

## **Bachelor-Arbeit**

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*This thesis is dedicated to my friends Dennis Ranasinghe and Simon Braun.*

*You will never be forgotten.*

*Rest in peace.*

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## **1. David Versus Goliath – An Introduction**

No other conflict since World War II has played such an important role on the global scale and especially for the United States like the Second Indochina War. It was the first war which was made visible to households all around the world through the media and therefore the American politicians who were responsible for the war, especially the presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, had to face mass protests worldwide. As the Second Indochina War emerged together with the Cold War, it can be interpreted as a proxy war between the two major ideological ideas of the world at that time: the democratic capitalism and the autocratic communism. As the conflict was a proxy war, the two ideologically opposing parts of Vietnam, the North and the South, received financial and military aid from China and the Soviet Union on the one side and the United States on the other side in order to put through one of the ideologies. The military aid coming from the opposing camps was transported within Vietnam via hidden routes in the jungle which had existed for many centuries before but were extended and improved within the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reached a length of about 10,000 miles at sea and on land as well as above and below ground during the Second Indochina War.

Dealing with foreign oppression was nothing new for the Vietnamese. Throughout the centuries, numerous forces had tried to invade the small Southeast Asian country, like the Chinese, the Mongolians, the French and the Americans. As the oppressing countries have been economically and militarily superior to Vietnam, these conflicts can be described as David-versus-Goliath scenarios. Although Vietnam had been under Chinese rule for approximately 1,000 years and the French had colonized the country, the Vietnamese were able to regain independence each time. Considering this long history of successfully overthrowing foreign oppressors, it is not surprising that the Vietnamese were able to resist the Americans as well and therefore Vietnam became the first nation which had defeated the United States in a war.

The reason for this impressive and successful resistance is that the Vietnamese forces used guerilla tactics in order to defeat the economically and militarily superior enemies. This strategy of warfare enabled Vietnamese forces to avoid open battles which they probably would have lost due to their previously described inferiority regarding financial capacity, amount of soldiers and firepower. They took advantage of the natural environment, which was a hardly accessible mountainous jungle, in order to hide in and to supply the troops through it.

Over the centuries, this kind of warfare and the resulting infrastructure in the jungle had grown. With the staging Second Indochina War, the network of supplying routes was named after the most important North Vietnamese political leading figure: Ho Chi Minh. Until today, the Ho Chi Minh Trail needs to be mentioned while discussing the events of the Second Indochina War due to its important strategic value. But was the Ho Chi Minh Trail that important to play the decisive role in order to win the war?

As described earlier, the use of the jungle for guerrilla warfare has a long tradition in Vietnamese history. But was taking advantage of the natural environment, especially during the Second Indochina War, the key factor to achieve Vietnamese independence? To answer this question, the previously described relevance of the natural environment and especially the Ho Chi Minh Trail need to be examined.

## **2. The Ho Chi Minh Trail and Its Predecessors**

The fight for independence and against mainly foreign oppressors in Vietnam has a long history: From Chinese and Mongolian rule over French colonialism and the occupation by the Japanese up to American influence on the Vietnamese government (cf. Asselin 2018, xxxi-xxxv). Vietnamese rebels were able to riot against their oppressors by taking an advantage of the local natural environment as they supplied their forces through the use of hardly passable jungle paths which their enemies did not know, could not find and furthermore could not control (cf. Asselin 2018 & Frey 2004 & Kort 2018).

The importance of these hardly controllable supplying routes can be exemplified well with the battle of Dien Bien Phu during the First Indochina War, when French forces were encircled by Vietnamese troops as they had crossed the border to Laos using jungle paths and therefore were able to defeat the French because of the advantage they took from the environment (cf. Kort 2018, 89). The experiences of this battle impressed North Vietnamese strategists and drew attention to the need for infrastructure and supply lines in remote areas (cf. Lentz 2019 in McElwee 2019, 3-4). During the interwar period between 1954 and 1965, when the conflict between North and South Vietnam was growing, the rebellious Vietcong in South Vietnam benefited from the support coming from North Vietnam through these supplying routes as well (cf. Frey 2004, 66-78 & Immerman 2011, 133-134).

This network of roads and tracks to support and supply the Vietcong with soldiers and equipment for war, like weapons, ammunition and even deconstructed tanks, had a length of around 10,000 miles throughout Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and was named by the Americans after the most important North Vietnamese leading figure, Ho Chi Minh, in 1959 and is known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail since then (cf. Asselin 2018, 97 & School History). Despite the so far impression, the Ho Chi Minh Trail did not only consist of hidden paths in the Indochinese jungle but also of sea routes, air support and even the financial trail that moved money from China and the Soviet Union to the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Vietnam was known under this name (cf. Dang 2012, 1-5 in McElwee 2019, 3) The transport of equipment and soldiers was difficult as it needed to happen unnoticed and therefore thousands of North Vietnamese and Chinese helpers carried the materials by foot, by bicycle, on horses and only rarely by trucks through the jungle (cf. Nguyen 2012, 45, 60, 66, 163 & School History & Kort 2018, 89). Pierre Asselin accurately describes the development and the conditions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, on shore and at sea, as following:

Arms and men sent by the North arrived in the South via a 10,000-mile-long network of roads, tracks, and waterways running through Laos and Cambodia. These had been developed during the [First] Indochina War and christened the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1959 because they were officially re-opened on 19 May that year, on the occasion of Ho's sixty-ninth birthday. The journey down the Trail, undertaken under the supervision of Group 995, which was responsible for its upkeep, was arduous and often deadly. Even before the United States began bombing it following the start of its military intervention in 1965, troops traveling on the Trail faced countless hazards, Mosquito- and water-borne diseases, poisonous snakes, inclement weather, exhaustion, and dehydration were among the most notable. The journey could take up to two months, depending on the season and other factors. One in ten individuals who undertook it died along the way. Because bad weather – and, later, American bombs – frequently disrupted traffic on the Trail, Hanoi set up and used a second, maritime artery to move men and supplies into the deep South. [...] This “Ho Chi Minh Trail of the Sea” linked the ports of Do Son and Haiphong in the North to inlets and reception points in the Ca Mau Peninsula and Cambodia. [...] [This route] did not run the length of the Vietnamese coast, but instead arched into the South China Sea to avoid detection by enemy naval forces patrolling territorial waters. The maritime infiltration route was actually the original trans-Vietnam supply artery, established during the Indochina War. The land route developed only after the French navy increased surveillance activities along the coastline. Until the imposition of a US naval blockade of the South Vietnamese coastline in 1965, the maritime artery was far more efficacious than the land trail (Asselin 2018, 97-98).

Due to the inferiority of Vietnamese forces regarding firepower and the amount of combatants in comparison to superior forces like France, the Diem regime and the United States, the Vietnamese had to avoid open battles and therefore used guerilla warfare, which means that they approached their enemies unnoticed, which was possible because of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, surprisingly attacked them with all the firepower available and disappeared back into the jungle (cf. Asselin 2018, 97-105). This kind of warfare generated a decisive advantage to

the Vietnamese troops especially during the Second Indochina War against the US Armed Forces (cf. Asselin 2018 & Kort 2018).

The American reaction on the use of Ho Chi Minh Trail was to destroy the environmental disadvantage in form of the opacity the trees of the jungle which hid the tracks from discovery through helicopters and airplanes (cf. Prados 2011, 247-261). Therefore the US military spilled millions of liters of the herbicide 'Agent Orange' over the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian jungle from 1965 to 1970 in order to defoliate the trees to make the Ho Chi Minh Trail visible (cf. Prados 2011, 247-261 & Dam & Nguyen 2018, 91-93).

The Second Indochina War once more was a David-versus-Goliath scenario due to the inferiority of the Vietnamese forces regarding financial capability, amount of soldiers and equipment for war in comparison to the United States but, by using the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Vietnamese were able to supply their troops, avoid open battles and to implement the strategy of guerrilla warfare which finally led to the victory of North Vietnam (cf. Briesen 2018, 7-8 & School History). As the Second Indochina War resulted from numerous foreign oppressions in Vietnam, which had led to increasing resistance against such oppressors, the history of Vietnam requires further examination in order to understand the events as well as the relevance of environmentally protected warfare strategies in Vietnam throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **3. A Brief History of Vietnam**

Vietnam has a long history of oppression by other countries and domestic conflicts. Beginning the timeline in 111 BCE, the country had become part of the Chinese province Jiaozhi and, although there were several attempts to become independent, the Chinese rule lasted for approximately 1.000 years. (cf. Asselin 2018, 16 & Kort 2018, 39). In 939 CE, after the Vietnamese people had staged numerous riots against the foreign rule, like the victory of Ngo Quyen over a Chinese fleet on the Red River in 938, the country finally became independent (cf. Asselin 2018, 16). The resulting vacuum of power led to a civil war between hostile clans, which all aimed to become the new leading elite, which lasted for 70 years until 1009 and is today known as the 'First Vietnamese Civil War' (cf. Asselin 2018, 16 & Britannica). The superior clan laid the foundation of the Ly Dynasty and named the country 'Dai Viet' (cf. Asselin 2018, 16).

During the thirteenth century, the Mongols tried to invade Dai Viet for three times and, although the local troops were inferior to the Mongolian ones, they were able to defeat their enemies by using guerrilla tactics as they took advantage of the natural environment in form of hiding in and supplying through the jungle (cf. Asselin 2018, 17 & Kort 2018, 43). After a second occupation through the Chinese from 1407 until 1428, Dai Viet became an independent country for the second time due to the same military strategy (cf. Asselin 2018, 17 & Britannica).

Despite the so far impression, Vietnam was as much an aggressor as it was a victim of foreign aggressions; from the 11<sup>th</sup> until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese troops invaded areas beyond the southern border and expanded their territory to the Mekong River Delta and parts of the Cambodian kingdom of Angkor (cf. Asselin 2018, 18 & Kort 2018, 47). As parts of the southern territories' population of Dai Viet did not consider themselves to be Vietnamese, the society was heterogeneous and therefore conflicts arose within South Dai Viet as well as between the south and the north of the country (cf. Asselin 2018, 18 & Britannica). These conflicts culminated in the 'Second Vietnamese Civil War' in 1613, which was mainly fought by the Trinh clan for Northern Vietnam and the Nguyen clan for the south (cf. Asselin 2018, 18-19 & Kort 2018, 47-48). The war lasted for approximately two centuries and consolidated the country's self-image as separated into north and south (cf. Asselin 2018, 19).

The Nguyen family and other opposing clans continually sought to extend their power. In 1787, Nguyen Phuc Anh sent his son to France in order to negotiate with the French king Louis XVI and to make him send troops to support the power of the Nguyen clan (cf. Asselin 2018, 19). The French monarch agreed to help and sent a small amount of soldiers which nevertheless was sufficient to make Nguyen Phuc Anh the new leading figure in the country which he renamed 'Viet Nam' in 1804 (cf. Asselin 2018, 19-20 & Britannica). As the Nguyen Dynasty, which lasted for nearly 150 years, would not have come into power without the help of France, the Nguyens owed the French compensation; the consequence was that France received special rights concerning trade and it was allowed to extend French Catholic missionary activities in Vietnam (cf. Asselin 2018, 20 & Britannica). As the succeeding Vietnamese emperor Minh Mang opposed strong French influence on his country, he forbade Catholic missionaries and renamed the country 'Dai Nam' in order to dissociate from the predecessor (cf. Asselin 2018, 20 & Britannica).

As the French feared to lose importance, keeping in mind that European countries sought to create as many colonies as possible at that time in order to secure access to resources as well

as workers, they invaded Dai Nam and it became a French colony in 1885, after French troops had stormed the royal palace in Hue, Vietnam's capital city at that time (cf. Asselin 2018, 20-21). Subsequently, the French split Dai Nam into three parts: Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina; France ruled them by puppet regimes and furthermore invaded Laos and Cambodia as well (cf. Asselin 2018, 21 & Kort 2018, 39, 52-53 & Britannica). These five protectorates became the 'Indochinese Union', which was the official name of the French colonial empire, and were heavily exploited in terms of people and resources throughout the colonial era (cf. Asselin 2018, 21-23 & Britannica). Pierre Asselin vividly describes this exploitation as following:

At the height of the colonial era, more than 100,000 Indochinese labored on plantations, 52,000 in mines, and 86,500 in industrial and commercial enterprises. The French also exported thousands of Vietnamese laborers to their colonies in Polynesia, New Hebrides, New Caledonia, and on Reunion Island. Wage laborers and poor peasants alike escaped the drudgery and misery of everyday life by consuming copious amounts of opium and rice alcohol. Well aware of that, French authorities monopolized the production and sale of both commodities, in addition to salt, ensuring steady revenue streams and the docility of consumers. Approximately twenty percent of the wealth France generated in Indochina came from the three monopolies (Asselin 2018, 22).

