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This Is the End? The French Settler Community in Saigon and the Fall of Indochina in 1945

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One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation.

—J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Introduction

In his Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J.M. Coetzee describes masterfully how the agents and members of empire struggle incessantly against the imperial state's demise by creating a constant state of fear against imminent barbarian attack. It is not enough to rule. The imperial state needs an enemy. It can then march the army into the borderlands to attack the nomads before they can descend upon the empire. The deployment of the army, the use of torture, and the suspension of rule of law are all necessary evils. The preservation of civilization depends on it. Empire simply cannot fathom its end. And yet, throughout his novel, Coetzee has his borderland administrator remind us that all empires must one day come to an end. Imperial time, the Magistrate whispers seditiously in our ear, is not universal: 'We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients' (Coetzee 2004: 55). Driven almost mad by the failed military campaign against the approaching barbarians he has come to admire but still cannot see, the Magistrate finally

admits that he ‘wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?’ (Coetzee 2004: 169). Our tortured colonial administrator had dared to imagine decolonization from the inside of empire.

Susan Bayly put her finger on this in a wonderful essay she penned in 2009 on one such rogue magistrate in French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), Paul Mus. This colonial administrator had dared to imagine the decolonization of Vietnam from within the French empire in the wake of the Second World War. Like Coetzee’s Magistrate, Mus lost his job at the head of the colonial academy (Bayly 2009). For the historian of French Indochina and its Vietnamese successor states, Coetzee’s vision of the empire as an entity lashing out against its collapse finds something of a case study in Saigon and Hanoi in mid-1945 as Mus witnessed first-hand at the time. After building modern schools, hospitals and roads for eighty years, French settlers watched in fear from behind their shuttered windows in Hanoi and Saigon as the ‘barbarians’ took over as the Second World War came to a close in Asia. The Vietnamese were not only dancing jubilantly in the streets of both cities in August and September 1945; they also took control of the administration of the new nation-state they christened ‘Vietnam.’ ‘The age of colonization is over,’ a newly appointed Vietnamese magistrate declared to Western reporters in Saigon on 17 September (Krull 1945: 12).¹ As he spoke, Vietnamese policemen did what they could to maintain order as their compatriots celebrated their liberation from eighty years of French colonial domination and five years of Japanese occupation.

The tables had been turned and yet everything still remained in flux. No one knew for sure in mid-1945 that the French would not return to retake Indochina having lost it briefly to the Japanese. Do all empires really die? Vietnamese nationalists were convinced that history was on their side; there was no going back. However, the overwhelming majority of the French settlers, colonial officers and administrators in Saigon disagreed vehemently that their time had come. Waves of Vietnamese nationalism surging around them did nothing to change their minds. To them, the Vietnamese revolution was an aberration. The Vietnamese were not, *could* not, be ‘nationalists’ or ‘patriots.’ They were ‘pirates’ and ‘troublemakers.’ At best, they were ‘children,’ unready to assume independence (Hertrich [1956] 1999: 46–47).² Imperial time had briefly stopped because of the war. But it was now just a question of re-establishing order and resetting the clock. As one French planter told a journalist in September 1945: ‘In 1942, I was in charge of re-establishing order at X. Well, we burned a few villages, jailed a few hundred natives, sentenced their leaders and that was all there was to that disturbance. Everything went back to order and the coolies went on working as before. They don’t want anything else. They expect that of us’ (Krull 1945: 9). Freed from Japanese internment, a ranking magistrate in Indochina repeated the same idea to Mus in a phrase the latter

would carry with him: ‘all the Annamese desire is our return’ (*les Annamites n’attendent que notre retour*) (cited in Gentil 1972: 312).

Most scholars of modern Vietnam have understandably focused their attention on the birth of Vietnam in August–September 1945 in the form of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). We owe much to this scholarship for putting the Vietnamese and their time before us. However, in this chapter, I would like to focus on the much less studied French community in Indochina whose members suddenly found themselves confronted with the end of empire in 1945. I would like to try to understand how the French in Saigon experienced the tumultuous events of August and September 1945, triggered by the end of the Second World War. How did they perceive Vietnamese independence? How did they understand the possible end of empire? How did they act to restore colonial rule, reset the imperial clock if you will? This chapter in no way responds definitively to all of these questions. Rather, it is a preliminary attempt to make better sense of how imperial time ended or didn’t for the settler community in Indochina. This is something Susan engaged with in her work on colonialism. I would like to think that I’m following her lead, for her work has been of great inspiration to me over the years.

A Colonial World Turned Upside Down

The French Community in Colonial Indochina (1862–1940)

The French community in Indochina³ numbered around thirty-five thousand people on the eve of the Second World War. Although the French had always been the smallest group of the thirty million people inhabiting Indochina by that time, they had always stood at the top of the colonial pyramid. Their violent conquest of Vietnam between 1858 and 1885 and their military superiority ensured this. The promulgation of the Indigenous Code in 1881 codified it by denying ‘natives’ equal rights with ‘French citizens’. Besides a few hundred settlers and European missionaries, most of the *Français d’Indochine*, as they soon styled themselves, resided mainly in the urban areas of Vietnam. In 1940, seventeen thousand French lived in Saigon, six thousand in Hanoi, and over two thousand in Haiphong. A few thousand were scattered across the rest of the colony. Most pushed pencils in the civil service or served in the colonial army. A couple of thousand worked as planters, traders and entrepreneurs. Largely masculine immigration in the late nineteenth century led to mixed unions between French men and Vietnamese women. Several hundred children were born from these ‘mixed’ unions, referred to in French as *Eurasiens* or *métis*. Eurasians born to legal unions were often in a better situation than those born out of wedlock. William Bazé and Henri de Lachevrotière, for example, became powerful figures in the settler community, owned property and ran influential papers. Both were vociferous and indefatigable defenders of the colonial order and its French community well into the 1950s. Both had Vietnamese mothers (Meyer 2003).

Social interactions between the French and the Vietnamese occurred during the colonial period. Sports, for example, generated mixed teams and even saw the ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ sit down together at the banquet table to celebrate a season, laugh together and reminisce (Larcher-Goscha 2009: 61–89, 1993). High school classrooms also brought some French and Vietnamese youth into contact with each other. French teachers often befriended their students. Jean-Michel Hertrich, who penned a gripping account of Vietnamese independence in 1945, had taught in Indochina in the 1930s and personally knew such future nationalist leaders as Pham Ngoc Thach and Pham Van Bach. Families often crossed paths and perhaps exchanged smiles in the Saigon markets or the beautiful Catholic cathedral in downtown Norodom Square (Hertrich [1956] 1999: 8).

