**The First Indochina War**

**http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/first-indochina-war/**



*French soldiers mount an attack during the First* *Indochina War*

The First Indochina War (December 1946 to August 1954) saw the [Viet Minh](http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/viet-minh/) and French colonial forces battle for control of Vietnam. In the West this conflict is called the First Indochina War; in Vietnam it is referred to as the Anti-French War. It unfolded after the Japanese surrender in August 1945, which left Vietnam without a single national government. [Ho Chi Minh](http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/ho-chi-minh/) seized the opportunity to declare Vietnamese independence on September 2nd 1945 – but the arrival of Chinese and British troops, tasked with overseeing the Japanese withdrawal, undermined the Viet Minh and its grip on power. Driven by anti-communist agendas, the Chinese and British allowed the restoration of French colonial rule, rather than leaving Vietnam in the hands of “red bandits”. By late 1946 the French had mobilised 50,000 troops in Vietnam and regained control of Saigon. In November, French naval vessels bombarded the northern port city of Haiphong, killing large numbers of civilians. The Viet Minh retaliated by attacking French positions in Haiphong and Hanoi, though these attacks were repelled by French artillery and naval guns. By mid December the two sides were openly at war.

Aside from Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh’s most notable military leader was [Vo Nguyen Giap](http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/vo-nguyen-giap/). The beneficiary of a French education, Giap graduated from the University of Hanoi, where he had studied history and politics. A learned and articulate man, Giap spent most of the 1930s teaching history, while contributing to and editing several socialist newspapers. In 1939 Giap was forced to flee Vietnam because of his anti-French political activities. He remained in exile for five years, during which French authorities arrested and executed most of his family. While in exile in China, Giap joined up with Ho Chi Minh and other Viet Minh rebels. After their 1944 return to Vietnam, Giap was tasked with overseeing the Viet Minh’s military forces. His leadership had a profound effect on the outcomes of the First Indochina War and, later, the Vietnam War.



*General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Viet Minh’s military leader in the First Indochina War.*

During the First Indochina War, the Viet Minh encountered similar difficulties experienced by other anti-colonial forces. Despite heavily outnumbering French forces the Viet Minh were hindered by severe weapons shortages, particularly a lack of artillery and munitions. Most Viet Minh weapons had been retrieved from the retreating Japanese or seized from captured French. By the end of 1946 Giap’s northern Viet Minh units boasted 60,000 men – but they were armed with only 40,000 rifles. In addition, Viet Minh soldiers were largely untrained and had little understanding of military organisation, discipline or strategy. Giap was not daunted by these shortcomings. A keen student of war and revolution, Giap studied the philosophy and tactics of famous leaders, from Sun Tzu to Napoleon, from George Washington to Leon Trotsky. Giap recognised the need for strategies that made use of Viet Minh strengths and exploited French weaknesses. One invaluable source of ideas was a 1936 pamphlet called *Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War*, written by Chinese communist leader [Mao Zedong](http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/mao-zedong/). Though Mao was writing of the situation in his own country, his pamphlet had lessons for Giap and the Viet Minh:

“The principal characteristics of China’s revolutionary war are: a vast semi-colonial country which is unevenly developed politically and economically… a big and powerful enemy… and a small and weak [revolutionary] army… These characteristics determine the line for guiding China’s revolutionary war as well as many of its strategic and tactical principles. It is clear that we must [recognise] the guerrilla character of our operations; oppose protracted campaigns and a strategy of quick decision… and instead uphold a strategy of protracted war and campaigns of quick decision; oppose fixed battle lines and positional warfare, and favour fluid battle lines and mobile warfare; oppose fighting merely to rout the enemy, and uphold fighting to annihilate the enemy; oppose the strategy of striking with two fists in two directions at the same time, and uphold the strategy of striking with one fist in one direction at one time.”

Giap and Ho Chi Minh adapted Mao’s strategies to the situation in their own country. It was impossible for the Viet Minh to win large scale battles against the French; they could not withstand French artillery or match French air support or supply lines. Instead, the Viet Minh sought to avoid decisive battles and withdraw to the countryside, jungles and mountains. There they established bases in areas too remote for the French to attack. In these bases they planned to train and prepare Viet Minh soldiers for future campaigns. Meanwhile, Viet Minh cadres would move among the peasants, working to build up political support. The backing of the Vietnamese people was important because they could supply food, information and cover for Viet Minh troops (Giap often cited Mao Zedong’s saying: “A guerrilla soldier swims through the people like a fish swims through the sea”). When ready, Viet Minh soldiers would be deployed to launch surprise attacks, ambushes and raids on weaker French positions (while avoiding full scale battles). Their aim was to prolong the war while inflicting casualties on French soldiers and damage to French resources. The intention was to make the war costly and unpopular back in France. Eventually, French forces would be weakened enough for the Viet Minh to engage them in a decisive battle.

