more men and armaments but VM guerrilla tactics utilised V’s geography; VM made surprise attacks then retreated to Western V’s jungle/mountains; “If only the Vietnamese would face us in a set officer” laughed a French officer “How we should crush them”; China supplied Ho with weapons, including new US