Throughout the centuries, the Vietnamese have always pursued the aim of living in a free country under the leadership of their own people. During the colonial era, many Vietnamese were incarcerated and a sense for communism developed in the jails and prisons, like, for instance, in the so called 'Hanoi Hilton' where portraits of socialist luminaries like Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin hung on the walls and spread a silent call for resistance (cf. Asselin 2018, 25 & Kort 2018, 56). When World War I broke out, France was in need of additional troops and therefore recruited combatants and other personnel in its colonies, which led to approximately 90,000 Vietnamese fighting in the war for the French (cf. Asselin 2018, 25). Although Vietnamese volunteers were offered French citizenship and the chance for a better life in Europe, or at least a compensating salary for their services, most of them had to return to their lives as poor farmers neither getting paid nor becoming French citizens (cf. Asselin 2018, 25 & Britannica). The enchantment about these empty promises led to a nationwide questioning about the alleged superiority of the colonialists and as a consequence an increasing Vietnamese patriotism arose (cf. Asselin 2018, 25-26 & Kort 2018, 52). This patriotism developed in the shape of socialist and communist ideas, contrasting the inequality within the society which had been omnipresent during the whole Vietnamese history so far (cf. Asselin 2018, 26-30 & Vu 2017, 32-35). The leading figure of communist Vietnamese

patriotism was Ho Chi Minh, who petitioned the allied victors of World War I to make Vietnam an independent country based on the '14 Points Program' by US president Woodrow Wilson (cf. Asselin 2018, 30-31 & Vu 2017, 31-33). As this petition was ignored, Vietnam remained a French colony until World War II despite several armed riots with the aim to achieve independence (cf. Asselin 2018, 31-36 & Britannica).

When German troops invaded Paris in 1940, they established a puppet regime in Vichy, France, which had to grant a steadily growing influence on whole Indochina to the German ally Japan and therefore France lost its status of being the 'real colonialist ruler' (cf. Asselin 2018, 37 & Kort 2018, 57-59). When Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam after 30 years in exile, he set up the Vietnam Independence League, also known as Vietminh, in order to fight Japanese and French oppression in Vietnam by attacking the enemies with guerrilla tactics from the jungle (cf. Asselin 2018, 39-42 & Kort 2018, 60). Ho's forces received support under coverage of the natural environment from the United States of America and China which both took advantage of the Vietminh in order to weaken the German collaborator Japan in Vietnam (cf. Asselin 2018, 39-42 & Kort 2018, 60).

As the Japanese had officially abolished the French colonialist rule in Indochina in 1945, the communist party under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh planned to finally make Vietnam independent and therefore the party members put an end to the dynastic system as well during the August Revolution (cf. Asselin 2018, 43 & Kort 2018, 60-63 & Britannica). The culmination of this revolution was on 2 September 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence, full sovereignty and reunification on the Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi (cf. Brocheux 2008, 15 & Asselin 2018, 44 & Kort 2018, 62). As France wanted to regain power in Indochina, the government did not acknowledge this independence and, as France was considered to be a more important ally than Vietnam, it was backed by the United States of America (cf. Asselin 2018, 44-45).

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese were willing to fight for their demands and the Vietminh declared the French forces to be the new enemy who would have to be defeated in order to achieve independence; the network of jungle paths would once more play a decisive role as it was intensively used for supplying and warfare purposes by the Vietminh between 1946 and 1954 (cf. McElwee 2005, 200). This conflict between French troops and armed Vietnamese independence fighters is known as the First Indochina War.

#### **4. The First Indochina War – Fighting For Independence**

The declaration of independence by Ho Chi Minh on 2 September 1945, was a significant step for the Vietnamese people because the country finally became independent again after years of foreign oppression (cf. Brocheux 2008, 16). But things did not work out as they should. In 1945 and 1946, the north was invaded by Chinese troops which aimed to disarm the defeated Japanese army and due to British support the south was occupied by French forces which wanted to re-establish their former colonial sovereignty (cf. Brocheux 2008, 16 & Vu 2017, 101).

Among the Vietnamese society, the tendency to socialist and communist ideas was caused by foreign oppressions, like by the French or the Japanese, as these forces had exploited the country so intensively that they could only be defeated if the Indochinese people united in order to fight against the oppressors (cf. Vu 2017, 94). Ho's policy of 'adding friends and reducing enemies' portrayed the development towards communism because the communist party sympathized with the Soviet Union and China while, considered from a western perspective, 'good forces' like France were the enemies that needed to be reduced (cf. Vu 2017, 101-102 & Latham 2010, 258-260). Following this theory, the First Indochina War was the logical consequence in form of another David-versus-Goliath scenario.

##### **4.1 Vietnam – New Experiences With an Old Warfare**

To understand Indochina's development after World War II, the global conflicts need to be examined as well. Tuong Vu aptly describes the situation and the Vietnamese state of mind as following:

In late 1945 the Viet Minh government under Ho ostensibly focused on the anticolonial struggle while rejecting social revolution. However, a different and thinly veiled face of this government is found in *Su That* [Truth], the biweekly journal of the Association for Marxist Studies in Indochina [...]. In the editorial of its debut issue in late 1945 *Su That* bluntly claimed that one of its missions was "to show all fellow Indochinese a basic truth: there was only one way to achieve freedom, peace, and happiness for mankind, for every nation and for the working class. This way was through the thorough implementation [...] of Marxism." [...] Despite ongoing diplomatic negotiations with France and overtures to the United States, secret Party documents and fiery articles in *Su That* frequently evoked the two-camp perspective. The "imperialist camp," now led by the United States, was viewed as significantly weaker (compared to before World War II); they needed time to "bandage their wounds" and prepare for an attack on the Soviet Union and nationalist movements in the colonies. The "socialist

forces,” especially the Soviet Union, had become much stronger, but they were not powerful enough to destroy the capitalist system and establish a proletarian government to rule the world. Indochina had become an important zone of revolution, and Indochina was not alone. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, England, the United States, and France had collaborated to set up an anticommunist front and suppress national liberation movements (Vu 2017, 104-105).

Inspired by Soviet leaders who believed “imperialism to be the highest stage of capitalism” (Engerman 2010, 34), the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) leaders tried to spread their socialist and communist ideology among the Vietnamese society, contrasting the French and especially the Japanese philosophy (cf. Bradley 2011, 100-104 & Kort 2018, 85-86). France did not only try to recapture South Vietnam to regain its colonialist power but it also followed economic reasons (cf. Bradley 2011, 105). The south of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), as the country was named after Ho Chi Minh’s declaration of independence, has been home to the majority of the Vietnamese rice and rubber industry since the French colonial era (cf. Bradley 2011, 105). France planned to strengthen the weak French economy, which went through a historic low due to the expenses during World War II, but the DRV was not willing to allow that as it still wished to be a sovereign state which would be in need of its own strong economy (cf. Bradley 2011, 105-106).

For several reasons, first of all the old Vietnamese desire to be independent and the economic pressure, the First Indochina War broke out in December 1946 (cf. Bradley 2011, 105-106). As Vietnam was inferior to France regarding financial capacities and strategical warfare and did not get any mentionable support from its ideological allies China and the Soviet Union, the inhabitants, especially in northern Vietnam, erected domestic weapon factories and the local forces improved the guerrilla warfare strategy in order to avoid open battles which the French would have won due to their military superiority (cf. Bradley 2011, 106). The Vietnamese tactics against the French forces were characterized by focusing on guerrilla warfare, by using the natural environment as a supporting factor and by constructing and improving jungle paths as supplying routes (cf. Bradley 2011, 106-107). This network of forest trails was used intensively throughout the whole First Indochina War and would become the decisive factor to eventually drive the French out of Vietnam due to its importance regarding the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 (cf. McElwee 2005, 200).

Sympathies towards the Vietnamese war for independence increased in Southeast Asia and India due to the fact that most of these states, except for Thailand, had been colonized as well (cf. Bradley 2011, 106-107). These diplomatic efforts led to the foundation of the Southeast Asia League which consisted of most Southeast Asian countries; it had the aim to

strengthen regional trade and cooperation as well as it fostered anticolonial and anti-imperialistic attitudes (cf. Bradley 2011, 106-107). The Southeast Asia League also improved the chances of the Vietnamese forces against the French because the other member states, especially Thailand, sold weapons and ammunition to Vietnam, which was essential as the domestic weapon production was not sufficient to cover the demands of the war (cf. Bradley 2011, 107).

Due to the staging Cold War, Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) leaders considered Vietnam to be part of the 'communist camp' and stated that the DRV was an important anti-imperialistic outpost which needed to defend itself against capitalist oppressors (cf. Vu 2017, 113-116). Vietnamese leaders like Ho Chi Minh positioned themselves against all members of the 'capitalist camp' (cf. Vu 2017, 113-116). This was a drastic change in comparison to the so far proclaimed status of being a neutral state and therefore the ICP received increasing support from China against the French since 1950 (cf. Vu 2017, 114-116 & Kort 2018, 87).

Vietnam was divided into two parts: North Vietnam was under control of Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh, which kept the people under constant pressure to riot against the French whenever it was possible (cf. Kort 2018, 86-87). The north was influenced by China and the Soviet Union whereas South Vietnam was oppressed by the French (cf. Kort 2018, 86-87). In the latter part of the country, religious sects like the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai were more popular among the population than the revolutionary Vietminh (cf. Kort 2018, 86-87). Resulting from the constant atmosphere of mistrust and the control of thoughts, the majority of the people in South Vietnam considered an alliance with the French to be less oppressive than the treatment they would have had to expect from the Vietminh (cf. Kort 2018, 86-87). The consequences of this cleft situation lasted until the Second Indochina War, as the north remained under Vietminh's control and the South was ruled by a puppet regime that was set up by France and later influenced by the United States (cf. Kort 2018, 86-90).

The culmination of the First Indochina War was the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, when the French did not only lose their most important outpost but also around 3,500 soldiers and barely 10,000 were taken captive (cf. Kort 2018, 89 & Anderson 2011, 26-28). Once more, the Vietnamese used the natural environment in order to supply their forces and to encircle the French via hidden jungle tracks in Vietnam and neighboring Laos (cf. Kort 2018, 89-90 & Anderson 2011, 26-28). The victory of the Vietminh in Dien Bien Phu is today seen as the turning point to end the First Indochina War and could only be achieved by taking advantage of the natural environment and avoiding open battles as a result of the guerrilla warfare (cf.

Kort 2018, 89-91 & Anderson 2011, 26-28). While discussing the relevance of the supply through the jungle, the network of jungle tracks is of massive importance because it had been improved prior to the battle of Dien Bien Phu and without maintaining and expanding this network of routes to encircle and surprisingly attack the French, the Vietminh would not have won (cf. McElwee 2019, 3 & Lentz 2019 in McElwee 2019, 3-4). Michael G. Kort accurately describes the importance of this battle and the efforts made to supply the Vietnamese troops, to encircle and eventually defeat the French forces as following:

The biggest payoff of the Vietminh's close relationship with the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] was its victory over the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. By then Chinese aid to the Vietminh had reached 4,000 tons of supplies per month, ten times the quantity of 1951. The French had turned this remote village in northern Vietnam into a fortress, one of whose purposes was to lure the Vietminh into a set piece battle that the French, with their superior firepower, were sure they would win. But the French did not anticipate the massive military aid the Vietminh received from China. It included vital advice from top Chinese commanders in planning and fighting the battle, artillery and antiaircraft weapons, 1,000 trucks (made in the Soviet Union), advanced rocket launchers manned by Chinese experts, and thousands of Chinese porters to carry disassembled weapons into position in the mountains surrounding Dien Bien Phu. The Vietminh siege lasted almost two months, with both sides suffering heavy casualties. The fortress fell on May 7, ending the war and setting the stage for the French withdrawal from Vietnam (Kort 2018, 89).