*“It is the fight between tiger and elephant. If the tiger stands his ground to fight, the elephant will crush him with its weight. But if he stays agile and keeps his mobility, he will finally vanquish the elephant, who will bleed to death from a multitude of small cuts.”****Ho Chi Minh***

French military units that participated in the First Indochina War were called the *Corps Expeditionnaire Francais en Extreme-Orient* (the ‘French Far-East Expeditionary Corps’, or CEFEO). It was a composite military force containing native Frenchmen, pro-French Vietnamese and troops from other French colonies in Africa, as well as units of the French Foreign Legion. At its peak the CEFEO numbered more than 200,000 men, the majority of them Vietnamese. While the CEFEO was better armed and equipped than the Viet Minh, it still suffered from severe shortages. France was economically devastated by World War II so the French government had to mobilise the CEFEO on a shoestring budget. During the first phase of the war, many CEFEO troops had no uniforms or standard-issue weapons; they had to rely on whatever they could scrounge or capture. The situation did not improve until 1953, when the United States began supplying the CEFEO with military aid.



*French Foreign Legion soldiers during the First Indochina War*

The first two years of the war (1947-48) was marked by sporadic fighting. The CEFEO was able to quickly capture and control the major cities, while the Viet Minh followed Giap’s strategic plan and withdrew into the mountains. In late 1947 the CEFEO launched Operation Lea, an attempt to destroy the Viet Minh leadership base at Bac Can, north of Hanoi. More than 1,000 French paratroopers were dropped into the area, with orders to flush out the Viet Minh hierarchy. Meanwhile a 15,000-strong CEFEO force was positioned to outflank the retreating Viet Minh and rout them in battle. Despite heavy Viet Minh losses (around 9,000 men) most of their soldiers proved too elusive. “The enemy,” according to one French soldier, “melted into the jungle”.



*A CIA map from 1950 showing areas of communist activity*

In early 1949 the French, frustrated by a lack of progress in the war, changed tack. Paris began looking for a political solution rather than a military victory. Hoping to undermine the Viet Minh’s supporter base, France set up an alternative Vietnamese government, more moderate and pro-French than the Viet Minh. Paris began negotiating with figurehead emperor Bao Dai about forming a government. The new regime was to remain part of the French Union but would be self governing – at least in theory. Bao Dai agreed to the plan and the national capital was moved from Hue to Saigon. This was itself a tactical move because Viet Minh support was much weaker in the south, which contained higher numbers of Vietnamese middle class, Francophiles, Catholics, Confucians, Buddhists, political liberals and moderates. While these groups welcomed Vietnamese independence, they harboured fears about communism and refused to support the Viet Minh, viewing them as lower class bandits led by political trouble makers.

Bao Dai’s new government was encouraged to form a new military force, the Vietnamese National Army (VNA). This was done by recruiting new soldiers but also by co-opting the ‘private’ armies run by cultists, warlords and gangsters. VNA officers were given the same command training as French soldiers. Recruits were promised good pay and the opportunity to serve in France (promises that were later broken). By 1952 the VNA had more than 120,000 soldiers and was fighting alongside the CEFEO in many anti-Viet Minh campaigns. The year 1952 also saw some of the most bitter fighting of the war, as the Viet Minh launched a series of advances in the north, to restore their supply lines and expel the French. When these attacks were unsuccessful, Ho Chi Minh and Giap decided to move men and supplies into Laos – Vietnam’s western neighbour and another French colony – to further stretch CEFEO resources. This shift would facilitate the final decisive engagement of the First Indochina War: the [Battle of Dien Bien Phu](http://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/dien-bien-phu/).



1. Tension and hostility between the independence-seeking Viet Minh and returning French colonial forces led to the outbreak of the First Indochina War in late 1946.
2. The Viet Minh had superior numbers but lack the weapons, munitions and technology of the French. Led by General Giap, they retreated to remote areas to train, gather support and instigate a protracted war.
3. The continuation of the war and some failed military operations led to France seeking a political solution. Paris sought to undermine the Viet Minh by establishing an independent republic of Vietnam.
4. The figurehead emperor Bao Dai was put in charge of this nominally independent state. He was encouraged to form a national army, which later provided support to the French CEFEO.
5. In 1952-53 the Viet Minh began to move men and supplies into remote areas of French-occupied Laos. This change in tactics led to a decisive military confrontation at Dien Bien Phu.

