

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Vietnam Before 1975

2800 B.C. - 300 B.C.

The Vietnamese have numerous legends about the origin of their state. According to the most famous legend, a Vietnamese prince named Lạc Long Quân comes to northern Việt Nam from his home in the sea. He marries Âu Cơ, a princess from the mountain, on the top of Mount Tản Viên some time around 2800 B.C. The union results in the princess laying 100 eggs, with a son eventually hatching from each. For some unknown reason, the parents separate, the mother leading half the progeny across the northern mountains, where they become the ancestors of the Mường people, and the father leading the remaining fifty sons to the sea, where they become ancestors of the Vietnamese. The most valiant of the sons later becomes the first of the eighteen Hùng kings. Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ are regarded by the Vietnamese as their primal ancestors.

King Hùng establishes Văn Lang, the earliest name for Việt Nam. Another seventeen Hùng kings or generations succeed him, ruling throughout the Bronze Age. The new state prospers under an elaborate irrigation system of dikes and canals that control and channel the supplies of water in the Red River Delta. Văn Lang comprises the northern parts of present-day Việt Nam.

300 B.C.

The historical evidence does not establish the reasons for the fall of the Hùng kingdom of Văn Lang. But by 300 B.C., the people in this region seem to be divided into Tay Au (Vietnamese of the highlands) and Lạc Việt (Vietnamese of the plains). The two groups are politically united by An Dương Vương into the kingdom of Âu Lạc, with its capital at Cổ Loa, about 20 miles north of present-day Hà Nội.

207 B.C.

Zhao Tuo, a renegade Chinese general, conquers Âu Lạc and proclaims himself emperor of a newly independent kingdom called Nam Việt (Nam means south), with its capital in modern Canton, China. The kingdom retains its independence for roughly a century.

111 B.C.

The expansionist *Han Dynasty* emperor Wu Ti sends his forces against Nam Việt, liquidating its independence and incorporating it as a province of the Chinese Empire.

111 B.C. – 939 A.D.

During this period, Việt Nam is a directly ruled province of the Chinese Empire. The Chinese seize important natural resources from Việt Nam, such as salt and iron, and also conduct a program of Vietnamese conversion to Chinese culture. The Vietnamese fight throughout this period to free themselves from Chinese occupation.

39-41

Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, two sisters, lead the first Vietnamese revolt against the Chinese. The Trưng Sisters

raise troops and drive out the Chinese. They proclaim themselves joint queens of Nam Việt for two years until the Chinese return and crush the revolt in 41. The sisters commit suicide in defiance. The martyred Trưng Sisters are later deified by the Vietnamese, and their story of bravery and patriotism becomes an inspiration for Vietnamese resistance to foreign domination.

939 – 968

Ngô Quyền, leader of an independence movement, and his forces end the thousand-year Chinese rule. Ngô Quyền, known as a brilliant strategist, restores the country's name to Nam Việt and its capital in the ancient city of Cổ Loa, which reflects the intense nationalism of the new Vietnamese leadership. Before he could consolidate his kingdom and establish an institutional structure, Ngô Quyền dies five years after the removal of the Chinese. Ambitious feudal lords divide the territory.

968 – 980

Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, of peasant background, puts down the feudal lords, consolidates the kingdom and calls the new state Đại Cồ Việt (country of the great Việt people). Đinh Bộ Lĩnh starts triennial payments of tribute to the Chinese emperor in return for assurance that China would not interfere in his country's internal affairs.

939 – 1800S

Việt Nam enjoys a thousand years of freedom from alien rule, with the exception of a brief Chinese invasion in the early 1400s. The Vietnamese continue to fight off Chinese imperialism throughout this period. Several dynastic families rule the country during this extensive period, including in succession: Ngô Dynasty (939-968), Đinh Dynasty (968-980), early Lê Dynasty (980-1009), Lý Dynasty (1010-1225), Trần Dynasty (1225-1400), Hồ Dynasty (1400-1407), later Lê Dynasty (1428-1526, 1533-1540), Mạc Dynasty (1527-1533, 1540-1592), Lê Dynasty/Nguyễn and Trịnh families (1592-1788), Tây Sơn/Nguyễn Dynasty (1788-1802), and Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1955).