France withdrew from Vietnam in 1954 and as a result of the Geneva Conference, from 26 April to 20 July of the same year, the country was officially separated into two parts: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, which was a communist dictatorship under the rule of Ho Chi Minh and his Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP), and the Republic of Vietnam in the south under the rule of a puppet regime set up by France (cf. Kort 2018, 90-91 & History & Anderson 2011, 308-309 & Großheim 2008, 20). The new president of South Vietnam since 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem, contrasted Ho Chi Minh's communist state model in North Vietnam by putting up a capitalist and republican state model based inspired by the United States (cf. Maxner 2008, 26).

#### **4.2 The Western Forces – Demands For Worldwide Power**

The course of the Second World War and its aftermath play an important role in order to understand Vietnamese and Western policies. As France had been the ruler in Indochina since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its leaders wanted to re-establish their former power in Southeast Asia just as they did in Europe as one of the victorious forces defeating fascist Germany (cf. Frey 2004,

17-20). At the same time, the global hegemon USA aimed to strengthen its influence all over the world and to spread its idea of democracy and capitalism, opposing communist countries like the Soviet Union and China (cf. Frey 2004, 17-20 & Westad 2010, 4-6). Indochina, which sympathized with communism and was an important strategic outpost for trade in Southeast Asia, became one of the areas where the frontline between these major global ideologies was running (cf. Frey 2004, 17-20 & Engerman 2010, 34-41).

#### **4.2.1 France – Fighting For Its Colonialist Power**

After the liberation of France by the allied forces in 1944, France regained importance as member of the alliance against Germany and also as an economically promising state with a glorious history on the global scale (cf. Frey 2004, 17-18). General Charles de Gaulle proclaimed the right of France to re-establish its former colonial rule in order to become competitive and to be able to defend western values against the ‘communist enemies of the western world’ (cf. Frey 2004, 17-19). Although US president Franklin D. Roosevelt had pleaded France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands to slowly release their colonies into independence, his successor Harry S. Truman considered it to be more important to secure the help of France against the Japanese in Vietnam and toned down Roosevelt’s ideas (cf. Frey 2004, 18).

During the Potsdam conference in 1945, the Allied Forces agreed on the invasion of South Vietnam by British troops in order to lay the basis for another French colonial rule despite Ho Chi Minh’s following declaration of independence (cf. Frey 2004, 18-19). After 5 months of battles, the French general Philippe Leclerc promulgated the victory of his troops in South Vietnam and the prior leading sects, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, preferred an alliance with the French to one with the Vietminh as described earlier (cf. Frey 2004, 18-19). Although the French controlled the South Vietnamese capital Saigon, their victory over the Vietminh in North Vietnam was temporary because whenever the French forces moved on to capture new territories, the Vietminh came back to the older ones so there was no clear frontline (cf. Frey 2004, 18-19). The Vietminh was able to resist the French troops by using guerrilla warfare and therefore taking advantage of the jungle in order to supply the combatants and to stage quick offensives (cf. Kort 2018, 89-91).

As part of the Elysée Agreement in 1949, France convinced the South Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai to represent French interests in his domestic policies (cf. Frey 2004, 24). France granted South Vietnam some kind of 'independence' under the conditions that the country would have to make economic concessions and to become part of the French Union, which was the official name of the French colonial empire (cf. Frey 2004, 24-25 & Britannica). As Bao Dai lived in France and visited his country very rarely, he did not have much support at home, especially not among the rural population, which then began to sympathize with the Vietminh (cf. Frey 2004, 25 & Britannica & Bradley 2011, 111). Furthermore, France had to pay huge amounts of money to rebuild its own destroyed cities and ran out of financial capacities to pay for the war in Indochina (cf. Frey 2004, 28). This situation made the United States the most important ally of France because they supported the war against the communist regime in North Vietnam (cf. Bradley 2011, 110). By 1954, the United States paid up to 80 % of the costs for the war against Ho Chi Minh's troops (cf. Frey 2004, 28-29 & Bradley 2011, 110).

The sentiments in the French population were turning against the war due to the high human losses: Between 1946 and 1954, more than 90,000 French soldiers had been killed, wounded or taken captive (cf. Frey 2004, 29 & Bradley 2011, 114-115). The French national assembly declared negative attitudes towards such an expensive and 'dirty' war (cf. Frey 2004, 29). In 1954, the French general Henri Navarre planned to force the Vietminh into an open battle, which the French would have won due to their superiority regarding firepower, and made an agreement with the Laotian king Sisavang Vong that Laos would support the colonialists against Ho Chi Minh's soldiers (cf. Frey 2004, 32-33 & Anderson 2011, 26-28). But the Vietminh withstood the French threats by putting up military infrastructure in the jungle, which was an impressive achievement as male and female porters had to carry all the weapons and military equipment necessary through the jungle by foot or by bicycle (cf. Frey 2004, 32-33 & Anderson 2011, 26-28). These efforts in order to be able to resist against the French, who had made the village Dien Bien Phu their fortress in North Vietnam, laid the basis for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which would become strategically essential especially during the Second Indochina War and its aftermath (cf. Frey 2004, 32-33 & Anderson 2011, 26-28). As the French forces had positioned hardly movable artillery in Dien Bien Phu, they were not able to act as fast as the Vietnamese combatants approaching them from all sides and therefore they could not take any advantages of their - under different circumstances - superior equipment, which both were decisive disadvantages and eventually led to the French defeat (cf. Anderson 2011, 26-28).

On 7 May 1954, the French forces capitulated in Dien Bien Phu which marked the end of their colonial rule in Vietnam and later in whole Indochina and led to the previously mentioned Geneva Conference, where representatives of Vietnam, France, Laos, Cambodia, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Soviet Union and China discussed how to handle the situation in Vietnam (cf. Frey 2004, 35-36 & Anderson 2011, 27-28). The outcome of this conference was the division of Vietnam along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel into a communist part in the north under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, which was influenced by the ‘communist camp’ of the Cold War, and a capitalist ruled south under a puppet regime which was heavily influenced by France and the United States, although France had officially lost the power in Vietnam (cf. Kort 2018, 90-91 & Maxner 2008, 26).

#### **4.2.2 The USA – Changing Alliances**

American policies in Indochina were changing over the years, depending on which forces were considered to be ‘more useful’. During the occupation by the Japanese, the United States had supported Ho Chi Minh and his troops in order to defeat fascism all over the world, but after World War II and the defeat of Germany, when France wanted to claw back its former colony, they turned against their prior allies and supported France (cf. Horlemann & Gäng 1973, 37-49). As mentioned before, the support for colonialist France increased under President Truman and especially after China, which was considered to be an ‘enemy from the communist camp’, had officially acknowledged the communist Vietminh as the government of North Vietnam, the United States wanted to oppose this development by officially acknowledging the French puppet regime in South Vietnam (cf. Frey 2004, 25-27). By doing so, the United States’ government demonstrated its attitude against any form of extremism, fascist as well as communist (cf. Guthrie-Shimizu 2010, 246-251). The acknowledgement of both regimes, in the north and in the south, made the First Indochina War a proxy war between China and the United States because both states considered their ideologies to be superior and therefore demanded control over whole Vietnam (cf. Frey 2004, 25-36).

As the United States wanted France to join the NATO, they wanted them to be successful against the Vietminh and therefore paid most of the expenses for the French, which went up to 80 % in 1954, and supplied them with weapons and equipment (cf. Frey 2004, 28-29 & Maxner 2008, 26). The crucial difference between France and the United States was that the

USA did not want to rule Vietnam after defeating the Vietminh (cf. Frey 2004, 31-40 & Guthrie-Shimizu 2010, 247-251). Instead they wanted to release the country into independence as soon as it would have become a capitalist and democratic state according to the American ideal which was supposed to generate peace through wealth and capitalism (cf. Frey 2004, 31-40 & Guthrie-Shimizu 2010, 247-251).

Furthermore, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted to prevent a process which is known as the 'Domino Theory': This theory predicates that as soon as one state becomes communist, it would influence its neighboring countries and make them communist as well like metaphorical dominoes (cf. Frey 2004, 35 & Logevall 2010, 288-289). This development would go on until all countries in the world were ruled by communists (cf. Frey 2004, 35 & Logevall 2010, 288-289). To prevent this development the United States would have to fight communism whenever it occurred (cf. Frey 2004, 35 & Logevall 2010, 288-289). The idea was known as the American 'Containment Policy' which became very important during the development of the Cold War and was the reason for the involvement of the United States in Southeast Asian politics (cf. Kort 2018, 94 & Costigliola 2010, 112).

Eisenhower's strategy was to include Southeast Asian countries into a trade community which would generate wealth in all participating countries and establish capitalist values (cf. Frey 2004, 35-36). As the result of the Geneva Conference was a separated Vietnam with the north under communist rule, the United States secured their influence on the regime in the south in order to resist a possible influential takeover by the North (cf. Frey 2004, 36-40).

Additionally, the United States aimed to set up the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) including South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for further future cooperation as the American government considered trade to be essential in order to create a stable government and a peaceful coexistence of the Indochinese states (cf. Immerman 2011, 126). As soon as these countries would have become wealthier than they were at that time, communism would, according to the American theory, become obsolete as the population would not have to suffer from poverty, hunger and unemployment (cf. Immerman 2011, 126).

### **4.3 Laos – A Passive Spectator?**

Regarding the development of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Vietnam's neighboring kingdom Laos also needs to be examined. Due to its societal diversity in form of numerous tribes, which in

many cases spoke different languages and had hostile relationships among each other, Laos was influenced by foreign players like France, the United States or China (cf. Weggel 1987, 61). The foreign forces were able to increase their influence on Laotian politics by financially supporting the tribes which represented their ideologies best (cf. Weggel 1987, 61). Laos had a population of less than 3 million inhabitants in the 1950s but this small number of 'Laotians' consisted of 68 different ethnic groups which caused many conflicts between the different tribes and was misused by oppressors who played them off against each other in many cases (cf. Weggel 1987, 61-62).

The history of Laos shows similarities to the one of Vietnam: Laos had become a French colony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was invaded by the Japanese during World War II, with the difference that the puppet Vichy government remained in office but under control of Japan (cf. Weggel 1987, 61-71). After World War II, British troops landed in Laos in order to support the French at re-establishing their former power as colonialist rulers and left the country as soon as France had achieved control (cf. Weggel 1987, 61-71). Although France had an agreement with the Laotian king Sisavang Vong which obliged Laos to support the French troops against the Vietminh and also against the Pathet Lao, which was the Laotian communist equivalent to the Vietminh, the country played an important strategic role especially regarding the battle of Dien Bien Phu (cf. Weggel 1987, 61-71 & Kotte & Siebert 2002, 68-69 & Frey 2004, 32-33). Just like in Vietnam against the Vietminh, the United States supported France against the Pathet Lao financially and by providing equipment for war (cf. Kotte & Siebert 2002, 68-69 & Weggel 1987, 68-71).

The Vietminh on the other hand managed the transportation of weapons and equipment for the battle of Dien Bien Phu on the Vietnamese and the Laotian side of the border, which made it possible to encircle the French soldiers and to finally defeat them (cf. Frey 2004, 33-36). These transportation paths in the jungle laid the basis for the later so called Ho Chi Minh Trail (cf. Frey 2004, 33-36). As Laos and Vietnam had shared a comparable history of oppression by the French, the rebels of both countries unified by taking advantage of the natural environment which led to the defeat of the enemy and made a turning point as it laid the basis for supplying forces beyond the Vietnamese border (cf. Anderson 2011, 26-28). Taking advantage of the Laotian jungle and the support by Laotian communists were decisive factors in order to encircle and defeat the French forces in Dien Bien Phu and the strategic value of expanding the network of supplying routes beyond the Vietnamese border would become increasingly important throughout the Vietnamese Civil War and especially the Second

Indochina War (cf. McElwee 2005, 200 & Duiker 2000 in McElwee 2005, 200 & McElwee 2019, 3). The relevance of Laos throughout the Indochinese conflicts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century therefore was crucial and the country needs to be characterized as highly important instead of being a passive spectator.