**The Chinese Civil War**



*A map showing territorial possession during the last phase of the Civil War*

The Chinese Civil War started, in many respects, with the [Shanghai Massacre](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/shanghai-massacre/) and the collapse of the First United Front in 1927. The main phase of the [Chinese Civil War](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/chinese-civil-war/), however, is generally regarded as the period spanning late 1945 to October 1949. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalists agreed to peace talks and an abortive ceasefire. But by the start of 1946, the two were again fighting for control of China. The Chinese Civil War culminated in the CCP’s capture of Beijing, where its leader [Mao Zedong](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/mao-zedong/) declared the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Nationalist *generalissimo* [Jiang Jieshi](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/jiang-jieshi/) was forced to retreat to Taiwan, where he established an alternative government called the Republic of China (ROC). The civil war inflicted major suffering on China’s civilian population, already exhausted and economically ravaged by decades of revolution, warlordism and conflict with the Japanese. The war caused millions of casualties, collapsed the economy through hyperinflation and corruption, and displaced millions of refugees. The CCP secured victory in 1949 but like the republicans of 1912, they inherited a divided, unstable and economically depleted nation.

With the Japanese surrender in August 1945, most observers believed the CCP and Nationalists would revive their civil war. In late 1945 foreign intermediaries, particularly the Americans, tried to broker peace talks between the two groups. In late August 1945 Mao Zedong and [Zhou Enlai](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/zhou-enlai/) attended peace talks with Jiang Jieshi and other Nationalist leaders in Chongqing. Mao and Zhou attended at the urging of the Soviet Union and were accompanied by US diplomat Patrick Hurley. These talks were notable for their civility and frequent shows of goodwill between Mao and Jiang Jieshi. At one function in Chongqing, Jiang raised a toast and declared that he hoped “we can now go back to the days of 1924”. At another dinner Mao even exclaimed “Long live President Jiang Jieshi!”. The two men were also photographed together smiling. But beneath this polite veneer, the Chongqing talks were insincere and unproductive. Both sides were maneuvering behind the scenes and buying time for their military forces to recover and regroup. The United States was promising to support a coalition government, while increasing shipments of military supplies to the Nationalists.



*Mao, Jiang and US diplomat Patrick Hurley during the 1945 peace talks*

After three weeks of negotiating Mao and Jiang announced a bilateral pact, agreeing to suspend hostilities and form an all-party government. As expected, the pact did not last long. Fighting between the CCP and Nationalists soon flared up again in Manchuria, an area at this time controlled by the Soviet Red Army. As Soviet leader [Joseph Stalin](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/joseph-stalin/) played both the CCP and [Guomindang](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/guomindang/) to his own advantage, US general [George Marshall](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/george-marshall/) forced Jiang’s government to agree to a 15 day ceasefire, which gave the beleaguered CCP a lifeline. Jiang had negotiated with Moscow to allow Soviet troops to occupy Manchuria, until he could mass enough troops there to counter any threat from the CCP. The Russians held to this agreement but offered the CCP’s Red Army training, weapons and supplies before withdrawing. This support helped transform communist guerrilla fighters in Manchuria into an more conventional military force. George Marshall continued to push Jiang for further negotiations but was frustrated by the *generalissimo’s* attitude, so returned to the US in January 1947. American president Harry Truman later noted the “selfish interest of extremist elements, equally in the Guomindang as in the Communist Party, are hindering the aspirations of the Chinese people”.



*Starving Chinese peasants during the civil war*

The Civil War had a significant impact on the Chinese people. The historian [Jonathan Fenby](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/historian-jonathan-fenby/) suggests that “hyperinflation [during the Chinese Civil War] undermined everyday lives and ruined tens of millions”. Hampered by a poor taxation base, increased military spending and widespread corruption, the Nationalist government’s deficit skyrocketed. The [Sino-Japanese War](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/sino-japanese-war/) also caused government revenue to shrink, forcing the Guomindang to release large amounts of paper money not backed by financial reserves. The result was hyperinflation: a rapid rise in prices and a deterioration in the value of currency. Historian [Michael Lynch](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/historian-michael-lynch/) writes that “in 1940, 100 yuan bought a pig, in 1943 a chicken, in 1945 a fish, in 1946 an egg, and in 1947 one third of a box of matches”. By 1949 hyperinflation was approaching the levels seen in Weimar Germany in 1923, with some Chinese observed hauling their money in carts. A thriving black market emerged and crime increased. Foreign aid supplies were hijacked and sold, reconstruction of industry was halted and unemployment rose. The behaviour of the Nationalist army only increased dissatisfaction with the government. Nationalists troops, the majority of whom were poorly treated conscripts, mutinied or deserted in large numbers. Soldiers also engaged in rape, looting and other acts of brutality against the civilian population. This unpopularity grew further when Jiang repeated a tactic he had previously used against the Japanese, ordering the diversion of the Yellow River to split enemy forces. The outcome was around 500 villages flooded and 400,000 people displaced.