However, this intermingling had real limits in colonial society. Other than learning a smattering of Vietnamese words to communicate with their domestic staff, few French spoke enough Vietnamese to interact proficiently with ordinary Vietnamese. Although the famous colonial country club in Saigon, the *Cercle Sportif*, was not officially segregated, in practice it only opened its membership to the well off, socially connected and almost exclusively French population (Franchini 1995: 77). The thousands of Vietnamese maids, ‘boys’, ‘bep’ (cooks) and drivers who worked in French households in Saigon had to carry permission slips in order to enter shops on the colonial city’s chic *rue Catinat*. Many French and Vietnamese of comparable financial means lived in the same neighbourhoods and apartment complexes. And of course, not all *Français d’Indochine* were rich. But the French, Vietnamese and Chinese quarters remained distinct (see Babut 1931). Mixed marriages between Vietnamese men and French women were, on the whole, very rare. A notable exception was Dr Pham Ngoc Thach, future diplomat-at-large for Ho Chi Minh who married a French woman in Paris. The future novelist, Marguerite Duras, was another. But when her French classmates learned that she was dating a Vietnamese beau, a very wealthy one at that, they ‘definitively distanced themselves from me. Those who frequented me until then dared no more to compromise themselves in my company’ (Duras 2006: 41).

Contrary to the idyllic image many of the *Français d’Indochine* would later create about the peaceful, orderly and serene pre-Second World War period, the reality was different. Revolts against colonial rule had occurred repeatedly since the earliest days of the French conquest in the nineteenth century. Some were spontaneous peasant uprisings; others were nationalist and communist directed ones. The French community made no qualitative difference between any of them. They all threatened the colonial order. Massive peasant protests in central Vietnam in 1908 struck fear in colonial hearts and the European settler community used the image of the masses descending on the cities to pressure the government to roll back liberal reforms for the ‘natives’, suspend the rule of law for their ‘subjects’ and smash any insurrection. And that is what happened. Revolts occurred again during the First World War and then climaxed in massive ones in central and northern Vietnam in 1930–31 and a revolt in Cochinchina

in 1940. The French relied on the colonial police, army and even the air force to smash and bomb these movements into submission. Torture became an all-too-common colonial practice in Indochina. The 'barbarians' had obviously not been invisible. The Vietnamese had always been there.

Japanese Occupation and the Collapse of Imperial Time (1940–45)

The Second World War weakened colonial power dramatically and discredited the French profoundly in the eyes of Vietnamese. Things first went badly when the French capitulated to the Germans in June 1940, dissolved the Third Republic, and allied the new State of France, better known as Vichy for the town from where it operated, with Hitler's Third Reich. Emboldened by French weakness, the Japanese moved their troops into northern Indochina from China in late 1940. However, rather than overthrowing the French colonial state under Vichy's control, the Japanese and the French ended up collaborating in an uneasy condominium based on the fact that Japan and France were now both partners with Germany. Rather than taking a stand against the Japanese, the French allowed the Japanese to occupy all of Indochina as the Germans had occupied all of France. As long as the French honoured their agreements with the occupiers and provided the required food, labour and natural resources, Japanese authorities were content to rule indirectly through the pre-existing French colonial administration. French Indochina became, if you will, a Japanese military protectorate.

It is not certain that the French grasped how an estimated fifteen thousand Indochinese elites and millions of increasingly hungry peasants may have interpreted their collaboration. While Vichy's Governor General Jean Decoux prided himself on keeping Indochina French (just as Pétain claimed to do in the metropole), it was clear to any thinking Vietnamese regardless of class that Decoux did so because the Japanese allowed him to do so. Second, that a 'yellow race' could so easily dominate a 'white one' debunked for good Social Darwinian arguments justifying French colonial rule since the nineteenth century. Vietnamese rickshaw drivers serving customers in Saigon understood perfectly well that Japanese soldiers strolling down the *rue Catinat* had upended the colonial order and the racism on which settler domination rested. Thanks to their military superiority, the Japanese occupied the top rung of the colonial ladder. Third, by collaborating with the Japanese, the French failed to honour duly signed international legal agreements binding them to defend their Asian colony. The French did not fight against the foreign occupiers in 1940–41. In the eyes of many Vietnamese nationalists, French prestige and invincibility had suffered a massive blow as a result of this, something which Vichy, its Republican successors and the French community in Indochina in particular failed entirely to grasp.

Vichy also applied its National Revolution in the colonies. Admiral Decoux faithfully applied anti-Semitic laws and clamped down on Republicans and

their associations (Free Masons, the League of Human Rights, and the socialists). In their place, the admiral promoted the Fascist-minded *Légion française des Combattants et Volontaires de la Révolution nationale*. Thanks to volunteers from the French community, its ranks increased from 2,637 members in early 1942 to 6,576 by mid-1943, meaning about 25% of the total European population (Isoart 1982: 20). Decoux rolled back what little democracy the Third Republic had introduced to Indochina in the preceding decades. In November 1940, the admiral presided over the dissolution of all Indochinese local chambers and even the Colonial Council of Cochinchina. Like the Germans in France, the Japanese in French Indochina never required any of these anti-democratic measures (Jennings 2001; Raffin 2005; Namba 2012).

While Decoux did his best to build up Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, increasing the salaries of Vietnamese civil servants and stimulating local patriotism, little changed when it came to interactions between the Vietnamese and the French community. Each continued to live in separate worlds. Decoux's National Revolution may have mobilized tens of thousands of youths between late 1940 and early 1945, but I am unaware of any attempts to integrate French and Vietnamese youth groups. They remained segregated in practice. The Governor General had no real Vietnamese elites with whom he was willing to collaborate, other than the monarchy, and even then King Bao Dai was not really interested in collaborating with Decoux.⁴

The balance of power turned against the Axis powers, when the Allies debarked in Normandy in mid-1944 and brought down the Vichy government in France shortly thereafter. Worried by the prospect of an Allied landing in Indochina as the Germans retreated in Europe, on 9 March 1945 the Japanese occupiers easily overthrew the orphaned Vichy colonial state in Indochina, rapidly incarcerated its army, police force and ranking administrators, and declared the independence of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. France's Indochinese empire was no more. A few months later, the same was true for the Japanese one: on 15 August 1945, following the nuclear explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese emperor announced his country's capitulation to the Allies. It was in this context that Vietnamese nationalists, led by the Viet Minh, a nationalist front created by Ho Chi Minh's communist party in 1941, seized power in Hanoi on 19 August and then moved their way southwards, reaching Saigon a week or so later. On 2 September 1945, Ho stepped up to the microphone in Ba Dinh Square in downtown Hanoi, read the declaration of independence and announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) before tens of thousands of cheering Vietnamese citizens. National time was rapidly materializing.