After the French had been defeated and as a result of the Geneva Conference in 1954, the provinces Phong Saly and Hua Phan were officially ruled by the Pathet Lao while a solution for the rest of the country should emerge in the future because the Americans tried to prevent further losses of territories to the communists (cf. Kotte & Siebert 2002, 68-69). The influence of the Pathet Lao on the Laotian politics grew steadily due to the support coming from China and the Soviet Union and enabled the extension of the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Second Indochina War; on the other hand, the United States aimed to strengthen their puppet representatives in order to oppose the communists (cf. Weggel 1987, 68-79 & Kotte & Siebert 2002, 68-71 & Frey 2004, 29-40).

## **5. Segregated Vietnam – Opposing Ideologies**

As mentioned before, the major consequences of the Geneva Conference in 1954 were the withdrawal of the French from Indochina and the segregation of Vietnam along the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel into a communist northern part under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, receiving support from China and the Soviet Union, and a southern part under the rule of the former king Bao Dai, who was supported and influenced by the United States (cf. Weggel 1987, 71-72 & Logevall 2010, 284). Especially Ho Chi Minh and his comrades in North Vietnam sought to unify the country but the south, ruled by Ngo Dinh Diem since 1955, refused such attempts because they represented American anticommunist interests (cf. Vu 2017, 117-119). Although the participating countries of the Geneva Conference had agreed that the segregation would be temporary until democratic elections would have been held after two years, many North Vietnamese people did not want to wait for such a long time and became impatient (cf. Horlemann & Gäng 1973, 81-82). Their aspirations for a quick reunification led to more conflicts in the still unstable peace as the government of South Vietnam did not want to be unified under a communist leadership but in contrary wanted to liberate the north in order to establish democracy and capitalism (cf. Ruehl 1966, 96-97).

## 5.1 North Vietnam – Fighting For Communism

The autonomy of North Vietnam caused controversial attitudes among the Vietnamese population: Some considered it to be damaging regarding the revolution for a unified Vietnam as there were no more oppressors to fight against in the north (cf. Asselin 2018, 79-80). Others understood it as a chance to use the newly obtained sovereignty for unifying whole Vietnamese purposes (cf. Asselin 2018, 79-80). The contrasting political system Ho Chi Minh was establishing, in comparison to what the United States wanted Vietnam to be organized, caused a very low probability for a quick reunification and caused an economical dependence on South Vietnam which was agriculturally much stronger than the north (cf. Horlemann & Gäng 1973, 81-83). Michael G. Kort aptly describes North Vietnam as following:

In North Vietnam, it was a commitment to Communism rather than nationalism that guided Ho Chi Minh and his comrades. The VWP [Vietnam Workers' Party] set up a Marxist totalitarian state modeled largely on that of the People's Republic of China and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union. The North Vietnamese state was a one-party dictatorship backed by a ubiquitous secret police that quashed any dissent. The state controlled the media, education, and all cultural and artistic life. Traditional forms of cultural expression, something that presumably would be encouraged by nationalists, were discouraged or suppressed as part of the effort to indoctrinate the people in Marxist values. Traditional village festivals were forbidden and many temples and shrines were shut down. An effort was made to control religion by limiting the number of Buddhist monks and Catholic priests and carefully regulating their activity. Confucianism was denounced, although some of its precepts were recycled to encourage the people to obey the Communist authorities. By the early 1960s the economy had been largely transformed into a classic Communist planned economy based on state control of all industry and collectivized agriculture. (Kort 2018, 90-91).

One of the most controversial domestic political decisions was the land reform of the mid 1950s: Landlords were dispossessed and their property was distributed to the peasantry in order to eventually end the authority of the small elite, owning large areas of farmland (cf. Kort 2018, 91). All authority was moved to the state and the government as it considered itself to be ideologically superior and had the right to dispossess people for a higher purpose (cf. Kort 2018, 91). This self-esteem of being ideologically superior supported the aim to reunify the whole of Vietnam under the communist leadership of Ho Chi Minh, whose life also requires further examination.

### **5.1.1 Ho Chi Minh – ‘Godfather of the Trail’**

In 1890, the person later known as Ho Chi Minh was born in Kim Lien, a village close to the city Vinh in Central Vietnam, with the name Nguyen Sinh Cung (cf. Neumann-Hoditz 1971, 172-173). Although his family was poor, his parents sent him to the most prestigious and modern secondary school in Hue, where his future opponent Ngo Dinh Diem was educated as well (cf. Kort 2018, 64-65). At the age of 21, Nguyen Sinh Cung was a militant nationalist and left Vietnam in 1911 to travel the world and to enlarge his knowledge (cf. Kort 2018, 65). To demonstrate his nationalist and patriotic views on his home country, he named himself Nguyen Ai Quoc in 1917, which means, correspondingly translated, ‘Nguyen the Patriot’ (cf. Neumann-Hoditz 1971, 172-173). He travelled to France and Russia, where he studied Marxism, read ‘Theses on the National and Colonial Questions’ by Vladimir Lenin and adapted many socialist and communist ideas into his own way of thinking (cf. Kort 2018, 65). In 1920, Nguyen Ai Quoc was one of the founding members of the French Communist Party and he became an agent of the Comintern when he moved to Moscow in 1923 (cf. Kort 2018, 65). The Comintern was an organization which directed and financed communist parties all over the world (cf. Kort 2018, 65-66). This organization funded Nguyen Ai Quoc’s journeys and enabled him to get involved into socialist and communist politics in numerous countries in Western Europe, Thailand and China, where he founded the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 (cf. Kort 2018, 65-66 & Neumann-Hoditz 1971, 172-173).

In 1941, Nguyen Ai Quoc finally returned to Vietnam after 30 years in exile, called himself Ho Chi Minh, which can be translated as ‘Bringer of Light’, and, in order to live up to the name, he started to spread his revolutionary and communist ideas among the society (cf. Kort 2018, 65-85). As Ho’s ideas had already been familiar to the Vietnamese population because of the ICP, it was not difficult for him to find members for the Vietminh, which he set up in 1941 in order to fight against the oppressors from Japan and France and to achieve independence for Vietnam (cf. Kort 2018, 72-85). On 2 September 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence and seemed to have reached his goal but, as mentioned before, the French and the British invaded South Vietnam so his declaration was not acknowledged by the powerful and therefore decisive states of the world (cf. Asselin 2018, 44-45 & Kort 2018, 62). To succeed he had to rule the Vietminh until they were able to defeat the French forces in Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and, after the following Geneva Conference, he became the leader of North Vietnam (cf. Weggel 1987, 71-72 & Kort 2018, 90-91 & History).

He established a communist dictatorship, oppressed the diversity of opinions, which went so far that he ordered numerous executions of his political enemies, and dispossessed the landlords in North Vietnam in order to restructure the patterns of ownership following the communist model (cf. Asselin 2018, 79-82 & Kort 2018, 90-91).

In the late 1950s, Ho Chi Minh once more visited his communist allies China and Russia in order to secure their support (cf. Neumann-Hoditz 1971, 172-173). After numerous American aggressions, which he regarded as violations of the Geneva Agreement, Ho officially called the Vietnamese forces to arms in order to fight against the U.S. military until all foreign soldiers would have left the country (cf. Neumann-Hoditz 1971, 172-173). Following the order of Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnamese strategists and soldiers continually took advantage of the already existent network of tracks in the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian jungle in order to implement the guerrilla warfare against their enemies in South Vietnam; to honor the communist leader, the network of supplying routes was named the Ho Chi Minh Trail on 19 May 1959, Ho Chi Minh's birthday (cf. McElwee 2019, 3). On 3 September 1969, Ho Chi Minh died at the age of 79 years and has remained the most important leading figure in Vietnam until today (cf. Neumann-Hoditz 1971, 172-173 & Brocheux 2008, 14). Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the great leader had died and his embalmed body is visited by thousands of people every year in his own mausoleum in Hanoi (cf. Brocheux 2008, 14-18 & Margara 2012, 34-36).

## **5.2 South Vietnam – Fighting For Capitalism**

Following their 'Containment Policy', which aimed to smash communism wherever in the world it occurred, like in Korea in the early 1950s, the United States sought to gain as much influence on Asian politics as possible and therefore they aimed to make South Vietnam a fortress of American values opposing the communist north (cf. Kort 2018, 94-98). Michael G. Kort precisely describes the aftermath of the Geneva Agreement and the struggle for power in South Vietnam:

Between 1954 and 1963, the American effort to prevent a Communist takeover of Vietnam south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel rested on support of the regime headed by Ngo Dinh Diem. [...] In June 1954 Diem was appointed prime minister of what was then called the State of Vietnam by the Emperor Bao Dai. His chances of survival, and those of the regime he served, were slim. As General Phillip B. Davidson has aptly put it, "Diem had inherited chaos – a mishmash of conflicting political cliques and religious

factions, an ineffective and almost nonexistent governmental apparatus, and a farce for a policy force and army.” Diem’s ramshackle government was opposed by the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, both of which had armies, the former’s numbering about 20,000 and the latter’s about 15,000, and by a formidable criminal gang known as the Binh Xuyen, which controlled much of the gambling, prostitution, and other vice in Saigon and fielded an armed force of 25,000. The French also still had 160,000 troops in South Vietnam, and Paris was not friendly to Diem, viewing him as a tool America was using to push France completely out of Vietnam. All this was in addition to the thousands of cadres (and their hidden weapons) the Vietminh, in violation of the Geneva Accords, had left behind in 1954 to maintain its presence in rural areas. It was under these daunting circumstances that in 1954 the United States began providing the Diem regime with limited aid and military advice (Kort 2018, 98).

After the members of the Geneva Conference had acknowledged North Vietnam as an independent state, the government under Ho Chi Minh nevertheless aimed to reunify Vietnam but prior to this goal they followed a ‘North-First Policy’, for example in form of the land reform, which bothered the communists in the south (cf. Asselin 2018, 83-84). When Ngo Dinh Diem became Head of State and Chief of Government in 1955, after he had held and won a rigged referendum on the future political system and had deposed the former emperor Bao Dai, he initiated the ‘Denounce the Communists Campaign’ which intended to fully eradicate every kind of communism in South Vietnam by executing or incarcerating all communists (cf. Asselin 2018, 83-84).

Despite the fact that one of the results of the Geneva Conference was to hold a referendum on the question of the reunification of whole Vietnam, Diem proclaimed that such a referendum would never be held under his leadership as long as the north was under the control of a communist regime (cf. Asselin 2018, 84). As such an anticommunist attitude was very welcome to the United States, they financially supported Ngo Dinh Diem’s government with nearly 300 million dollars in 1956 and kept paying these rates over the following few years (cf. Asselin 2018, 84). The ideological differences between North and South Vietnam fostered further conflicts and led to the Vietnamese Civil War.

## **6. The Vietnamese Civil War – Optimization of the Trail**

To understand the relationship between North and South Vietnam in the 1950s, the enormous political differences, while still remaining interconnectedness, between the two parts of the country need to be stressed. The North Vietnamese government under Ho Chi Minh steadily gave the order for dispossessions and, in many cases, executions of wealthy landlords disregarding whether they had been cooperating with the Vietminh or not in order to establish

a communist economic system with the state as the only powerful player (cf. Frey 2004, 41-44). The political system of North Vietnam went through a significant change as the plurality of political parties decreased down to only one: the communist Vietnam Worker's Party (VWP) (cf. Frey 2004, 41-44).

On the other hand, the government under Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, supported by the United States, followed a completely different political direction. The policies against communists in South Vietnam were brutally enforced in form of political persecution, internment and executions (cf. Frey 2004, 59-63). It is assumed that up to 150,000 people were incarcerated between 1954 and 1960 while in only two years, 1955-1957, up to 12,000 inhabitants were executed by the Diem regime (cf. Frey 2004, 60).