Việt Nam becomes an independent monarchy in the tenth century. However, it is only in the first half of the following century that major institutional changes come about. The Lý and Trần dynasties produce a number of great leaders. During this period, the Lý rulers rename the kingdom Đại Việt, move the capital to Thăng Long (present-day Hà Nội), and give the kingdom a strong centralized government. The Lý Dynasty builds a network of roads and adopts a Confucian government bureaucracy. The most significant ruler of the Trần Dynasty is Trần Thái Tông, who is known for his successful defense of the country, in addition to his innovative agrarian, administrative and economic measures.

1257

In their quest to conquer all of China, the *Mongols* attack Đại Việt to consolidate its southern areas. Later deemed as a significant achievement of the Trần Dynasty, Trần Thái Tông and his troops push the Mongols back into China.

1284 – 1287

After conquering all of China, the Mongols seek to annex the *Champa kingdom*, which is located in present-day central Việt Nam. To support their naval attacks on Champa, Mongol troops pass through Đại Việt on foot to reach the central nation, despite Vietnamese opposition. The Mongols are met with strong Vietnamese resistance that eventually defeats them.

1407 – 1428

The Chinese Empire invades Đại Việt and again brings it under direct Chinese rule. Lê Lợi, an aristocratic landowner, leads a resistance movement that finally expels the Chinese troops and officials from Đại Việt in 1428.

1471

Led by the emperor Lê Thánh Tông, Đại Việt conquers the kingdom of Champa, which makes it possible for Vietnamese expansion into present-day central Việt Nam.

1516 – MID-1700S

The reign of Lê Chiêu Tông, the last real Lê ruler, is marked by rivalries for power between three families – the Mạc, the Nguyễn, and the Trịnh. After Tông's death in 1526, the Mạc family seizes power in northern Việt Nam, but eventually loses control six years later. These events signify the beginning of a protracted civil war with intervals of truce that does not really end until the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1673, a durable peace is worked out with Chinese intervention. The territory is partitioned near the 17th parallel, with the Trịnh ruling in the north and the Nguyễn in the south. Both families rule under the name of the Lê Dynasty.

1615

French Jesuits open the first mission near the city of Đà Nẵng (in central Việt Nam), and begins the long history of Catholic influence in Việt Nam. *Alexandre de Rhodes*, a French missionary and scholar, invents the quốc ngữ a method of writing the Vietnamese language in Roman script, instead of the traditional Chinese characters. The quốc ngữ continues to be used today.

MID-1700S

With peace established with the Trịnh in the north, the Nguyễn ruling family expands its territory further south, first liquidating remaining areas of the old Champa kingdom and then capturing all the Khmer territories of present-day southern Việt Nam.

1773 – 1802

In 1773, three brothers from the village of Tây Sơn in central Việt Nam – Nguyễn Văn Nhạc, Nguyễn Văn Lữ, and Nguyễn Văn Huệ (adopting the name of the southern ruling family) – topple the Nguyễn family. In 1787, the Tây Sơn brothers also eliminate the Trịnh and thus depose the Lê Dynasty. In the north, the brothers are hailed as deliverers, freeing the people from the corrupt Trịnh government. But in the south, they are seen as unscrupulous usurpers. The Nguyễn king does not leave an adult heir upon his death, and the southerners accuse the Tây Sơn brothers of taking advantage of this family tragedy. Many believe that the mandate of heaven must pass on from the Lê-Trịnh to the Nguyễn, and not to the Tây Sơn brothers. The teenage prince, Nguyễn Ánh, receives support from numerous family allies and revolt against the Tây Sơn brothers.

1802

Nguyễn Ánh ends thirty years of civil war and unites the three regions of Việt Nam (south, central, and north) and declares himself *Emperor Gia Long*. The Nguyễn Dynasty, the last Vietnamese monarchy, begins. He revives the imperial government in Huế and completes significant public works, including restoration of the irrigation system and construction of the Mandarin Road, which connects the cities of Hà Nội, Huế and Sài Gòn. Emperor Gia Long is considered by the Vietnamese people as their country's unifier and greatest monarch ever, although he is later lambasted by Vietnamese Communists for accepting minor assistance from the French during his quest for unification.

1858 – 1862

France first attacks and occupies Đà Nẵng under the guise that Catholics are facing religious persecution under the Vietnamese. After three years of fighting, Emperor Tự Đức is forced to cede Sài Gòn and adjacent areas to France.