From 9 March 1945, and especially after 15 August, French settlers found themselves in an unprecedented, extremely vulnerable and potentially dangerous position. With the colonial army behind bars, they were at the mercy of their Japanese rulers and then the Vietnamese nationalists. For the first time ever, the *Français d'Indochine* had no police or army to protect them between March and September 1945. Between 9 March and 15 August, the Japanese

incarcerated an estimated 683 French civilians and high-ranking officers, including 150 in Saigon. They interned fifteen thousand members of the French colonial army, twelve thousand of them European. In Saigon, this included the *11^{ème} Régiment d'infanterie coloniale* (11^{ème} RIC). The Japanese confiscated weapons from the civilian population. In the same period, 400 French civilians and 1,800 French military personnel perished. Executions and torture of the French most certainly occurred. The Indochinese suffered in even greater numbers – six thousand ‘Indochinese’ civilians and seven hundred military personnel died in Japanese custody in equally horrible conditions. And under joint Franco-Japanese rule, at least one million Vietnamese died due to a massive famine in 1944–45. Strikingly absent from French accounts of their experiences in Indochina during this time is any mention of this massive Vietnamese loss of life and suffering (Goscha 2011: 388–89).

Many of the French living in the countryside fled to Saigon in search of safety; others did so on Japanese orders. As of 21 September, an estimated twenty-five thousand Europeans resided in Saigon (Goupy 1945). To accommodate this sudden influx in the population, longstanding French families in Saigon did their best to take in new arrivals. Twelve to eighteen people often lived in one house. Living conditions were often cramped – again, not all French lived in spacious villas (Goupy 1945). That said, the French community in Saigon never went hungry. To my knowledge, no French settler died from famine during this time. Western journalists arriving in early September reported that war-imposed autarchy, home gardening and animal husbandry had proven effective in Saigon: ‘There was enough to eat and none of the necessities were lacking. On the whole, life had not changed much’ (Krull 1945: 2).

Fear among the settlers, however, ran at unprecedented levels. Besides the Japanese assault on French civilians and combatants, including all sorts of humiliations, the colonizers suddenly found themselves at the mercy of the colonized, in particular the majority Vietnamese. By supporting the independence of Vietnam under Emperor Bao Dai following the 9 March coup, the Japanese had allowed nationalists, youth groups, scouts and workers to organize themselves and to take to the streets for the first time free of French control. The change in the balance of power immediately modified relationships between the French and the Vietnamese at all social levels. Vichy’s scouting and youth groups morphed rapidly into the Youth Guard under Pham Ngoc Thach’s leadership. Nationalist-minded presses and papers published scores of books and articles celebrating the heroes who had resisted the French since the 1860s. French settlers watched as Vietnamese nationalists ripped down colonial monuments and renamed streets celebrating French colonial heroes in favour of Vietnamese ones. The monument in Saigon dedicated to the French conqueror of Indochina, Francis Garnier, crumbled, as did another one in Norodom Square dedicated to the symbol of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, the Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine (Barthouet 1947: 166). They had served as the all-important symbolic markers of imperial time. Their obliteration prepared the way for national ones, but their destruction convinced settlers that they had to

be rebuilt and the Vietnamese put back in their place. It was essential to the re-establishment of imperial time and the reassurance that would come with it once the war was over. But there was no hiding the fact that the tables had been thoroughly turned on them. It was a humiliating, complex and powerful emotion for the settler community. 'Losing face' is how de Gaulle's new commissioner to Cochinchina described it upon arriving secretly in southern Vietnam (Cédile 1945: 1).

'Black Sunday': Vietnamese Independence and the Imperial Time Warp

French fear spiked when the Japanese capitulation of 15 August 1945 changed the balance of power firmly in favour of the Viet Minh, whose forces rapidly seized power in Hanoi on 19 August and in Saigon on the 25th. Until the Allies arrived, the Japanese remained in de facto control thanks to their 100,000 troops in Vietnam, including 70,000 in the south, not to mention their police forces. But as long as the Viet Minh didn't let things get out of hand, Japanese officers looked the other way as they waited for the Allied victors to take over. To the stupefaction of the French settlers, the Japanese refused to free incarcerated colonial troops, administrators and security forces in Hanoi or Saigon, for the simple reason that the Japanese did not recognize the French, 'new' or 'old', as an Allied power to whom they would surrender. Order no. 1 issued by Truman on 15 August 1945 had excluded the French and Dutch from joining the other Allied forces in occupying Japanese territories in the Asia-Pacific region. French settlers had to wait for the arrival of the British, who were to accept the Japanese surrender below the 16th parallel, repatriate Allied POWs and maintain order, while the Republic of China's troops under Chiang Kai-shek would do the same to the north of that line.

This was yet another blow to French prestige, for it confirmed for all to see the difficult situation in which France's wartime collaboration with the Axis had placed all of them. There was a general though unspoken realization among the settlers in Indochina that they had not quite been on the 'winning side'. In concrete terms, this meant that the French population could not free the imprisoned colonial troops to restore the colonial order and protect them. The French in Saigon thus continued to live in an expectative, troubled state of mind in August and September. The most powerful emotion was fear, alleviated somewhat by the belief that the Allies would soon arrive to protect them until the new French army sent by Charles de Gaulle could debark and put the Vietnamese back in their places, all of them.