As both regimes were, to put it mildly, 'problematic', there was massive migration between both parts of the country: persecuted communists from the south fled to the communist north, while anticommunist citizens from the north came to the south in order to escape the threats for their lives (cf. Frey 2004, 59-66). Since Ngo Dinh Diem had become Head of State in South Vietnam in 1956 and had enforced his policies in brutal and ruthless ways, he had to face a steadily growing opposition which drew attention through several bombings and homicides in the late 1950s (cf. Frey 2004, 64-66). The resistant forces consisted of heterogeneous parts of the society: it included communists, intellectuals, religious people, especially members of the sects Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, and others (cf. Frey 2004, 64-66). But the federal opinion was that the major force in this group was the communists, who secretly received support from North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union via the previously described network of supplying routes in the jungle but also via the financial trail (cf. Frey 2004, 64-66 & Dang 2012, 1-5 in McElwee 2019, 3). The resistance against Ngo Dinh Diem and his regime expanded to the political level in 1960, when the rebellious forces founded the National Liberation Front (NLF) which was in the 'western world' more commonly known under the name Ngo Dinh Diem gave it: the Vietcong (cf. Frey 2004, 65-66). The NLF published its program in the same year, which demanded the deposition of Ngo Dinh Diem, to strengthen the local economy while reducing imports from foreign countries, neutral foreign policies and to put an end to American influence on South Vietnam (cf. Frey 2004, 66).

The Vietcong, which can be translated as 'Vietnamese communists', were supported by communist allies like North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union in form of money, weapons and equipment for war, which, once more, were mainly transported through developing and expanding jungle and financial paths which were named as Ho Chi Minh Trail during the

Second Indochina War (cf. Frey 2004, 66-78 & Immerman 2011, 133-134 & Dang 2012, 1-5 in McElwee 2019, 3). Until 1959, North Vietnam had not made any attempts to violently overthrow the Diem regime but in January of that year, the VWP Central Committee worked out an anti-imperialist document named ‘Resolution 15’ which declared to support rebellious forces in South Vietnam, if applicable even to found a ‘Southern Vietminh’, in order to put Diem out of power, to get rid of American influence and any marionettes they might come up with, to establish communism and to improve the necessary infrastructure, in form of the future Ho Chi Minh Trail, in order to supply the Vietcong with troops and equipment for war (cf. Asselin 2018, 94-95). The Vietcong fighters and soldiers of North Vietnam were trained to survive in the jungle, to manage the transportation of supplies via the hardly passable mountainous jungle tracks, how to construct infrastructure in remote areas, how to communicate and move unnoticed and they were taught first aid to properly react in case of poisonous snake bites (cf. McElwee 2019, 4 & Hoang 1999 in McElwee 2019, 4). Especially the extension of the supplying routes was essential to make the fight against the Diem regime and the Americans possible because without these routes the rebels in the south would not have had enough firepower to resist their oppressors (cf. Asselin 2018, 94-99). When the network of paths was expanded to neighboring Laos in 1960, the transportation was improved as well: porters had been able to walk an average of 6 miles per day and were limited to backpacks but as soon as the trails were improved, they were able to carry weights of up to 700 pounds by bicycle through the jungle much quicker (cf. McElwee 2019, 4). The relevance of the future Ho Chi Minh Trail therefore increased drastically and enabled taking advantage of it during the Second Indochina War. Ho Chi Minh acknowledged ‘Resolution 15’, fortified by the success of the anti-imperialist movement in Cuba under Fidel Castro, but he still feared American retaliation (cf. Asselin 2018, 95). Richard Immerman describes Ho’s concerns as a ‘legitimate fear’:

Although Resolution No. 15 emphasized the continued importance of political action, it stipulated that final victory would be achieved only through protracted and heroic struggle. It also proclaimed the need to create and coordinate insurgent forces in the South. Within months, southern commanders began to build a revolutionary base in Vietnam’s central highlands; the clandestine Group 559 began to construct what would become the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the Laotian mountains adjacent to Vietnam; and the Vietminh initiated “spontaneous uprisings” from central Vietnam extending southward to the Mekong Delta. The Communist Party’s Third National Congress formally approved the initiation of armed struggle in September 1960. At the end of the year, representatives of a broad spectrum of political, social, religious, and ethnic groups convened near the Cambodian border to form the National Liberation Front (NLF) of South Vietnam. Under the leadership of Nguyen Van Linh, who was Le Duan’s successor in the Central Office for South Vietnam, in early 1961 the NLF established its fighting arm, the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). In the last year of his presidency, Eisenhower viewed with increasing alarm the growing insurgency, which strengthened with the influx

of adherents from the countryside. He knew that Diem's military forces were not capable of responding. Yet more worrisome were events occurring in neighboring Laos. The civil war there threatened to produce a union between the leader of one faction of the Royal Lao Government, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, founder of the Communist Pathet Lao. The alliance between the Pathet Lao and Hanoi could shift the balance of power in Southeast Asia against Western interests. So serious did Eisenhower perceive the danger that when on January 19, 1961, he briefed his successor John F. Kennedy at the White House on the most pressing global problems, the agenda included Laos, not Vietnam. According to Kennedy's note takers, Eisenhower advised the president-elect that he should take whatever measures necessary, not excluding unilateral military intervention, to prevent a Communist takeover of Laos and, by extension, Vietnam. The president, according to the briefing memorandum published in the Pentagon Papers, "stated that he considered Laos of such importance that if it reached the stage where we could not persuade others to act with us, then he would be willing, as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally (Immerman 2011, 133-134).

Facing a growing influence of communism in Southeast Asia, the United States felt threatened, regarding the 'Domino Theory' and the 'Containment Policy', and therefore tried to strengthen their influence on Indochina in order to overthrow this development (cf. Kort 2018, 104-118). As the Vietcong became increasingly important and a serious enemy to the Diem regime and the United States, which had successfully defeated its enemies, like in the battle of Ap Bac in January 1963, the situation for the anticommunist regime in South Vietnam became critical and culminated in the execution of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, within a riot of South Vietnamese generals on 1 November 1963 during the 'Buddhist Crisis' (cf. Asselin 2018, 106-107).

Ngo Dinh Diem was replaced by a military junta backed by the United States, which were able to strengthen their influence on South Vietnam, while the political discussions in North Vietnam became increasingly controversial between Ho Chi Minh, who aimed to peacefully coexist with the neighboring south, and Le Duan, who planned to invade South Vietnam to compel the Vietnamese reunification as long as the vacuum of power was not completely filled (cf. Asselin 2018, 107-108 & Biermann 1997, 212-220). The opposing ideas were discussed during the 'Ninth Central Committee Plenum' of the VWP and resulted in the replacement of Ho Chi Minh by Le Duan and the production of 'Resolution 9' which ordered the immediate invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese forces in order to liberate the south and to achieve national reunification before an outnumbering amount of American troops would arrive in Saigon (cf. Asselin 2018, 108-109). The danger that South Vietnam might become part of the communist north forced the United States into a military intervention of this development in order avoid the expansion of communism (cf. Asselin 2018, 109-112).

## **7. The Second Indochina War – The Ho Chi Minh Trail as the Key Factor?**

The policies of the United States regarding former French colonies in Indochina changed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Although the US presidents Truman and Eisenhower agreed on the abolition of colonies and their release into freedom, they also shared the opinion that this loss of influence could only be acceptable under the political condition that the Indochinese states would have to adapt American state structures like democracy and capitalism (cf. Hess 2011, 143-167). But setting them free would not be possible as long as there was a chance that these states might turn communist (cf. Hess 2011, 143-167). When John F. Kennedy came into office in 1961, he adopted the ‘Containment Policy’ of the former government in order to fight communism all over the world (cf. Hess 2011, 143-145 & Freedman 2000, 288-289). Therefore the United States kept supporting Ngo Dinh Diem and after his death in 1963, they were able to extend the American influence on South Vietnam by collaborating with the military junta which had replaced the Diem regime (cf. Asselin 2018, 107-112). The government under Kennedy also supported the neutral forces under Souvanna Phouma in neighboring Laos against the Pathet Lao in order to prevent Indochina from turning communist (cf. Biermann 1997, 90-95 & Freedman 2000, 294).

Facing a growing opposition in form of the Vietcong, Kennedy enlarged the amount of objective support like equipment and supplies and also increased the number of military advisers in South Vietnam from less than 700 in January 1961 up to 16,000 in November 1963 (cf. Hess 2011, 143-144). The United States also widened their agenda from only training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to accompanying them into battles and on patrols, which led to deaths and injuries of American soldiers even before the escalation of the war in 1964 (cf. Hess 2011, 144). Another strategy to oppose the Vietcong was the ‘Hamlet Program’ within which villages were erected where Vietnamese peasants were offered protection from the Vietcong and health care as well as educational and other social services (cf. Hess 2011, 144). Due to the haste in the construction of these hamlets and the poor implementation, there was only little acceptance of them by the South Vietnamese rural population and a high number of it, especially young men, joined the Vietcong which enlarged the threat for the Americans (cf. Hess 2011, 145).

The military junta in South Vietnam was overthrown after only three months and replaced by other generals who were soon dispositioned as well; the country experienced seven different

governments in the years from 1963 to 1965 which led to the aim for more control by the United States, at least from the American perspective, in order to overcome the political instability which furthermore had led to a higher number of people joining the Vietcong (cf. Kort 2018, 118-119). When Lyndon B. Johnson came into office in 1963, after John F. Kennedy had been assassinated, he fostered the influence of the American government on South Vietnam, especially in form of sending military advisers, soldiers, destroyers and other equipment to the country, which led to the escalation between American and Vietnamese forces in form of the ‘Gulf of Tonkin Incident’ (cf. Kort 2018, 118-123 & Hess 2011, 144-145 & Gardner 2011, 168-170). The relevance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Second Indochina War was decisive and its development as well as its importance is going to be examined throughout the following chapter.

### **7.1 The Gulf of Tonkin Incident - Staging the War**

The ‘Gulf of Tonkin Incident’ is regarded as the event which led to direct American involvement in Vietnam and set the stage for the Second Indochina War. On 2 August 1964, the American destroyer “Maddox” was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin as a revenge for the strike against the island Hon Me the day before (cf. Frey 2004, 103). As President Johnson did not want to accept any limitations of American actions, especially not in international waters, he sent the two destroyers “Maddox” and “Turner Joy” to the site of the first attack in order to demonstrate American power and the legitimacy of their presence on 4 August (cf. Frey 2004, 103). During that night, seamen of both destroyers reported that they were under fire and shot back at the allegedly North Vietnamese forces (cf. Frey 2004, 103-104). But the ‘Pentagon Papers’ and the memoirs of former American Minister of Foreign Affairs Robert McNamara prove that the Vietnamese were not firing at human enemies but at flying fish (cf. Frey 2004, 103-104). Nonetheless, the ‘Gulf of Tonkin Incident’ gave Johnson and his government a reason for direct involvement in Vietnam, as they suddenly were in the position of defenders and not aggressors, and on the following day, 5 August 1964, American aircrafts bombarded North Vietnamese naval bases and fuel depots (cf. Frey 2004, 103-104).

In the context of the Cold War, the United States were convinced that they had to respond to aggressions from communist ruled North Vietnam in order to not lose their face as the

capitalist and democratic hegemon in the world and therefore the US Congress produced the ‘Gulf of Tonkin Resolution’ which allowed President Johnson to send as many troops to Vietnam as necessary, to take whatever actions necessary to destroy communist aggressions in the country, which makes it comparable to the previously mentioned North Vietnamese ‘Resolution 9’, and therefore initiated the Second Indochina War (cf. Asselin 2018, 112-113).

## **7.2 Operation Rolling Thunder – Successful Demoralization of Vietnam?**

Although President Johnson had been warned by his Minister for Foreign Affairs, Robert McNamara, and his Secretary of State, David Dean Rusk, that bombing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) might lead to revenge bombings by the forces of the north, he decided, backed by the ‘Gulf of Tonkin Resolution’, to initiate the ‘Operation Rolling Thunder’ on North Vietnam in order to prevent communist forces from coming to South Vietnam; ‘Operation Rolling Thunder’ was a series of airstrikes in form of intensive bombings in North Vietnam, resulting from an NLF raid on the American helicopter base near Pleiku (cf. Gardner 2011, 168-171 & Frey 2004, 119).

