

## **FRANCE IN VIETNAM**

**“To achieve the common aim of all colonialist countries, France first had to transform the Vietnamese peasants and landlords into an economy that produced surpluses for the inter-national market.”**

**France’s primary goal was economic: exploit natural resources, gain new markets, improve national security and prestige.**

**It also wanted to govern its new possessions effectively (carry its “white man’s burden”)--although its policy was informal, unclear, and inconsistent. (Were Vietnamese equals or inferiors? How could the French help them without creating disorder and thus threatening economic success? How to use mandarins, language, people, leaders, etc. to France’s advantage?)**

Involved:

- development of mines (coal, zinc, silver, tin)
- expansion of Vietnamese trade to outside markets
- building a commercial and manufacturing sector (textiles, paper, sugar, bikes, food processing)
- developing new cash crops (coffee, tea, \*rubber, corn)
- building an infrastructure (roads [asphalted and gravel] in Vietnam and connecting Vietnam to Laos/Cambodia, canals, railroads, market cities)
- reliance on a *corvée* (forced labor) system
- increasing taxes (paid in money [*piastre*], not in kind)
- establishing a government monopoly on salt, alcohol, opium (and gambling)
- expanding the land under cultivation (less a matter of how much land available for cultivation than a matter of who owned it, what/how it produced, and how it was taxed); creating absentee landlords and tenants (*ta dien*)
- creating large landholdings controlled mostly **by French and wealthy Vietnamese** (= 1% of population but controlled 17% of wealth)

- splitting of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) into five administrative areas: [Tonkin](#), [Annam](#), [Cochinchina](#), [Laos](#), and [Cambodia](#) - - all under a governor-general and each with a *resident-superieur* or, in the case of Cochinchina, a governor
- allowing the Chinese in Vietnam to manage own affairs (virtually autonomous, self-governing) (they regulated taxes, justice, trade/business, thus controlling much of Vietnam's economy, including banking)
- applying different laws in each region, although French law always available and sometimes required (and courts in both language, but mainly French)
- defining Cochinchinese as *sujets* and *Tonkinese and Annamese as protégés*, not French citizens; could be nationalized through adoption, marriage, service in French army, etc. (1937: 2555 Vietnamese naturalized [v. about 20,000 *colons*])
- drafting Vietnamese into the military (many served France in Europe in WWI)
- seeing an obligation to bring benefits of modern civilization to primitive peoples, but not seeing that consistently and as a clear goal

- undermining of French policy by the *colons* who did not like interference by the “uninformed”
- suppressing traditional system of politics (village [council of notables] and nation [mandarin system; emperor = figurehead, but used both to benefit administration of Indochina, to maintain control, to gain peasants’ support])
- changing the education system (education = dangerous) so that fewer were literate, schools were fewer; but created opportunities, including access to French universities
- promoted use of *quoc ngu*
- reliance on large number of French bureaucrats (“so that France’s policy came to look as if it had been dictated as much by a desire to find employment for the sons of her own middle classes as by any political wisdom in furtherance of the joint interest of colony and metropolis.”)
- shutting Vietnamese out of many jobs (banking, commerce, industry)

## How Some Observers See French Rule in Vietnam

Vietnam “was as well run and as efficiently organized as the best colonial governments” with “economic measures meant to benefit large numbers.” (K.M. Panikkar)

“France’s sins in the economic field were not her major ones; her major ones were all political.” (Bernard Fall)

Changes “left Viet Nam halfway between the traditional and modern worlds.” “[T]he French chose to maintain an old order, with the laudable motive of avoiding any shock to the local social structure, but with the practical result that in the country the economy continued to be based on little trade and local consumption while the cities developed a modern commercial economy based on worldwide exchange.” (Paul Mus)

“[I]mprovements . . . were paid for by the hardworking, neglected, and mistreated mass of Vietnam's peasantry, who were exploited by the colonial treasury, robbed by the moneylenders, persecuted by the agents of the monopolies, deprived of a just share of their labors if they were tenants, starving when unemployed, and hungry for long periods of the year even when they worked.” (Joseph Buttinger)

“France has had the country - - thirty million inhabitants - - for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning. . . . France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.” (Franklin Roosevelt, 1944)

“[T]he French occupation changed the Vietnamese way of life permanently. Since the Second World War the Vietnamese have been waging a struggle not merely over the form of their state but over the nature of Vietnamese society, the very identity of the Vietnamese.” (Frances Fitzgerald)

“The French greatly intensified and accelerated the [preexisting] land crisis, undermining much of whatever cohesion existed in an agrarian society, and created the objective preconditions for effective radical mobilization.” (Gabriel Kolko)

“Through a combination of ignorance and cynicism, French policies at the turn of the century had reduced large numbers of Vietnamese to unendurable depths of poverty.” (Neil L. Jamieson)