Things became tense by early September 1945 as the Vietnamese moved fast to build a new nation-state on their terms. Nationalist leaders in charge of Saigon exhorted the population to refrain from aiding or collaborating with the French 'colonialists'. The Viet Minh issued orders to boycott French shops and urged colonial servants, maids, boys, cooks, suppliers and urban workers to

abandon their masters and support the new Vietnamese nation by joining militias. Many did. Citing patriotic reasons or under pressure from Viet Minh authorities or friends, many rickshaw drivers stopped taking French passengers (Krull 1945: 6). Vietnamese hotheads taunted the French in the street. Fights often broke out and spitting on the former colonizer was not uncommon. *Métis* children, often fluent in Vietnamese, had to be very careful about how they spoke, what they said and with whom they consorted, for many militant nationalists now saw them as the visible traitors of their Vietnamese country because of the French 'blood' running through their veins. Caught between two identities, many had to choose their alliances at this very time. Some 'became' French in late August and early September; others chose 'Vietnam'. Names changed, as did language preferences. But pure fear often drove these choices as much as burning patriotism (Tran Van Giàu undated : 273–84; Goupy 1945). Philippe Franchini, the *métis* son of the French owner of the Continental Hotel, recalled the terrible fright he experienced at this time as a child:

'Motherfucker, moron, son of a bitch, pig child, dirty Westerner, cocksucker'. The insults rained down on us, but worse than the words were the black faces filled with hate, the mouths contorted in fits of disgust, the rocks and trash being thrown at us, the obscene gesticulations and laughs, all of which welcomed us as we made our way before them. The Japanese soldiers who escorted us in order to 'protect' us only added to the horror. It seemed as unreal as a nightmare. We couldn't understand a thing about what was happening. (Franchini 1995: 128)

It was very real though and it was in this emotionally explosive atmosphere that southern Viet Minh authorities prepared a huge demonstration in downtown Saigon on 2 September 1945 to celebrate, as in the capital of Hanoi, the formal declaration of Vietnam's national independence and the official creation of the DRV under Ho Chi Minh's presidency. What happened in Vietnam on 2 September 1945 needs to be compared to what happened in the Algerian cities of Sétif and Guelma on 8 May of that same year. For just as 8 May 1945 marked the victory of the Allies over Nazi Germany in Europe, setting off independence demonstrations in Algeria, 2 September 1945 was the day on which the Allies celebrated victory over Japan and Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence. As de Gaulle's representative, General Philippe Leclerc, looked on approvingly as the American General Douglas MacArthur signed the instrument of Japanese unconditional surrender on the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, the French Expeditionary Corps was steaming towards Saigon to restore Indochina to the French empire under de Gaulle's rule. Two different times were about to clash.

In Algeria, where the French remained in control after the Allied landing in North Africa in 1942, Algerian calls for independence and spontaneous revolts resulted in a violent French crackdown on VE Day on 8 May. In Indochina, however, the French could do nothing to stop the Vietnamese from organizing massive independence demonstrations and celebrations, free of colonial interference. Unlike in Algeria, the French colonial state in Indochina no longer existed. The 2nd of September 1945 was a hot, muggy day in Saigon. Starting in

the morning, the Viet Minh, led by Pham Ngoc Thach, Tran Van Giau and others, organized and presided over a massive demonstration of tens of thousands of Vietnamese to celebrate Vietnam's Independence Day. The participants consisted of youths, workers, students, women and men, young and old, rich and poor. Starting from different areas on the outskirts of the city, they all converged on Norodom Square, next to the cathedral in downtown Saigon. From there, Tran Van Giau, Pham Ngoc Thach and others would address the rally at 2pm. Thanks to big loudspeakers placed in the square, they would all listen together to Ho Chi Minh's address to the nation on this historic day in Vietnamese history.

The organizers had also learned that the first Allied teams had or would arrive possibly on that same day. The Viet Minh immediately plastered the city and the square with banners and posters reading in English, Chinese and Russian: 'Down with Fascism and Colonialism', 'Vietnam has Suffered and Bled under the Yoke of the French', 'Long Live the USSR and the USA', and 'Long Live Vietnamese Independence'. British, Chinese, American, Russian and the DRV's red flag with a yellow star in the middle hung from administrative buildings everywhere. If General Leclerc and the French flag were part of the Allied delegation celebrating the victory over Japan on the USS *Missouri* that day, in Saigon the Vietnamese intentionally excluded the French flag as the *Français d'Indochine* looked on with a mix of intense anger, fear and, no doubt, humiliation.

To complicate matters, earlier that day a group of five hundred Vietnamese youths carrying swords and light arms gathered in front of the military barracks where the Japanese had interned the French colonial army since March. In response to Vietnamese taunting and insults, the soldiers of the 11ème RIC reciprocated in kind and then burst out singing the *Marseillaise*. The Japanese stepped in to maintain order, but they also humiliated the colonial soldiers by keeping them confined while allowing some five thousand English, Australian, Dutch and American prisoners to walk free that day and move in and about Saigon and its sister-city, Cholon. As one of Decoux's closest collaborators wrote of his humiliation on 2 September: 'From our barred windows, we saw the English soldiers walking about in the streets, together with free Dutch soldiers. Only the French soldiers and seamen remained imprisoned!' (Franchini 1995: 131; Goupy 1945; Ducoroy 1949: 210–11 for the citation).

Significantly, many of these Allied POWs were very thankful to many in the French community for the assistance, food, care and compassion they had provided the POWs during the war. As a sign of their gratitude, many Allied POWs even loaned their passes and clothes to the local French so that they could circulate safely and shop 'undercover' as Allies (Marr 1995: 524–25). French families in Saigon welcomed liberated POWs from Japanese camps in Indochina, who helped with cooking and housework, and provided protection against possible Vietnamese molestation. Also riding into town that same day was one no-holds-barred, fluent French-speaking American war hero from Europe turned intelligence officer in Asia named Emile Counasse (his family had

emigrated to the United States). He, his men and several American POWs immediately took the defence of the French community (personnel file for E. Counasse, NARA; Bartholomew-Feis 2006: 270–74).

