Cold War and Decolonization

Case Study: Vietnam
Case Study: Vietnam

Background: Indochina

- became part of French overseas empire 19th century

- territory ‘Indo China’ divided: Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam

- Vietnam: resources contributed to colonial economy – rubber to Michelin Tires

- otherwise, colony remained poor, underdeveloped
Case Study: Vietnam

French Indo-China (Four Regions)
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Vietnam under the Japanese:

- was part of swath territory Japan occupied during WWII

- some groups welcomed Japanese as ‘relief’ from French colonial masters: co-operated

- others remained loyal to French, including former emperor

- yet others: fought both ‘foreign’ powers as Vietnamese nationals
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Ho Chi Minh: founder ‘Viet Minh’

- father bureaucrat who refused to work for French

- left to study in Europe, Soviet Union: became attracted to Communism as ideology respecting nationalism and not associated with colonialism

- returned to Vietnam 1941: built up movement to fight against Japanese
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Ho Chi Minh: founder ‘Viet Minh’

1921 (left)

1946 (right)
Case Study: Vietnam

Although Communist, seen by Allies as primarily ‘nationalist’

- US worked with him: sent in ‘special ops’ to train his army in counter insurgency

- Japanese surrendered before planned operations took place

- US forces withdrew: left him to chase Japanese from North, British did so in South

*Viet Minh declared own ‘independence’ as Democratic Republic of Vietnam*
Case Study: Vietnam

Japanese surrendering to British in Saigon 1945
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Return to the French:

- British no intention of remaining

- Chinese (nationalists – not Mao) looted country, acted as ‘bandits’ but left

- Allies turned Vietnam back to French: part of plan to ‘rebuild’ France in Europe [context: Marshal Plan]

First example of ‘inherent contradiction’ of American position vis-à-vis Decolonization: cold war fears trumped promises of self-determination and self-government
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New Threat:

- French attempts to ‘return’ provoked fierce resistance (again) by Viet Minh, based in north (mountains in border region China)

- North engaged in fighting French: weakened, vulnerable

- Chinese nationalists became real threat

- Ho Chi Minh negotiated with French to protect against much stronger Chinese
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- Viet Minh: accord with French was temporary, assurance of independence from Chinese nationalists

- French: acknowledgement of ‘victory’

- created State of Vietnam in south: placed former emperor (who had served under Japanese, abdicated 1945) on throne

While not realized at the time, accord would lead region into international war that would ultimately defeat new Super Power -- America
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1950: situation changed

- Mao’s new People’s Republic of China recognized Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam

- offered it substantial military, financial support

- PRC and Soviet Union signed agreement

- US saw these events as clear ‘Communist Threat’ to its interests in south-east Asia/Pacific
Major Battles, Offenses
Vietnam 1954-1973
(mentioned in lecture)

1. Diem Bien Phu
2. Gulf of Tonkin
3. US Air Raids
4. Tet Offensive
5. My Lai (Massacre)
Case Study: Vietnam

Diem Bien Phu March-May 1954: end of Asian Empire for French

- Viet Minh gaining strength among liberation forces in south, also in neighbouring Laos, Cambodia

- French built military base near Laos border in north: goal was to deliver critical ‘blow’

- instead: Viet Minh achieved the unbelievable in terms of physical movement arms, strategy
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French defeat: humiliating

– 2300 killed, 5200 wounded, 11000 imprisoned

- while Viet Minh lost more men (estimated 23000 casualties): achieved victory

"the first time that a non-European colonial independence movement had evolved through all the stages from guerrilla bands to a conventionally organized and equipped army able to defeat a modern Western occupier in pitched battle".
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Impact and Geneva Accords 1954:

- huge impact on discussions occurring in Geneva regarding SE Asia: not what French hoped for

- Accord called for:
  - partition 17th parallel – north to Viet Minh, south to State of Vietnam (now under control Ngo Dinh Diem)

  - elections in 1956 to unify country

Refusal of South to hold elections – backed by US – ensured North continued to fight
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US Begins War in Vietnam:

- US had already invested $2.5 billion at time of French defeat

- effectively: now stepped in to replace the French in the South

- early days of Diem’s regime: unstable

- actual ‘war’ broke out against him: he prevailed and refused to move to elections
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US had Decision to Make: support Diem or Geneva Accord (and elections)

- elections would have put Ho Chi Minh in power: had support of people in both north and increasingly in south

US supported Diem
Case Study: Vietnam

Diem Built Up Security Forces, Secret Police:

- sought out, imprisoned 100,000 Viet Minh sympathizers

- named them ‘Viet Cong’ (Vietnamese Communists)

- many tortured, executed

-1957: Viet Cong fighting back, attacks on government

- 1959: engaging South Vietnamese Army forces in small-scale, frequent battles
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Video

“American Experience: Vietnam” Pt.2

[YouTube 20:00 – 24:15]
Case Study: Vietnam

National Liberation Front:

- 1960 Diem’s opponents communist and non-communist–formed coalition: National Liberation Front (NLF) to organize resistance to the regime