The CCP, on the other hand, was winning the propaganda war. While Nationalist forces were able to capture the communist soviet in Yan’an in March 1947, the CCP still controlled much of northern China. By September 1947 the civil war was being fought on two fronts: the huge Manchurian theatre in the north and the triangle of Shandong, Anhui and Henan in east central China. In late 1947 the communists captured the cities of Shenyang and Changchun. The Red Army laid siege to Changchun for 150 days, a tactic designed to starve out GMD forces inside the city – but the siege caused 160,000 civilians to die of hunger, while another 30,000 died when they were trapped between the communist lines and the city walls. In his book *The Tragedy of Liberation*, historian [Frank Dikötter](http://alphahistory.com/chineserevolution/historian-frank-dikotter/) describes the casual attitude of both communists and Nationalists when it came to civilian loss of life. “After decades of propaganda about the peaceful liberation of China,” Dikötter writes, “few people remember the victims of the Communist Party’s rise to power”. While statistics vary, it has been suggested that up to 2.5 million people died during the 1945-1949 phase of the Civil War. Several historians suggest the death toll for the entire Chinese Civil War period (1927-49) exceeded six million.

*“There is a sense in which the Chinese Civil War has not ended; no formal peace treaty or agreement has ever been made. The two Chinese states that emerged from the civil war, the PRC and Taiwan, have followed very different paths… but each side continues to claim that it alone is the legitimate government of all China. At the start of the second decade of the 21st century, the issues over which the civil war had been fought have still to be resolved.”****Michael Lynch, historian***

In late 1948, with CCP forces increasing their grip on China and closing in on Beijing, Jiang Jieshi called for the reopening of peace talks. Appealing to the United States and the Soviet Union for mediation, Jiang found little support, while Mao refused his offers. The climax of the war came in early 1949 when the Nationalist general Fu Zuoyi was forced to surrender Beijing. The Red Army was met by cheering crowds as they marched into the city, while at the Gate of Heavenly Peace, Jiang Jieshi’s portrait was replaced by an image of Mao Zedong. One after another cities fell to the CCP. On October 10th 1949, the 55-year-old party leader addressed the nation from Tiananmen Square, declaring that “the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China is founded today”. In the weeks after this momentous declaration the Red Army chased Jiang across the country, from Guangzhou to Chongqing to Chengdu. Finally, on December 10th 1949, the *generalissimo* fled by airplane to Taiwan, his departure marking the end of the Nationalist era in China.



*A Western press report from October 1948, on the fall of Changchun*

Jiang Jieshi left China with around 500,000 loyalist soldiers and two million civilian refugees. He was still unwilling to accept defeat. In Taiwan, Jiang established the Republic of China (ROC). He remained president of this republic until his death in April 1975, his rule exceeding a quarter of a century. Jiang’s Taiwanese government was bankrolled by gold, silver and banknotes worth hundred of million of US dollars. Much of this was snatched from banks and government coffers as the Nationalists prepared to flee China. Millions of dollars worth of art and artefacts were also confiscated, from buildings like the Imperial Palace, and taken to Taiwan, where they remain today. Jiang maintained his claim as the rightful ruler of China. He declared the ROC to be China’s legitimate government in exile, further widening the political split between the mainland and Taiwan. Many western nations refused to acknowledge the CCP as the rightful rulers of China for decades after 1949. No peace treaty was signed by the CCP and Guomindang, so technically the civil war continues today; it is in hiatus rather than conclusion.



1. The Civil War between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalists can be traced back to 1927, however it usually refers to the struggle for China between late 1945 and October 1949.
2. The Americans brought Mao Zedong and Jiang Jieshi together for peace talks in Chongqing in 1946 but their commitment to a unified China was short lived and fighting quickly resumed.
3. Life during the Civil War was severely impacted by economic problems including hyperinflation, mass unemployment, inadequate reconstruction of industry and large numbers of refugees.
4. By early 1949 Beijing had fallen to the CCP and as other major cities across China fell, the CCP declared victory by proclaiming of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949. The ‘liberation’ of China, however, resulted in millions of civilian causalities at the hands of both sides.
5. Jiang Jieshi fled to Taiwan and set up the Republic of China, maintaining that he was the legitimate leader of mainland China. His regime was bankrolled with riches taken from the mainland. He remained president of the ROC until his death in April 1975.