Hotheads, shattered loyalties, powerful mixed emotions of fear and hate, feelings of nationalist invincibility and colonial insecurity were swirling all over Saigon as the Vietnamese marched in a very orderly fashion towards Norodom Square, where Viet Minh leaders awaited them that hot September day. It was a Sunday and noon mass had just let out. Standing on their balconies looking over the square, several French watched as Vietnamese gathered below them. Others looked on from the cathedral's steps. Jacques Le Bourgeois, the former director of *Radio Saigon* under Decoux, later recalled his thoughts that day as he walked through the burgeoning crowd of Vietnamese swirling around him:

For the first time in Saigon, I felt terribly isolated. The 'Whiteman' whose face distinguishes him from everyone else and who understands nothing of what is being said around him or notices that everyone hushes up when he approaches ... There was a bit of everyone in the crowd around me. Curiosity more than politics must have drawn young secretaries in their silk vests (to the square), the coolies with their bare legs showing and towels wrapped around their foreheads, these women of the people wearing their black trousers, and the elegant Vietnamese women in their multicolored silk dresses falling to their feet (*ao dai*). I moved forward in a loud ocean of gossipy noise and laughter ... Further beyond, people were yelling, not out of meanness, but in support of the one who was holding up giant signs on which were written the words: 'We want the Viet Minh', 'Long Live the USSR and the USA', 'Down with Fascism and Colonialism!', 'Vietnam has long suffered and bled under French domination' ... The public applauded, except for the French whom could be seen from their presbytery balconies and posts. *Doc Lap!* Independence! So many Annamese who would never have thought of it now joined in the headiness of the moment to pronounce the word. But the desire for independence still remained theoretical. Regardless of what local newspapers advanced, few of these seemingly happy Cochinchinese were ready to 'fight to the death' against the French troops that had been announced to be on their way. Who after all really thought about death in such a jubilant crowd. (Le Bourgeois 1985: 310–11)

It is hard to know whether le Bourgeois actually understood what was happening before his very eyes that day. Did he understand Vietnamese? Did he seek out a translation of what the Vietnamese loudspeakers were blaring out? Did he ask why the people were clapping? After all, many of these 'elegant' Vietnamese women spoke beautiful French. Or had the troubled events occurring between that historic afternoon of September 1945 and the publication of his memoirs a few years later led him to leave many things out of his narrative in order to build his colonial case? What is striking in Le Bourgeois' account is the absence of any explanation as to what would attract so many people to converge in an 'orderly' fashion on Norodom Square. It couldn't be political, he says. These people were there out of 'curiosity'. He acknowledges their 'great joy', but fails to explain. Le Bourgeois acknowledged the use of the Vietnamese word *Doc Lap*; but, for him, 'independence' had no meaning for a Vietnamese.

Locked firmly in an imperial time warp, there is no place in his account of 2 September for the possibility of another historical time.⁵ The Vietnamese were not mature enough for politics is all he can offer, echoing a colonial language common to so many colonizers save Coetzee's Magistrate and Bayly's Paul Mus. Other *Français d'Indochine* rejected the idea that the Vietnamese could even organize such an event themselves. It must have been the Japanese or the communists. As the Vietnamese marched calmly past the Hotel Continental on their way to Norodom Square, Frenchmen and women jeered: 'These country hicks (*niaques*) are taking advantage of the situation! It's the bastard Japs who are pushing them to do this.' The French promised to take their revenge: 'Go ahead, you opportunists! You'll see soon enough when you are singing *Doc Lap* behind bars' (Krull 1945: 3; Franchini 1995: 133).

Elation turned to frustration in Norodom Square in the afternoon, when the radio failed to work, denying the Vietnamese the chance to hear Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence. Tran Van Giau quickly took to the stage, grabbed the microphone and rallied the crowd with a rousing, patriotic and anticolonialist harangue. He and others pleaded with the Vietnamese not to serve the French. Looking down from the balconies and across from the steps of the grand cathedral, Frenchmen and women watched but did not applaud. Silence. Some Vietnamese saw them and resented their failure to clap. Others said the radio's failure was due to a colonial plot (Marr 1995: 525; Ung Ngoc Ky 1995). Suddenly, each side eyed the other warily. And then, as the crowd began to disperse, shots rang out. French and Vietnamese alike ran for cover as pandemonium seized the square. We do not know who fired first and probably never will. The French said it was the Vietnamese, while some Vietnamese screamed 'French saboteurs...', 'Catch them ...' and 'Brothers, arrest the traitors', as well as '*trung tri chung no'* for 'wipe them out' (Ung Ngoc Ky 1995: 384–85). Hotheaded Vietnamese – and there were many of them present that day – attacked French houses and the church as the DRV security forces tried with little success to prevent things from spinning out of control. The French priests in the cathedral hustled nearby French civilians inside, but Father Tricoire lay dead on the steps, loved by as many Vietnamese as French. The Japanese did little to help. Dutch POWs came to the rescue of the French trapped in the cathedral. Tensions ran extremely high until the 3rd, as Vietnamese groups rounded up as many as five hundred French prisoners, including women and children. The mob riot that afternoon confirmed the worst suspicions of each side. As Germaine Krull wrote later from her interviews with those present that day: 'The French were watching from behind shuttered windows. At a given moment several shots rang out and the rioting started. An enraged mob rushed into the houses. Women and children were beaten up and men taken off to prison. A smoldering hatred was suddenly unleashed. The enemy was yesterday's house-boy and coolie seeking revenge on his former master' (Krull 1945: 3).

Hundreds of French fled towards the Continental Hotel, where the gungling Lt. Counasse had already taken charge of protecting the French holed up there. The latter had convinced the American OSS officer that the

Vietnamese 'had declared their intention to kill every white man in Saigon that night, their next objective being the hotel' (Bartholomew-Feis 2006: 271). Until now, the Japanese had refused to ensure the hotel's security. Again, it was French, not Allied property that they pointed out. In order to force the Japanese hand, Counasse convinced Mathieu Franchini, the owner of the Continental, to sign a contract by which the latter sold his famous hotel to the OSS for one (apparently American) dollar. The Japanese acquiesced and ensured the security of the hotel and the hundreds of French in it (personnel file, NARA; Bartholomew-Feis 2006: 270–74).⁶

The French population soon referred to what happened on 2 September 1945 as 'Black Sunday' or the *Vêpres sanglantes* in a well-known reference to the massacre of the French by the Sicilians in 1282. But there was no massacre on 2 September, unlike what happened in Algeria on 8 May 1945. In all, the Japanese and others reported, four Frenchmen died and about ten Vietnamese (Patti 1980: 256–57). But the events of 2 September marked a rupture between the two communities and struck even more fear and hate into French and Vietnamese hearts (Franchini 1995: 134). Fear is certainly what Le Bourgeois recalled after having hidden in the cathedral until the 3rd: 'Having become concerned about their security at night time at least, people stopped complaining about two or three families being crowded into one lodging. From the time the sun set, people returned home to barricade themselves in. Without weapons, we slept with wrenches and golf clubs within reach' (Le Bourgeois 1985: 314).