1883 – 1887

Việt Nam loses its independence to the French, which extends its colonial control into northern Việt Nam. In 1887,

the new French colony, called the *Indochinese Union* or *Indochina*, is founded, covering Việt Nam, Cambodia, and Laos. Vietnamese resistance to French rule starts immediately thereafter.

1914

World War I breaks out in Europe. The French ship some hundred thousand Vietnamese to France as labor battalions.

1920S

A new class of young, educated Vietnamese people emerges. This new elite consists of government employees, professionals, French-trained college and university students, educated landowners and businesspeople. They soon demand important positions in high administration as well as legislation to equalize the Vietnamese status with that of French settlers. Above all, they demand freedom of speech, association and press.

1926

Phan Bội Châu, one of Việt Nam's most prominent nationalist leaders and a non-Marxist, is seized by the French secret police in Shanghai, China, while in hiding. Apparently, the French government acted upon information on his whereabouts provided by Hồ Chí Minh in exchange for 100,000 French piasters. The Communists believe Châu is a threat to Vietnamese Communism. Châu is sentenced to death by the French, though later, because of widespread public protests, the sentence is commuted to life. The great patriot languishes and dies in 1940.

1927

The *Vietnamese Nationalist Party*, or Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, is founded, becoming the most prominent non-Marxist organization of the 1920s and holding far greater appeal among the Vietnamese masses than do the Communists during this period. The party adopts the principles of nationalism, democracy and people's livelihood, and commits itself to overthrowing the French colonial rule in Việt Nam.

1929-1930

French authorities suspect the Vietnamese Nationalist Party of assassinating a high-ranking French official in 1929 (possibly at Communist instigation). The French imprison party supporters and launch a thorough but clandestine investigation of the party's underground activities. Fearing that French retaliation will destroy the party, the party orders nationwide insurrection in 1930, but the French are able to suppress the uprisings and conclusively destroy the effectiveness of the party. Many members flee to China, and others are arrested and executed. The French destruction of the party opens immediate opportunity for Hồ Chí Minh and the Communists, and virtually guarantees their ultimate control of the nationalist movement.

1932

Bảo Đại, theoretically emperor since 1925, returns to Việt Nam from school in France to ascend the throne of a puppet monarchy. He is Việt Nam's last emperor.

1940 – 1945

Japan occupies Việt Nam during World War II with approval of the Vichy government in France. The Japanese utilize French military facilities and economic resources in Việt Nam (rice, coal, rubber and other raw materials) to launch massive attacks of major targets in Asia. The French colonial administration remains intact. Throughout this period, some two million Vietnamese die of famine in the north.

1945

When Japan surrenders to the Allies on August 7, 1945, the French, with the support of the Allies, repositions

itself for colonial control of Việt Nam.

1946 – 1954

The *First Indochina War* breaks out all over Việt Nam between the French and Vietnamese, including both non-Communist and Communist forces.

On May 5, 1954, the Việt Minh, the Communist forces led by Hồ Chí Minh, hand French troops their worse defeat at Điện Biên Phủ, completely demoralizing the French troops in Việt Nam and the French politicians and diplomats.

On July 21, 1954, the *Geneva Agreements* temporarily divide Việt Nam along the 17th parallel into two zones for the two rival military forces: the pro-democracy forces in the south and the Communist Việt Minh in the north. The question of reunification is to be decided by a Việt Nam-wide election in 1956. The United States refuses to sign the declaration and proceeds to support the government of the new Republic of Việt Nam (South Việt Nam) under the leadership of Emperor Bảo Đại and Ngô Đình Diệm as prime minister. The Communist north declares its own separate state, the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam, with Hồ Chí Minh as its president. Nearly one million refugees, mostly Catholics, flee the north to the south in fear of persecution.

1955

Ngô Đình Diệm wins a referendum and becomes president of the Republic of Việt Nam, removing Emperor Bảo Đại. Although Diệm is praised for his handling of northern refugees, for his crackdown of corrupt religio-military sects in South Việt Nam and for his call for the elections of a national assembly, he is influenced by his corrupt family and becomes increasingly unpopular after issuing oppressive measures.

Land reform in North Việt Nam reaches its most radical phase as landlords go before “people’s tribunals.”

