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Indo-China: Freedom— Or We Burn the House

The basic political unrest among Moslem and Asiatic peoples has burst out with violence in French Indo-China. In the southern part of that rich colony, French and British troops are slowly suppressing the native independence movement. But the Chinese have occupied the north. There the nationalists have practically installed their own government. Harold Isaacs, NEWSWEEK correspondent, sends the following on-the-scene report from the capital of Northern Indo-China.

Hanoi is a pleasant city lying in the Red River plain, once the seat of the French Government General for Tonkin. Evidence of change flickers past as you drive in from the airfield. The flag of the nationalists—a yellow star on a red background—flies everywhere. The French street signs are all gone. The avenues, previously named for French conquerors, now bear the names of Indo-Chinese revolutionists and old native kings.

Trams run, rickshas fill the streets, and shops other than French are open for business along Cotton Street, Pipe Street, Copper Street, Brass Street, Tin Street, and Basket Street.

Some 6,500 French civilians move freely about the city, gathering disconsolately in patisseries, bars, and hotel lobbies, trying to talk each other out of the profound sense of humiliation and defeatism which grips them. In the Citadel, a huge, sprawling military encampment, 3,500 disarmed French soldiers live in a semi-internment under Chinese supervision and control. Frenchmen swap rumors of the arrival of French troops or the departure of the Chinese—always “next week.”

The Pure Nationalists: Hanoi is now the fountainhead of the largest and most successful anti-French insurgent movement ever mounted in Indo-China. Here Vietminh (first and last words of Viet Nam Doclap Dong Minh, meaning the league for the independence of Viet Nam) has set up the provisional government of the Viet Nam Republic. Viet Nam is the ancient name for the coastal provinces of Indo-China. Vietminh has been actively in existence since 1939.

French Indo-China

The president of Viet Nam and leader of the whole insurgent movement is a slight, graying little man of 55, named Ho Chi Minh, who commanded guerrillas in collaboration with American officers in Northern Tonkin. He has a scraggly mustache and beard, deep hollow cheeks, and a skin like old brown paper. His brown eyes gleam with quizzical brightness. Ho was born in the province of Vinh in Annam, called "the country of revolutionists," because many of Indo-China's most famous leaders have come from its sparse hills and valleys. He began his national revolutionary career at the age of 12, acting as a messenger for anti-French secret societies.

For 43 years he has devoted himself exclusively to anti-French activity. Constantly reported captured or dead, he never actually fell into French hands. His frail body shows the effects of long travail. He has lost teeth from malnutrition and masters the diseases that rack him only by sheerest will power.

Politically he is a pure and simple nationalist. He points to the Vietminh as a combination of all classes of social elements on a single plank of independence. In return for recognition of independence he says Vietminh is ready to collaborate on the broadest scale with the French. He includes a grant of "reasonable economic priority" in any aspect in which France proves capable of building Indo-Chinese economy on a new national basis of benefiting the Indo-Chinese instead of merely filling the pockets of Frenchmen.

The Pure Nationalism: There is no thought of trying to fight better equipped foreigners on their own terms. Dran Fan Gaiu, 34-year-old political-military leader who was chairman of the short-lived Vietminh regime at Saigon before the French took over with British assistance, explained the Vietminh military setup in terms of small bands based on units of twelve, pyramiding up to a "strategic group" (Chidai) of 144 partisans.

He says the alternatives are independence or scorched earth: "The French have launched a war to reconquer our country. They will fight by their means. We will fight by our means. They will advance along roads, rivers, railways, and canals, razing villages and killing people. We on our part will destroy everything the French own. We will destroy their factories, plantations, railroads, blow up bridges, tear up rails. We will make Indo-China uninhabitable for Frenchmen. We will destroy all they have in order to build a new life for ourselves, even if it means we must start that new life on the smoldering ashes of French power."