Settler Vengeance? The Coup of 23 September 1945

The *Français d'Indochine* now placed their immediate hopes in the arrival of the British and pressed de Gaulle's recently arrived commissioner for Cochinchina, Jean Cédile, to release the men of the 11^{ème} RIC. But this he could not do, for the simple reason that the Japanese still did not recognize the French as an Allied power. There was another problem, too. The new French, Gaullist officers like Cédile were not only wary of the Vietnamese nationalists they met, but they were also distrustful of the *Français d'Indochine* welcoming them with open arms. *Franco-français* divisions dating from the Vichy period immediately made themselves felt in Saigon.

A Divided French House: The Problem of French 'Collaboration'

Like so many shattered empires and nations stretching across postwar Eurasia, people of all walks of life had to assert, deny, alter or simply forget earlier loyalties in view of the new balance of power and the delicate if not dangerous situations in which they suddenly found themselves following the Axis defeat.

The French were no exception to this rule. Retribution, purges and even

lynching occurred in France in 1944 as people turned on the *collabos*. Breaking with 'the old' was essential to inventing 'the new' (see Deak et al. 2000). The 'Free French' Gaullists arriving in Indochina in late August and early September, like Jean Cédile in Saigon and Jean Sainteny in Hanoi, had fought in the French resistance and Allied armies in Europe. These dedicated Gaullist nationalists were most certainly determined to reassert French sovereignty over Indochina and rebuild the French empire, but they had no sympathy, at least upon their arrival, for the French community, the colonial army and civilian administrators, who, in their eyes, had collaborated disgracefully with the Japanese. Cédile – and he was not alone in the Gaullist military and political class – despised Decoux, his officers and the 11ème RIC in particular for failing to put up a good fight on 9 March in Saigon. Cédile was more than happy to leave Decoux under house arrest in the southern Vietnamese countryside, where the Japanese had put him in March. Cédile recoiled before the settlers streaming into his office speaking of how much they had suffered and how well they had resisted, when, for this Gaullist, they had co-existed quite nicely with the Japanese until March 1945, with little resistance of which to speak in his view and that of other Gaullists. The Vietnamese nationalists were thus not alone in humiliating the *Français d'Indochine*.

The 'new French' nationalists arriving in Saigon held the settler community in contempt. In fact, Cédile and other Gaullist civil and military officers arrived with lists of names of French collaborators to arrest or investigate. They even carried orders to purge colonial administrators, military personnel and others for collaborating with the Japanese and Vichy. General Douglas Gracey, who was about to leave for Saigon, also carried a booklet with 'black' and 'grey' lists, containing the names of sixty-four well-known or highly suspected French and Vietnamese collaborators (Dunn 1985: 150). Cédile had already begun preparing épuration or purging committees for investigating, prosecuting and firing of colonial personnel.⁷

Of course, not all the *Français d'Indochine* collaborated. While I cannot treat the subject of French wartime collaboration in Indochina here, it is important to avoid black and white stereotypes turning everyone into 'collabos' or 'resisters'. Strategies of collaboration are always occupier driven and could change in time and space as the occupier's power waxed or waned, or as international events, like the Allied victory in Europe (8 May) and Asia (2 September 1945), radically changed the present and the prospects for the future (Gross 2000). There were Gaullists and resisters among the *Français d'Indochine*. Decoux arrested some but left others alone. The socialist and longtime resident of Indochina, Louis Caput, organized secret meetings in Hanoi with Gaullists and Vietnamese communists to find ways to resist the Japanese and help the Allies. During the Second World War, the *métis* and inveterate colonialist William Bazé refused to collaborate with the Japanese. He organized a resistance network in remote areas near his plantations in southern Vietnam. His choice cost him dearly when the Japanese captured, imprisoned and tortured him severely in mid-1945. On his liberation from prison, he had to be carried

home on a stretcher. However, he was soon back on his feet, now a staunch Gaullist and defender of restoring the empire.

There is no denying that the newly arriving Gaullist officers and colonial administrators (Cédile was both) held the *Français d'Indochine* in suspicion. One such person was Le Bourgeois, the former director of *Radio Saigon* for the Vichy regime whom we met on 'Black Sunday'. Just as he couldn't believe that the Vietnamese were capable of understanding nationalism, so too was he caught off guard when he learned that he himself was not a good French nationalist. Arriving in Cédile's office in Saigon shortly before or after 2 September, Le Bourgeois describes his painful first encounter with this 'New France', in the person of a young, decorated French paratrooper who met him at Cédile's door. When Le Bourgeois asked whether he could see the new commissioner for Cochinchina, the young man disdainfully pointed the former high-ranking Vichy official towards Cédile's office without looking up. Writing in the third person, Le Bourgeois described this humiliation in his memoirs as follows:

The only impression the sight of the director of *Radio Saigon*, the official voice of the Governor General of Indochina until 9 March, could make on him was one of distrust. The gulf that had just opened between them and us would take me three more years to close ... No doubt this young man thought for good reason that I had 'collaborated' with the Japanese ... And yet I wanted to take him in my arms and embrace him as the first Frenchman from liberated France I had been able to meet ... But his mouth uttered not a word, his eyes never left his machine gun on which his hands rested. I was a suspect! (Le Bourgeois 1985: 307)

Le Bourgeois then either intentionally or disingenuously committed a terrible *faux pas* in Cédile's office. Sitting before the new magistrate, who had intentionally refrained from asking him to sit down, Le Bourgeois asked after the well-being of his former boss and friend, Admiral Jean Decoux. Visibly irritated by such impudence, Cédile brushed his question away with contempt, telling Le Bourgeois that his former boss would be sent off to France. And then he dropped the bombshell on his uninvited guest: 'His role here has been too antinational'. Devastated, Le Bourgeois had just had the nationalist tables turned on him yet again. Blindsided, he could not believe the word he had just heard, the dangers of which were aimed right at him – 'Antinational!' is all he could write in his memoir and it captures the emotion well (Le Bourgeois 1985: 309).⁸ Cédile then casually informed him that his name was on the black list. When Le Bourgeois spoke of 'three years' above, he was clearly referring to his *épuration* and his legal battle to clear his name. Not only did many in the French community feel 'isolated' as they moved delicately among the exuberant Vietnamese national community, but they also feared being excluded or excommunicated from this new Free French definition of nationhood. 'Paris seems to have forgotten us as much as the (Free French) General headquarters in Calcutta. As for the (Free French) paratroopers in their villa (in Saigon), they had not yet announced a plan for re-establishing order' (Le Bourgeois 1985: 314).