The operation was controversially discussed within the US government and politics worldwide as it was not clear whether it was possible to violently establish a sustainable democracy (cf. Gardner 2011, 169). Johnson’s bombing campaign, which had begun in February 1965, was also justified with the Geneva Agreements and the Laos Accord as the American government argued that the communist regime of North Vietnam had violated the arrangements of these conferences because they had neither established a democratic state system nor reunified the country (cf. Gardner 2011, 169-170).

North Vietnam on the other hand, had foreseen the escalations with the south and the United States and therefore signed a subsidiary agreement with China in 1964, which engaged the Chinese government to send equipment and up to 320,000 soldiers to North Vietnam, who mainly had the task to improve the infrastructure, including the Ho Chi Minh Trail, necessary to be able to resist American offensives (cf. Frey 2004, 110-112). Due to the continuing American airstrikes, the North Vietnamese forces built a tunnel system in both parts of the country with a length of more than 40,000 kilometers so they could supply the combatants while not being exposed to the bombings above ground (cf. Frey 2004, 128). When the North Vietnamese population was exposed to continuing bombardment by the Americans, they did

not lose their confidence but developed an impressive stubbornness to repair target points and especially the Ho Chi Minh Trail (cf. McElwee 2019, 12). Its decisive role is pointed out well by slogans like ‘fight the enemy to go forth, open the roads to transport’ and ‘blood may spill red, but this road cannot be blocked’ which demonstrate how important the maintenance of the infrastructure was in order to oppose the Americans and the South Vietnamese forces as well as they contribute to the myth of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (cf. Dong 1999, 43 in McElwee 2019, 12). The Soviet Union also supported the North by sending radar systems and air defense systems which destroyed up to 950 American aircrafts from 1965 to 1968 (cf. Frey 2004, 129). Despite the ongoing bombardments, the amount of soldiers coming from North Vietnam on the Ho Chi Minh Trail even increased due to the improved conditions and its expansion during the Vietnamese Civil War (cf. Frey 2004, 128-129 & McElwee 2019, 4). The communist forces were already used to maintaining the tracks and to implementing the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a decisive advantage in a war regarding supply and guerrilla warfare (cf. McElwee 2019, 4).

During the ‘Operation Rolling Thunder’ from 1965 to 1968, the American military dropped more than 500,000 tons of different explosives, to name especially cluster and Napalm bombs which caused a high number of deaths and injuries among civilians, within more than 200,000 airstrikes but still was not able to reduce the amount of North Vietnamese forces in the South and therefore decided to more specifically destroy the supplying infrastructure of their enemies (cf. Frey 2004, 126-129 & Logevall 2010, 296).

### **7.3 Chemical Warfare – Making the Trail Visible**

As part of the American ‘Ranch Hand Program’ from 1962 to 1971, which was supposed to destroy the environmental advantages the North Vietnamese forces were able to draw from the jungle, the US military caused enormous damage to Vietnam’s nature and population (cf. Dam & Nguyen 2018, 91-106 & Nguyen 2018, 127-130). Dam Thi Phuong Thuy and Nguyen Van Bac accurately describe American actions during this period and their consequences:

Through the American War in Vietnam, the United States (US) Army launched many new technologies. Of those, some contributed to Vietnam’s ecosystem change from a once-pristine habitat to an almost apocalyptic after the war. These techniques included toxic chemical deforestation, Rome plows and napalm bombs. Among large-scale destruction of forests, an herbicide spraying program named Ranch Hand lasting between 1962 and 1971 is popularly supposed to be the most destructive. Within nine

years of Operation Ranch Hand, the US Air Force was supposed to spray about 19 million gallons of defoliants over 20 percent tropical forest and 36 percent mangrove-forests in southern Vietnam. This spraying density reached approximately 37 kg/ha which was equivalent to 17 times the dose used in agriculture [...]. Of the sprayed chemicals, Agent Orange accounted for approximately 60 percent (11/19 million gallons). It is evident that Agent Orange contained in herbicides shared a common deadly characteristic, especially a significant amount of an extremely toxic chemical, dioxin. Dioxin can destroy forests, cause exposed people and animals to give birth to offspring with many defects as well as diseases such as lung cancer, blood cancer, diabetes type 2, etc. which can be inherited from parents to children. So far, at least three Vietnamese [and Laotian] generations have suffered the tremendous impact of dioxin reflected by sequelae of physical and psychological health. There was the fact that majority of ethnic minorities in SVN [South Vietnam] dwelled in the Central Highlands which the American strategists considered a strategically important region for the whole of Southeast Asia. As the Vietnam War intensified in the early 1960s, the Central Highlands became one of the main battlefields because the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong were able to lead a guerrilla war in the rain forests there [by using the Ho Chi Minh Trail]. For this reason, many villages of the minorities accidentally became targets of the US herbicidal spraying missions (Dam & Nguyen 2018, 91-93).

The chemical warfare of the US military destroyed the natural camouflage of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese forces in order to destroy their supply on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, created better overlookable areas around American military bases and also destroyed the agricultural land necessary to supply their enemies with nutrition (cf. Dam & Nguyen 2018, 95 & Sullivan III 2004, 83-84). The natural environment was not only destroyed with herbicides like ‘Agent Orange’ but also with ‘Napalm bombs’ which were extremely flammable, burned down large areas in whole Vietnam in order to damage the opposing forces and were only hardly extinguishable (cf. Dam & Nguyen 2018, 95). The American forces had realized that the Vietnamese advantage in form of the Ho Chi Minh Trail could only be destroyed by heavily damaging the natural environment disregarding the numerous negative impacts on the health of civilians.

#### **7.4 The Tet Offensive – The Trail Proves Its Value**

In 1968, the government of North Vietnam reacted on the highly aggressive American warfare, which had caused many thousands of deaths and injuries, with an operation of simultaneous offensives on cities in the south, like in Da Nang, Nha Trang, Pleiku, Hoi An and many others, under the name ‘Tet Offensive’ in order to provoke riots, as a reaction on as many casualties as possible, to finally overthrow the South Vietnamese government and to drive the United States out of the country (cf. Kort 2018, 153-155 & Asselin 2018, 156). The actions during the ‘Tet Offensive’ came surprisingly for the Southern and the American forces due to the similar timing (cf. Kort 2018, 154). Once more, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was of

significant importance as these simultaneous attacks would not have been possible without secretly supplying and distributing the North Vietnamese forces (cf. Nguyen 2012, 110-113). Nonetheless, the Northern forces were defeated and lost approximately half of their combatants which summed up to more than 40,000 soldiers being killed (cf. Kort 2018, 154 & Anderson 2011, 52-53). Despite the American victory, the ‘Tet Offensive’ was highly important to demonstrate the continuing resistance by the communist forces against the oppressors and the Ho Chi Minh Trail once more proved its relevance as the key factor to stage offensives.

When the media published images of hundreds of dead North Vietnamese soldiers who had lost their lives because of the desperate attempt to reunify Vietnam and to liberate the south from American influence while the United States were not able to win the war as well, the sentiments within the American society largely turned against Johnson’s policy of sending more and more troops to Vietnam (cf. Kort 2018, 154-156 & Asselin 2018, 163). Numerous protests against the ‘Vietnam War’ arose all over the country and President Johnson withdrew from the 1968 presidential race due to the immense political pressure (cf. Kort 2018, 154-156 & Asselin 2018, 163). The war in Vietnam had heavily influenced the presidential elections and therefore the republican candidate Richard Nixon succeeded Johnson in office in 1969, because he represented a policy of ending the war as fast as possible (cf. Kort 2018, 161). As the only way for Nixon to actually end the war was to send more troops to Vietnam in order to quickly defeat the North Vietnamese forces, he expanded the war from only Vietnam to the neighboring Laos and Cambodia as well (cf. Kort 2018, 161-164 & Kimball 2011, 217). But the Vietcong and its allies reacted on Nixon’s expansion of the war with the expansion and improvement of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia which contributed to their victory and the Vietnamese reunification (cf. McElwee 2019, 6 & McElwee 2005, 201).

## **7.5 Expansion of the War and the Trail**

As Richard Nixon had been an advocate for American values and had declared the necessity of an American victory in the Cold War many times, it was obvious that he would not accept the communist regime in North Vietnam to win the war although he had stated that the conflict needed to be ended as fast as possible (cf. Asselin 2018, 171-172). When he came into office in January 1969, it was unclear what strategies he planned to actually deliver on

promises he had made during the election race (cf. Asselin 2018, 172). The new protagonists in this conflict, Le Duan as the leader of North Vietnam and Richard Nixon as the new American president, were both stubborn proponents of their own ideas and none of them was willing to end the conflict as the weaker leader (cf. Asselin 2018, 172-173).

The first step of the ‘Nixon Doctrine’ was the ‘Vietnamization’ of the war: Nixon ordered the withdrawal of 25,000 US ground forces from South Vietnam but, as he stuck to the ‘Containment Policy’, therefore increased the training of South Vietnamese forces in order to make them win the war while reducing the deaths and injuries of US forces as well as the anti-war protests in the United States at the same time (cf. Asselin 2018, 172-173). As this strategy led to more violence between Vietnamese citizens, opposing forces within the south and also between the north and the south, it deepened the gap between the hostile camps and furtherly damaged the relationships which would be necessary in order to make peace (cf. Asselin 2018, 173).

Furthermore, although the amount of American troops in Vietnam was decreasing, the airstrikes were not. As President Nixon realized that Vietnam could not find peace in form of the American ideal of separation, he extended the war to the neighboring countries Cambodia, in 1970, and Laos, in 1971, in order to destroy communism there as well and to make the supply for the enemies via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through Cambodia and Laos as well, impossible (cf. Asselin 2018, 183-185 & Kimball 2011, 223 & Chomsky 1972, 115-120). Pamela McElwee accurately describes the American actions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and its significance as following:

The later years of the war saw the Trail expand in size and significance; this expansion was met with escalation of the US aerial campaigns, including Operation Commando Hunt, which dropped 3 million tons of bombs on southern Laos from 1968 to 1972 [...]. Northern authorities estimated that each kilometer along the Trail had received on average 736 bombs of different types, and southern Laos after these campaigns was described as looking “cratered like the backside of the moon.” [...]. By this time, the Trail extended across most of southern Laos, with new bypasses and links as additional areas fell to PAVN; and a failed ARVN ground attack in 1971, known as Lam Son 719, showed how ineffectual interdiction against the Trail from the South was [...]. From 1973 onwards, PAVN moved more and more openly throughout the Trùng Sơn range, with large-scale Trail expansion plans, including bringing in Cuban specialists to build concrete roads and permanent iron bridges [...]. These roads were essential for the final campaign that ended with the march on Saigon on April 30, 1975, with 413,450 tons of equipment having moved on the Trail that spring alone [...] (McElwee 2019, 13-14).

As the bombardment on North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was steadily extensive, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces staged another

offensive of numerous simultaneous attacks on South Vietnam: the 'Easter Offensive' (cf. Kimball 2011, 232-233).

### **7.6 The Easter Offensive – The Way to the American Withdrawal?**

The Vietnamese communist forces launched the 'Easter Offensive' on 30 March 1972, as reaction on the continuous bombardment by American aircrafts, which was comparable to the earlier 'Tet Offensive' because approximately 120,000 North Vietnamese communist combatants openly attacked the south in order to force a victory equipped with tanks from the Soviet Union (cf. Kimball 2011, 232-233 & Frey 2004, 205). The 'Easter Offensive' was feasible due to the supply coming via the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (cf. Frey 2004, 205). The relevance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail needs to be stressed regarding the 'Easter Offensive' as these attacks would not have been possible without the supply and distribution of soldiers coming via the trail; the Northern forces could not move freely within the south and therefore encircled it beyond the borders to Laos and Cambodia which generated the decisive advantage of enabling to stage numerous offensives in the whole of South Vietnam at the same time (cf. Anderson 2011, 61-63).

President Nixon's reaction on the 'Easter Offensive', considering the presidential election race running at that time, was the 'Operation Linebacker', an intense series of bombings and mining in North Vietnam and he also threatened Le Duan with the option of dropping a nuclear bomb (cf. Kimball 2011, 232-233 & Dao & Nguyen 2018, 115-117). Due to exhaustion on both sides, enormous losses of soldiers, money and equipment and political pressure in form of societal protests against the war, representatives of the opposing regimes, Le Duc Tho for North Vietnam, Henry Kissinger for the United States and Nguyen Van Thieu for South Vietnam, negotiated options how to end the war (cf. Kimball 2011, 233).