In Moscow, Hồ Chí Minh accepts aid from the *Soviet Union*, having earlier negotiated in Beijing for assistance from *China*.

1956 – 1959

In 1956 – 1957, Diệm uses emergency powers to crackdown on Việt Minh suspects and other dissidents in South Việt Nam. In 1959, he signs a law authorizing intense repression of Communist suspects and other dissidents.

Communist insurgent activity in South Việt Nam begins, with the decision to organize thirty-seven armed companies in the *Mekong Delta* (southern Việt Nam). During 1957, guerillas assassinate more than four hundred minor South Vietnamese officials.

1960

North Việt Nam leaders form the National Liberation Front for South Việt Nam, or Việt Nam Cộng Sản (Vietnamese Communists). The U.S. and South Vietnamese governments begin to use the contraction, “Việt Cộng,” to name the Communist insurgents.

1963

On November 2, Ngô Đình Diệm and his chief aide and brother, Ngô Đình Nhu, are assassinated in Sài Gòn by Diệm’s own generals in a military coup d’etat. Political confusion ensues for the next several years with a succession of individuals assuming political leadership. General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Air Marshal Nguyễn Cao Kỳ emerge four years later as the country’s president and vice president, respectively.

1964

On August 2, President Lyndon Johnson charges that the North Vietnamese have attacked American battleships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Three days later, Congress passes the *Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* authorizing the president to take military actions against any armed attacks on American forces in the area. The United States enters the *Second Indochina War*. American aircraft bomb North Việt Nam for the first time.

1965

In March, the U.S. Air Force starts *Operation Rolling Thunder*, the wide-scale American bombardment of North Việt Nam. During the following three-and-a-half years, more than twice as many bombs are dropped over North Việt Nam than were dropped during the entire World War II.

1968

On January 31, during national celebration of the Tết, the Lunar New Year, North Việt Nam and the Việt Cộng launch a major offensive on all the main cities and towns of South Việt Nam. The Tết Offensive proves to be a military failure for North Việt Nam, but it has a tremendous impact on U.S. politics. Washington questions the potential costs of continuing the war as the American public sees on television the devastation that was occurring in Việt Nam. The United States decides to disengage from involvement in Việt Nam. American troop strength in Việt Nam at year's end is 540,000.

In March, 450 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians in Mỹ Lai village are killed by U.S. troops. Known as the Mỹ Lai Massacre, this incident, along with many other significant events in Việt Nam and in the United States, escalates American public opposition to U.S. involvement. Anti-war movements continue to grow. The U.S. troops in Mỹ Lai were under the command of Lieutenant William Calley, who is later convicted of the mass murder and sentenced to life in prison. However, in 1974, Calley is released from prison after many legal appeals.

1969

President Richard Nixon begins the policy of "*Vietnamization*," slowly withdrawing U.S. troops, while building up South Vietnamese troops and beginning to secretly bomb Communist supply lines in Cambodia.

1970 – 1972

In 1970, U.S. National Security Advisor *Henry Kissinger* begins secret talks in Paris with North Vietnamese Lê Đức Thọ regarding a cease-fire agreement. American and South Vietnamese forces attack Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.

In 1971, South Vietnamese forces begin incursions in Laos against the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.

In 1972, Kissinger and Thọ meet several times to again discuss a cease-fire. North Việt Nam launches offensive across the demilitarized zone. American bombing of areas near Hà Nội and Hải Phòng begins in May and intensifies in December.

1973

On January 27, the United States and North Việt Nam sign cease-fire agreements, called the *Paris Peace Accords*, which provide, among other things, for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the return of prisoners of war, and the ceasefire. President Thiệu of South Việt Nam rejects the agreement, as he had not been party to the talks. By the end of March, the remaining U.S. combat troops begin withdrawing from Việt Nam. By year's end, the war between South Việt Nam and North Việt Nam resumes, although the level of military operations is low-key on both sides.

1974

President Thiệu declares in January that the war has begun again. The Communist buildup of troops and supplies in South Việt Nam proceeds in June.

1975

During the week leading up to April 30, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese attempt to escape Việt Nam under chaotic conditions before the Communist takeover.

North Việt Nam launches a sudden and major military offensive and ends the civil war, capturing Sài Gòn on April 30, a date significant to both Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans today.