This *Franco-français* divide is as important as the Franco-Vietnamese one in understanding the experience of the *Français d'Indochine* at this critical historical juncture in the history of France, French Indochina and Vietnam. As the Vietnamese nationalist government led by Ho Chi Minh rounded up those among the Vietnamese who had collaborated with the French, executing many, the French went after their own. No study exists as to how many French officials received sanctions or jail sentences, or were purged. But the French decree establishing the *épuration* commissions in Indochina in November 1945 required all those who had worked for the colonial army and administration between June 1940 and March 1945 to provide investigators with a full accounting of their activities during this period. The meeting of these 'two Frances' in Saigon in September 1945 resulted in the creation of a dividing line between the 'old' and the 'new' in Indochina, between 'liberal' Gaullist colonialists speaking of 'reforms' like Cédile and old 'colonial' Indochinese hands like Le Bourgeois and the 'settler community' seeking a return to the pre-1945 idyllic past. According to Le Bourgeois, 'this point of view' was the source of serious misunderstandings 'between new and old colonizers' (*entre nouveau et anciens coloniaux*). Jean-Michel Hertrich, a former settler in the 1930s returning to Saigon in September with the British as a war correspondent, agreed that many of the newly arriving paratroopers hated the 'Vichystes' adding that 'a gap had emerged that would be difficult to close' (Hertrich [1956] 1999: 58).

For the time being, the French had no real power on the ground in Indochina, either in Saigon or Hanoi. The Vietnamese and the Japanese were in control. But both the 'old' and the 'new' French were confident that the imminent arrival of the British would change the balance of power in their favour. Their common enemy were the nationalist Vietnamese who challenged the French claim to empire in Indochina. The British would disarm the Japanese, back the French led by the Gaullists, and overthrow the DRV. That shared goal at least, the *Français d'Indochine* were sure, would allow them to reposition themselves on the right side of history, the French colonial one.

The Coup of 23 September: Colonial Vengeance on Settler Terms

British troops under the command of General Douglas Gracey began to arrive in Saigon on 11 September. The Japanese solemnly received the British General and put their troops under his command. The Japanese High Command had seventy thousand troops at its disposal in the south, many of whom were battle-hardened, none of whom had suffered a single defeat in Indochina, and all of whom were still armed and disciplined. However, British military might was hardly impressive. Gracey's mainly Indian Gurkha troops only numbered around three thousand men in September. The British immediately flew out over nine thousand British POWs. As he set up his headquarters in the *Palais des gouverneurs* in Saigon, Gracey was uncomfortably aware that keeping order as tensions rose between the Vietnamese and the French settler community

would not be easy (Dunn 1945: 153). The French community looked to the British for security, informing them of all the terrible things that had happened since 1940, on 9 March, and especially on 'Black Sunday'. They did everything they could to convince Gracey of the Vietnamese government's inability to maintain order. The settlers pleaded with the British to intervene directly or at least to release the 11ème RIC so that the French could restore order themselves. They 'knew' Indochina best. They could take care of this 'revolt'. They always had in the past (Ducoroy 1949: 211–12).

Over the next two weeks, the British did their best to maintain order as relations between the French and the Vietnamese deteriorated dramatically. A French administrator flown in from India to make an inspection tour of Saigon on 21–22 September reported that tensions between the two sides had taken a rapid turn for the worse since 2 September. He reported that the French community was obsessed with seeking vengeance against the 'Annamese' for the humiliations and suffering they had had to endure and made no effort to tone down the vitriol as the British seemed to introduce a more favourable balance of power. On the contrary (Goupy 1945). This official reported that the French tore down DRV flags and posters when they could, taunted DRV officials and insulted Vietnamese routinely. Looking on from the sidelines, they screamed with joy, he wrote, whenever Anglo-Indian troops removed DRV agents from their positions. Cédile ordered a stop to the rumour-mongering, convinced like Gracey that the French community's actions were only making things worse. On 12 September, a British officer reported phlegmatically that the 'outward welcome accorded to the Allied Force from both the French and the Annamese alike on our entry into French Indochina was decidedly embarrassing. Our forces obviously found themselves in a divided house' (Dunn 1945: 151).

The events leading up to the British-backed French coup dislodging the DRV from Saigon on 23 September 1945 are well known. At the core of the problem were two issues. First, the Vietnamese and French were sliding towards war, a war of national liberation for the Vietnamese, a war of colonial re-conquest for the French. There was no other way to put it. Second, the British did not have enough of their own troops on the ground to ensure security, and because they refused to use the Japanese to maintain order, Gracey reluctantly agreed that the 11ème RIC could be the solution he needed until General Leclerc's Expeditionary Corps arrived in three to four weeks' time. Gracey first tried to impose order by announcing a curfew and shutting down the Vietnamese press. Unwilling to give up its sovereignty, on 17 September the DRV organized a full-scale strike in a bid to force the British hand. It was counterproductive. Tensions escalated as the French settlers moved to expand their control over Saigon on every possible occasion. The British did their best to keep order while the French officers, including Cédile by this time, urged them to release the colonial army and let the French put their divided house in order. Gracey replaced the Japanese on 18 September, guarding the Continental Hotel with his Gurkhas. On the 21st, he began removing DRV authorities from their positions as the French cheered his men on from the sidelines. Anglo-Indian

troops occupied civilian jails, police stations, the treasury, and the post and telegraph office. Gracey also agreed to start rearming the 11ème RIC in order to use them in a coup starting at 3am on 23 September 1945.

Gracey, and above all Jean Cédile, should have known better than to use the 11ème RIC. Using these long cooped up, very angry and humiliated colonial troops, many of whom had been a part of the very French community that was now working Saigon into a nervous breakdown, were as bent as the settlers on putting the Vietnamese back in their place and re-establishing the prewar colonial order. Cédile had visited the 11ème RIC personally before the 23rd, as did a special Free French investigator. Neither was impressed by what they saw. Hardly an 'anticolonialist', the French journalist Jean-Michel Hertrich was appalled by his visit to the 11ème RIC around 21 September. A longtime friend of Cédile and a member of the French resistance in Europe, Germaine Krull could not believe that the French would deploy such soldiers to retake Saigon. She, too, had inspected the 11ème RIC and was shocked by what she saw. They were a terribly undisciplined and motley crew, she wrote in her diary. 'I shuddered to think that these troops might be unleashed upon the city.' She concluded: 'It was like being on top of a volcano about to erupt' (Krull 1945: 16).