- although genuinely ‘South Vietnamese’ and nationalist, US assumed it was puppet of Hanoi

- ‘National Liberation’ meant ‘Communism’ to John Kennedy’s America
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The Kennedy Commitment: ‘domino theory’

- Kennedy advisors reported on conditions in South Vietnam in 1961: regime weak

- if communists were to be kept out, more aid had to be sent in: military, economic, technical

- some recommended large-scale troop commitment: Kennedy resisted

- 1962: 9,000 troops in South Vietnam (had fewer than 800 during the 1950s)
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War Escalates:

- Diem regime ‘out of control’: own military planning to overthrow him (and brother Nu, by this time equally powerful, even more detested)

- June 1963: self-immolation of Buddhist Monk generated widespread protests in South Vietnam and garnered international attention

- violent reaction by Diem: military moved
Case Study: Vietnam
Case Study: Vietnam

With US agreement, Diem overthrown:

- he and brother captured, killed

- three-weeks later, Kennedy assassinated in Dallas

- Johnson (same who had earlier visited Saigon) took over as president

- political instability in South Vietnam convinced US to increase military, economic support
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**Tonkin Affair:**

- following summer: two US destroyers attacked in Gulf of Tonkin (some question of ‘error’, not certain)

- retaliatory bombings of military targets in North Vietnam

- August 1964: congress passed Gulf of Tonkin Resolution – broad approval to escalate the war *as necessary*

- by early 1965 ‘Operation Thunder’ brought regular bombing raids to North Vietnam
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Move into South Vietnam:

- March 1965: decision made to send U.S. combat forces into battle

- June: 82,000 combat troops stationed in Vietnam, military calling for 175,000 more by the end of 1965

- Johnson authorized dispatch 100,000 troops end of July 1965; another 100,000 in 1966
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**US in Crisis:**

- escalation in face of growing concerns among military

- November 1967: troops approached 500,000 casualties: 15,000 killed, 110,000 wounded

- question: ‘why are we (US) still in Vietnam’?

- disbelief at Washington’s claims ‘war is being won’
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-bombing campaigns killing, maiming civilians: difficult to tell ‘friend from foe’

- but media coverage brought horrific images of the war into American homes

-Protesters argued that civilians, not enemy combatants, were primary victims of war
Case Study: Vietnam

Anti-war movement that had been growing culminated in demonstration 35000 outside Pentagon in Oct 1967
Anti-War Protests 1967
Martin Luther King
addressing protesters (rt)
Case Study: Vietnam

Tet Offensive January 1968:

- North Vietnamese, Viet Cong attacked over 100 major towns, cities in South – including Saigon
- resistance everywhere but in some areas, fighting lasted for weeks
- US embassy occupied for several hours
- ultimately Communist forces withdrew: losses heavy
“Tet Offensive”
Case Study: Vietnam

- but shocking images of the fighting, violence had been watched on TVs everywhere

- casualty lists unexpectedly long

- confirmed perception that military had been lying about success of earlier military operations and ‘weakness’ of Communists

“... and ultimately, [about] the ability to achieve a meaningful military solution in Vietnam. “

Johnson decided to end escalation of War.
Saigon (Chinese Neighbourhood)
Battles of Tet Offensive filmed and shown on American television – unedited
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March 1968: My Lai Massacre

- angry, frustrated US army company entered South Vietnamese village firing: killed about 300 unarmed children, women, elderly

- investigation showed poor leadership -- discipline, moral, recruitment problems

- investigation launched 1969: became public only months later
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- military court convicted officer in charge of murder

- became ‘moment’ that proved the deep inhumanity of the war for much of America

- that it had been ‘secret’ for so long convinced many that those accusing the government of duplicity were right:

  *My Lai was not isolated incident – only the one that became famous!*
My Lai Massacre: houses, livestock crops burned. Inhabitants killed. Women, children (to right) killed moments later.
Vietnam, 1972: young girl among other children running from napalm attack: her clothes had been burned off, her skin scorched. Picture was icon of savagery of Vietnam war, known worldwide. Treaty ended US involvement the next year.
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The ‘noble cause’ had become the ‘shameful adventure’

[see ‘Introduction’ to ‘American Experience: Vietnam – Add’l Rdgs. ]

Sets up ‘noble cause’ drawing on short quotations from four presidents involved – ends with raising question of whether or not it was a ‘shameful adventure’.

[Approximately 10-15min]
Case Study: Vietnam

Vietnam: case study in cold war politics and failed decolonization

- 20th century role of Asia-Pacific reflected in history of Vietnam: not only did European, ‘Western’ politics shape its history, its history shaped European, ‘Western’ politics

- first major example of how so-called ‘Third World’ would become integral to futures of First and Second Worlds (understood to be America, Soviet Union and their ‘spheres of influence’
Case Study: Vietnam

Vietnam: case study in cold war politics and failed decolonization

- story continues for US and the war through to 1973: treaty with North Vietnam ended US involvement

*Legacy of WWII and its multi-theatre arena: global nature of colonialism ensured that decolonization was part of same process*