### **7.7 The Paris Agreement - The End of American Involvement**

The negotiations between North Vietnam, by Le Duc Tho, and the United States, by Henry Kissinger, had already started in 1968, but due to the opposite positions of the demands from both camps, they had not produced any noteworthy outcome until 1972 (cf. Frey 2004, 208).

In September and October of that year, when only 27,000 American soldiers were left in South Vietnam, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger agreed on some compromises within their negotiations in Paris: (1) The Thieu regime in South Vietnam would be allowed to remain in office, (2) a council with representatives from all opposing political camps had to be set up where the voices of all members would be of equal value, (3) elections would have to be held in South Vietnam, (4) a truce would immediately become effective, (5) an exchange of captives from both sides would have to be made, (6) all American missions against North Vietnam had to be cancelled and (7) all American forces would have to leave South Vietnam (cf. Frey 2004, 209).

As the presidential election race was running in late 1972, President Nixon did not want to risk his re-election because of exaggerated demands which might endanger the achievement of peace in Vietnam, but after he had been elected as president in November 1972, he did not have to fear to be punished with the loss of votes due to his strict policies regarding the Vietnam conflict and therefore ordered to renegotiate the already existent compromises (cf. Frey 2004, 209-210 & Kort 2018, 194-197). As North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho denied further concessions, the United States launched 'Operation Linebacker II' in order to force North Vietnam to renegotiate the compromises in Paris (cf. Frey 2004, 210-211 & Kort 2018, 194-197). 'Operation Linebacker II', also known as the 'Christmas Bombings', was another bombing campaign with 3,420 bombing missions from 18 to 29 December 1972, with the aim to 'bomb the negotiators to realistic demands' and to prove Nixon's image as a 'madman' who would not leave Vietnam silently (cf. Kimball 2011, 232-234 & Kaiser 2018, 147-152).

After this campaign, the opposing camps met for further negotiations in Paris and worked out the 'Paris Agreement' on 27 January 1973, which put an end to American involvement in Vietnam (cf. Kimball 2011, 233-234). The 'Paris Agreement' essentially had the same content like the previous compromises had had because it led to an (1) exchange of all captives of war, (2) an immediate truce and (3) the withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam within 60 days (cf. Frey 2004, 211). The agreement was signed by North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the provisional government of the National Liberation Front and the United States; it is regarded as the document which ended the Second Indochina War although that consequence was only on the global scale because the conflicts between the different societal and political groups in North and South Vietnam did not suddenly disappear and it took

another two years until the country was finally reunified (cf. Frey 2004, 211-213 & Nguyen 2012, 298-299).

### **7.8 Vietnamese Reunification – The Trail as the Key Factor to Reunify Vietnam?**

After the ‘Paris Agreement’ had become effective in January 1973, Vietnam remained a divided country consisting of the north, under the leadership of Le Duan, and the south, ruled by Nguyen Van Thieu, while the NLF still attempted to overthrow the Thieu regime in order to turn South Vietnam communist (cf. Asselin 2018, 206-208). Although the US forces had left Vietnam in 1973, the conflicts remained unsolved and caused another two years of struggling for power and the question which ideology could prevail (cf. Asselin 2018, 206-210). Pierre Asselin accurately describes the balance of power between the two parts of the country in the aftermath of the ‘Paris Agreement’ as following:

Cautiously optimistic about their prospects, DRVN [Democratic Republic of Vietnam = North Vietnam] leaders nonetheless shared a profound sense of trepidation about the agreement. To begin, it offered no guarantee of national reunification under their authority. If this was a victory for their side, as they officially claimed, it was a bittersweet one. The impending withdrawal of the last American troops was a major breakthrough, but even without them the balance of forces in the South continued to favor Saigon. Its army of more than a million regular and paramilitary troops was the fifth largest in the world; and recent, accelerated military aid deliveries from the United States had made it even more dangerous and lethal. North Vietnamese military analysts acknowledged among themselves that Saigon’s armed forces were in much better shape in 1973 than their own forces, and fretted over the implications of that disparity for the immediate future. Washington had agreed to pull out the remainder of its forces, but not without making sure South Vietnam could defend itself. (Asselin 2018, 212).

The military financial aid for South Vietnam nevertheless decreased between 1973 and 1975, due to anti-war voices in the US congress, from \$ 2.3 billion down to \$ 700 million per year (cf. Kort 2018, 200 & Frey 2004, 217). Another consequence, additional to the end of all military involvement in Laos and Cambodia as it was negotiated in the ‘Paris Agreement’, was that the United States terminated all military engagement in whole Indochina which prohibited any involvement in South Vietnam (cf. Kort 2018, 200).

Despite the official truce between the different Vietnamese camps, North Vietnam began to force the reunification under its rule (cf. Kort 2018, 200). It immediately violated the ‘Paris Agreement’ with the policy of land and population grabbing in 1973, when its troops violently forced territories in the south into property of the north (cf. Kort 2018, 200). The combination

of economic and political weakness in South Vietnam and the loss of American aid were the main factors which made an invasion by Northern forces possible at all (cf. Kort 2018, 200-201). Once more, the Ho Chi Minh Trail played a decisive role as it was used to transport 140,000 tons of supplies, including 27,000 tons of weapons and 100,000 soldiers into South Vietnam, which summed up to a total of 230,000 communist soldiers by the end 1973 (cf. Kort 2018, 201). The use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail tremendously increased due to the absence of American airstrikes, which made it much safer to travel on the jungle tracks (cf. Kort 2018, 201-202). The extension of these supplying routes was essential as it enabled offensives into South Vietnam coming from Laos or Cambodia and North Vietnamese forces could receive medical treatment along the trail and did not have to fear to be bombarded while staying in hospital (cf. Kort 2018, 202-203). Furthermore, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was of enormous importance because it enabled the encirclement of South Vietnam beyond the Laotian and Cambodian border, like it had been the case during the 'Tet Offensive' and the 'Easter Offensive', and therefore the North Vietnamese forces were able to use the infrastructure for the 'Spring Offensive' in 1975 as well (cf. Anderson 2011, 63-65).

In spring 1975, the comparably weak army of South Vietnam, ARVN, faced a much superior army from the North with approximately double as many soldiers and equipment like tanks and weapons, which could receive support from Laos and Cambodia via the Ho Chi Minh Trail at any time (cf. Kort 2018, 210-211). Due to the overwhelming inferiority of the South Vietnamese forces in comparison to the north, which continually received support from China and the Soviet Union while the United States could not support the south any more, they were not able to resist communist offensives, the so called 'Spring Offensive', and within the 'Black April' the North Vietnamese forces invaded Saigon and won the civil war on 30 April 1975 (cf. Kort 2018, 210-211). Both events were part of the 'Ho Chi Minh Campaign' which eventually led to the victory of North Vietnam (cf. Nguyen 2012, 301). As the encirclement of South Vietnam and the invasion of Saigon would not have been possible without the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it needs to be characterized as the key factor to achieve the reunification of Vietnam. Nguyen Van Thieu fled from South Vietnam after he had given up his office on 21 April, and made General Duong Van Minh the new president because Minh was optimistic to make an arrangement with the National Liberation Front; President Gerald Ford, who had come into office as Nixon's successor in 1974, refused to support South Vietnam against the overwhelming offensives because of strong anti-war sentiments in the congress and among the American population (cf. Frey 2004, 219-221 & Nguyen 2012, 300).

When Vietnam was reunified after the ‘Black April’ and the invasion of Saigon in 1975, the ‘political earthquake’ in Indochina was completed as the neighboring Laos and Cambodia had also faced tremendous changes in the aftermath of the Second Indochina War: In both countries the communist forces, Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge, had eventually overthrown the prior regimes and, by doing so, strengthened the communist and socialist ideologies in whole Indochina (cf. Frey 2004, 219-221 & Asselin 2018, 230-234 & Riemann 2008, 33-34).

## **8. The Aftermath – Changing Values**

The consequences on the relationships between and within the countries which had been part of the Second Indochina War require examination as well because of their global political importance. The foreign policies between Vietnam and the United States remained difficult as Robert Schulzinger aptly describes:

The United States and Vietnam remained estranged for twenty years after forces from the National Liberation Front and the People’s Army of Vietnam captured Saigon on April 30, 1975. The United States immediately sought to isolate and punish the victors with an economic and political embargo. The two countries eventually restored diplomatic relations in 1995 after arduous negotiations. The issue of the fate of American service personnel listed as prisoner of war (POW) and missing in action (MIA) became a major source of friction between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), complication efforts to restore diplomatic relations and fostering a hostile political climate inside the United States. American veterans of the Vietnam War bore a variety of physical and psychological scars left from the war, and they struggled to gain recognition for their service and sacrifices. Their efforts bore fruit in widespread public appreciation for their service (Schulzinger 2011, 385).

Although the Second Indochina War had officially been ended, the tensions between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, as the country was named after the capture of Saigon in 1975, the country was still far from peace as the economy was weakened due to the loss of trade with ‘western countries’, and the Third Indochina War was about to evolve (cf. Nguyen 2012, 300-301). The aftermath of the Vietnamese reunification needs to be examined as well and the perspectives of the different political players need to be taken into account.

## 8.1 Vietnam – Struggling For a New ‘Normal’

After Nguyen Van Thieu had fled from South Vietnam and Saigon had been captured by communist forces on 30 April 1975, the North Vietnamese regime had won the Second Indochina War and therefore attempted to establish a communist state structure in the south under Northern rule (cf. Nguyen 2012, 300-301). Although the successor of Nguyen Van Thieu, ARVN General Duong Van Minh, aimed to negotiate a peaceful surrender of South Vietnam during the ‘Black April’, the leaders of North Vietnam were not interested as they had already come close to Saigon and were confident to succeed (cf. Asselin 2018, 231). The advancing troops of North Vietnam caused the evacuation of all remaining American personnel from Saigon and approximately around 120,000 Vietnamese fled from the South within 29 and 30 April 1975 (cf. Asselin 2018, 231-233). The panic, which evolved as Vietnamese collaborators wanted to escape from the approaching enemy, led to desperate attempts to leave the country within which many Southerners lost their lives when they tried to escape with boats or hung on the last American helicopters (cf. Asselin 2018, 231-233). The remaining anticommunists were incarcerated in ‘re-education camps’, in most cases without trial, as Pierre Asselin impressively describes:

Contrary to rampant rumors at the time, there was no bloodbath, no mass killings of Saigon loyalists following the fall of that regime. Summary executions of RVN government, armed forces, police, and other personnel occurred, but were rare and unsanctioned by communist authorities. There was, however, a mass incarceration of as many as one million Southern “reactionaries,” only a handful of whom were ever formally charged or tried in court, in more than eighty “re-education camps” spread across the country. By official account, Hanoi aimed only to “reform” those individuals to facilitate their rehabilitation into “new society,” a practice introduced in the North in 1961 to deal with unrepentant former members of the French colonial government and armed forces. The reality proved much starker. Re-education camp detainees received a mandatory “education” centered on history and communism. [...] Detention lasted anywhere between a few weeks to several years, depending on one’s former activities, response to “treatment,” and family connections. Many spent over a decade in the camps. As part of their “therapy” detainees performed hard, often dangerous “productive labor,” such as clearing mine fields. They endured sleep and food deprivation as well as frequent beatings. Malnutrition, maltreatment, and diseases claimed the lives of more than 150,000 detainees. These Vietnamese “gulags,” a reference to the unforgiving Siberian prison camps where Stalin sent his real and imagined enemies, were veritable death camps (Asselin 2018, 235).