In the early hours of the 23rd, Gracey, pushed by the French, released the 11ème RIC and ordered them to replace the DRV and to help the British maintain order. The British-led operation easily dislodged the DRV from their headquarters in the Town Hall and rapidly occupied administrative buildings throughout the city without any Vietnamese casualties. Indeed, there was little Vietnamese resistance during the coup itself. It was rather the behaviour of the 11ème RIC and many in the French settler community that got out of hand. Around 8am, when it was clear that the Franco-British forces were in control, thousands in the French community, men and women, poured into the streets of Saigon without fear of reprisals from the Vietnamese or the Japanese. They then proceeded to go on a rampage through the city, breaking into Vietnamese homes, ransacking their stores and vandalizing their property. Soldiers and settlers walked together in the streets, grabbing any unfortunate Vietnamese they found in their path. French vigilantes seized around five hundred Vietnamese civilians in all and tied them up by their hands. They forced many at gunpoint to keep their hands in the air and kneel for hours. They then took them to British officers who could not believe their eyes. As one British officer reported: 'It hardly seemed necessary that women and striplings should be kept seated on the ground with their hands above their heads several hours after the shooting had stopped in the center of Saigon. This I saw' (Dunn 1945: 195). Settlers got hold of Pham Ngoc Thach's French wife and smashed in her teeth. She had been one of Gracey's most important contacts for talking to the DRV. She was lucky to get out of Saigon alive. Krull couldn't believe what she had witnessed that mad morning: 'I have never seen such unmilitary bearing or behavior. They beat up their wretched prisoners as soon as they got their hands on them.' 'I went all over town on foot and by car, in the company of Cédile, of various officers and journalists, and alone', Krull continued. 'I saw everything with my

own eyes – Annamites tied up, some of them tortured, drunken officers and soldiers with smoking guns’ (Krull 1945: 16).

On the rue Catinat, I saw soldiers driving before them a group of Annamites bound, slave fashion, to a long rope. Women spat in their faces. They were on the verge of being lynched. In more distant sections, I saw French soldiers come out of Annamite houses with stolen shoes and shirts, saying ‘at least, we will be able to wear clean linen this evening’. ‘Aren’t you ashamed of plundering like the Annamites?’ I asked them? ‘Certainly not’, they replied, ‘they have been stealing from us for months.’ (Krull 1945: 19)

Blind revenge trumped maintaining order as French soldiers and settlers vented their pent-up feelings. A former *Français d’Indochine* himself, Jean-Michel Hertrich confirmed it: ‘all of these people who only yesterday trembled in fear now only spoke of making the Annamese pay for the fear they had forced them to undergo. The (DRV’s) mayoral office had not yet been seized before the threatening (settler) crowd surrounded it from a distance, prudent, before commenting on the operation of occupation in hateful terms. It was all so despicable and nauseating’ (Hertrich [1956] 1999: 69). A few weeks later, Cédile reported to Leclerc that the 11ème RIC ‘had arrested and tied up all the Annamese they found during their search for arms ... Women were arrested. The men were badly treated’. As the new French magistrate in Saigon told Leclerc, this deplorable action explained why so many Vietnamese civilians streamed out of the city fearing for their lives and for their future with the French (Cédile 1945: 4).

The British officer class in Saigon, General Gracey above all, was simply aghast at the French behaviour, both that of the colonial soldiers and the settler population. Hopping mad, Gracey ordered the 11ème RIC back to its barracks and decided that it was much wiser to rely on the Japanese than on the undisciplined French colonial troops. Gracey blamed these troops for worsening the security situation and his job as the DRV forces began counterattacking that night and initiated a war of terror on Saigon that would last for years. The French in Saigon, in perhaps one of the lowest points in their history in Indochina, showed the ugly side of what fear, hysteria and vengeance can do. And their actions that day only further widened the gulf between the French and the Vietnamese, convincing many that the only way to change imperial time was by the use of violence.

Had the troops been more disciplined, as Peter Dunn has argued, then the mob hysteria that rolled through Saigon that long September day would probably have been averted (Dunn 1945: 196–97). But the 11ème disappointed miserably. The French were convinced on the 23rd that they were on their way back to how it was ‘before’. But of course there was no going back. In a perceptive reflection on what had ‘just’ happened, a British officer wrote that the French ‘do not realize that in the eyes of the natives the French are no longer the superior beings that their domination and their force of arms made them appear in the past. The Annamites have seen the French dictated to,

humiliated, and finally disarmed and kicked out of authority by an oriental race (the Japanese), and, perhaps equally important, they (the Vietnamese) have tasted power and known for a short time the pride of being a de facto government' (Nach n.d.: 42).

On 25 September, on her way out of town, Germaine Krull noted in her diary that 'Saigon was in flames'. And it was. She concluded her *Diary of Saigon* with a reflection on historical time that few in the French ruling class, including the 'new French', grasped: 'We may never regain face, but if we do, it won't be with the assistance of machine guns. The "good old days" are gone forever' (Krull 1945: 19). The 'barbarians' were now circling Saigon as the British and French turned to the Japanese to protect the city. But what the French forgot is that the Vietnamese had always been there. The question now was to what extent would the French ruling class go to ensure that imperial time, Empire, never ended?

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Notes

1. My thanks to David Marr for kindly providing me with a copy of this diary.
2. See the long list of even more pejorative terms Jean-Michel Hertrich noted from his interviews in Saigon in September 1945.
3. For an overview of the French in Indochina to 1910, see Meyer (2003).
4. On colonial royalty, see Goscha (2020).
5. Franchini's *Continental Saigon* is the sole exception I have found to this rule.
6. The American government decorated Counasse for his actions that day, but I have never found mention of him in any French account of 2 September.
7. 'Épuration du personnel français', *Journal de Saigon*, 21 November 1945, 1.
8. American OSS officers were well aware of this divide between the French. George Wickes wrote that Cédile 'would have liked to ship every colonial back to France and bring in an entirely new set of officials. Our views were also shared by the Free French soldiers who now began to arrive' (Wickes 1945: 8).

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