Despite the end of the war period in Vietnam, which had lasted for more than two decades, the Vietnamese still were not a united nation as prior tensions between the ideological camps remained (cf. Nguyen 2012, 300-302). The years after 1975 did not really bring peace to Vietnam as the country had to face offensives by their former allies: The Khmer Rouge

attacked South Vietnam and North Vietnam was under siege by Chinese forces, who staged the Third Indochina War in 1979 (cf. Nguyen 2012, 300-302). The aftermath of the war against China, although it had lasted for only approximately four weeks in 1979, was characterized by economic stagnation and hyperinflation as the relationship between Vietnam and its former ally China had become significantly worse (cf. Nguyen 2012, 300-302). The restructuration of the country's state model into a planned economy and the oppression of dissidents caused the emigration of more than two million Indochinese citizens between 1975 and 1990 (cf. Weggel 1999, 16). When the Cold War approached its end, Vietnam came up with 'Doi Moi' which was a reform plan to initiate the change from planned economy to a more social market economy in 1986 and since 2006, the political agenda has turned to an increasing openness (cf. Weggel 1999, 16-17 & Gamino 2008, 4-6 & Will 2008, 6-8).

The Ho Chi Minh Trail has remained until today, with some tracks being maintained better than others, and the myth of the trail still exists as it has become a tourist attraction for adventurers who want to explore the network of former supplying routes by motorcycle (cf. Gillet 2011). The extensive spraying of many millions of liters of the herbicide 'Agent Orange' during the Second Indochina War has caused enormous damages to the nature, the animals and the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and, so far, three Vietnamese generations have been affected by health impacts, like lung cancer, blood cancer and others, these American operations had effected (cf. Dam & Nguyen 2018, 92 & Gamino 2008, 4). The trail has remained a symbol for Vietnamese nationalism and resistance against foreign oppression and its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated among Vietnamese veterans by erecting monuments at the most important strategic sites (cf. McElwee 2019, 16).

## **8.2 The United States – Overcoming the Trauma**

The Second Indochina War or how Americans usually refer to it, 'the Vietnam War', has been the first war in American history which could not be won and due to the mixture of massive protests by pacifist activists, media reporting which brought images of the war via the televisions into most American households and, in the beginning, a lack of appreciation for veterans, the war in Vietnam has remained a national trauma (cf. Dauenhauer 2015, 144-145 & Frei 2008, 50-51). During the years of American involvement in Indochina, 58,000 American soldiers died and nearly half of the 500,000 American soldiers stationed in and

around Vietnam were addicted to drugs like opium or heroin which has caused massive addiction problems among veterans until today (cf. Scott 2003, 3-13). Vietnam veterans were unpopular among the American society for approximately ten years as most people did not want to talk about this war they felt ashamed of and other veteran associations kept distance to their colleagues from Vietnam; the American soldiers who had fought in the Second Indochina War finally experienced appreciation for their sacrifices in 1982, when the Vietnam Veteran Memorial was erected in Washington and a parade was organized to honor the veterans (cf. Maxner 2008, 29).

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, US President Gerald Ford continually boycotted the Socialist Republic of Vietnam economically and attempted to deny the country's representatives to get a seat in the United Nations in order to increase the isolation of Vietnam (cf. Schulzinger 2011, 385-386). Leaving Vietnam was not glamorous for the last remaining personnel and the American government: the 'former hegemon in the world regarding economy, ideological superiority and military strength' had to evacuate its people from a small country in Southeast Asia which had defeated the so far invincible US military for the first time in history (cf. Schulzinger 2011, 386).

The media reporting about the war, including war crimes of American troops like the massacre of My Lai and the resulting protests against the government and its 'Containment Policy', has shattered the country's self-image as the 'morally superior superpower of the world' and, until today, the self-esteem of the United States has not completely recovered (cf. Maxner 2008, 28 & Frei 2008, 50-53 & Greiner 2007, 361). The United States still have to bear the guilt for more than 1 million killed Vietnamese soldiers during their involvement, war crimes which had been made visible to the whole world through the media, exaggerating bombardments in whole Indochina with millions of bombs remaining unexploded until today, the massive destruction of the natural environment and devastating effects on the population's health due to the use of 'Agent Orange' (cf. Schulzinger 2011, 385-404 & Maxner 2008, 28-30 & Dam & Nguyen 2018, 91-93).

Up to now, the government of the United States has not officially apologized for the American involvement in Indochina, neither to Vietnam nor to Laos, although President Barack Obama acknowledged the suffering and the sacrifices of all sides of the conflict in September 2016 (cf. Fisher 2016).

### **8.3 Laos – The Secret Victim of the ‘Secret War’**

The most common term in the ‘western world’ for the Second Indochina War is the ‘Vietnam War’, while most Vietnamese people refer to it as the ‘American War’. Both terms disregard the involvement of neighboring Laos which was heavily affected by the events during this war period and due to the lack of global acknowledgement about this fact, the Lao people refer to the period as the ‘Secret War’ (cf. United Nations in Lao PDR). As the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through Laos and Cambodia as well, in order to circumvent open battles with ARVN and American forces, the country was target to many American operations in order to stop the supply of equipment and combatants and to avoid the encirclement of South Vietnam (cf. Clymer 2011, 357-376). From 1964 to 1973, the American Air Force dropped more than two million tons of ordnance over Laos, which makes an average of one ton of ordnance for every inhabitant at that time; this extremely high amount of dropped bombs makes Laos the most heavily bombarded country on earth until today (cf. United Nations in Lao PDR).

As the American policy to fight the Ho Chi Minh Trail was to make it visible, the US military sprayed tons of the herbicide ‘Agent Orange’ over Laos as well, which has caused tremendous impacts on nature and humanity in the country just like in Vietnam: millions of animals died during the agenda, plants were destroyed in millions of cases and already the third generation is affected by the consequences on health due to ‘Agent Orange’ (cf. Clymer 2011, 357-376 & Dam & Nguyen 2018, 91-93). As the failure rate of American bombs was approximately 30%, there still remain around 80 million bombs unexploded today which incited the Laotian government to bring up an additional Sustainable Development Goal within the UN 2030 Agenda with the aim to clear the country from unexploded remnants of war (cf. United Nations in Lao PDR). The Laotian government also aims to overcome the damage of the natural environment, caused by the Americans during the Second Indochina War in order to make the Ho Chi Minh Trail visible, with a big agenda of reforestation (cf. United Nations in Lao PDR). The Ho Chi Minh Trail has lost its initial purpose in Laos as well and nowadays it is a tourist attraction for adventurers from all over the world just like it is in Vietnam and Cambodia (cf. Gillet 2011). The myth of the trail remains in Laos until today as veterans, who had fought in the Second Indochina War, celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday by visiting important sites along the trail and by erecting monuments to maintain the memory of the trail’s relevance (cf. McElwee 2019, 16).

## 9. Conclusion – The ‘Trail’ to Success?

The strategy of taking advantage of the natural environment has a long history in Vietnamese warfare as well as opposing superior enemies in David-versus-Goliath scenarios. Beginning with the guerrilla tactics against the Chinese and the Mongolians, the jungle has played an important role to resist foreign oppressors. Throughout the First Indochina War, when the Vietnamese forces were fighting against the French colonialist rulers, the independence fighters once more hid in the jungle and the rural population erected factories to supply the fighters by using jungle paths. Regarding the First Indochina War, the battle of Dien Bien Phu needs to be mentioned as the Vietnamese forces would not have been victorious without encircling and surprisingly attack their enemies via jungle paths in Vietnam and Laos.

During the interwar period, the future Ho Chi Minh Trail was essential as well because without it, North Vietnam and China would not have been able to support the Vietcong in South Vietnam and the Vietcong itself would not have been as effective as it was because its fighters used not only military supply via the Ho Chi Minh Trail but surprising guerilla warfare as well. During the Second Indochina War, the forces opposing the United States and their allies continued to take advantage of the environment as they supplied their forces through the jungle, hid in there and used it for guerrilla warfare. When the Americans began to spray ‘Agent Orange’, the Vietnamese kept the Ho Chi Minh Trail alive by building a huge network of tunnels in order to hide from the airstrikes. The Vietnamese reunification would not have been possible as well without the Ho Chi Minh Trail as it was essential to implement the ‘Easter Offensive’ and the ‘Spring Offensive’.

Considering these many cases of Vietnamese independence fighters taking advantage of the natural environment, above and below ground, the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the preceding network of supplying routes in the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian jungle were key factors to achieve Vietnamese independence. Without this strategy, the wars in Vietnam’s history would have consisted of open battles which the Vietnamese would have lost due to their mostly inferior amount of troops and firepower.

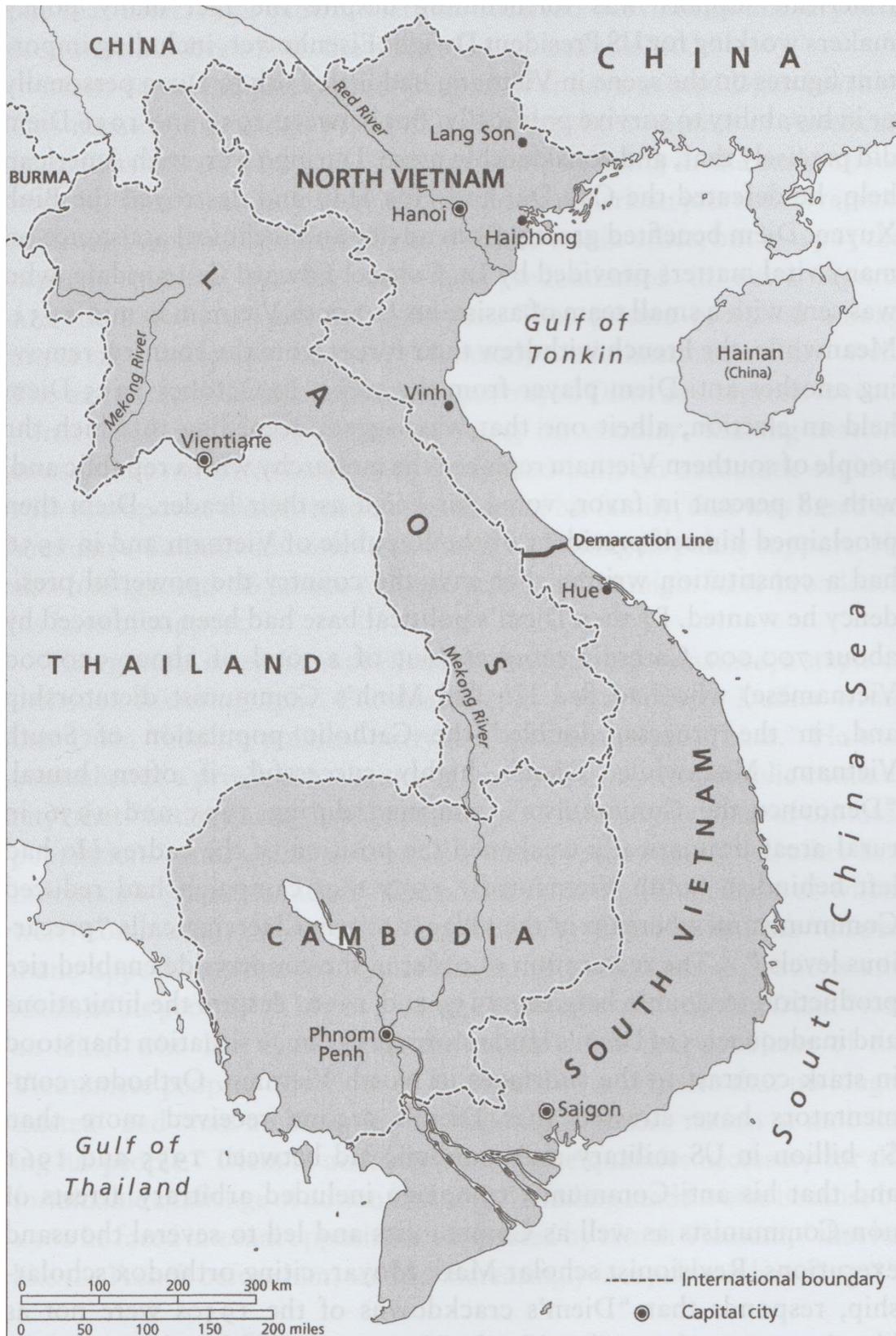
Nowadays the Ho Chi Minh Trail remains as a symbol for the Vietnamese fight for independence and has become a tourist attraction, but the original purpose will not be forgotten among the society because of the memorials along the trail and its historical relevance.

10. Appendix

10.1 Maps



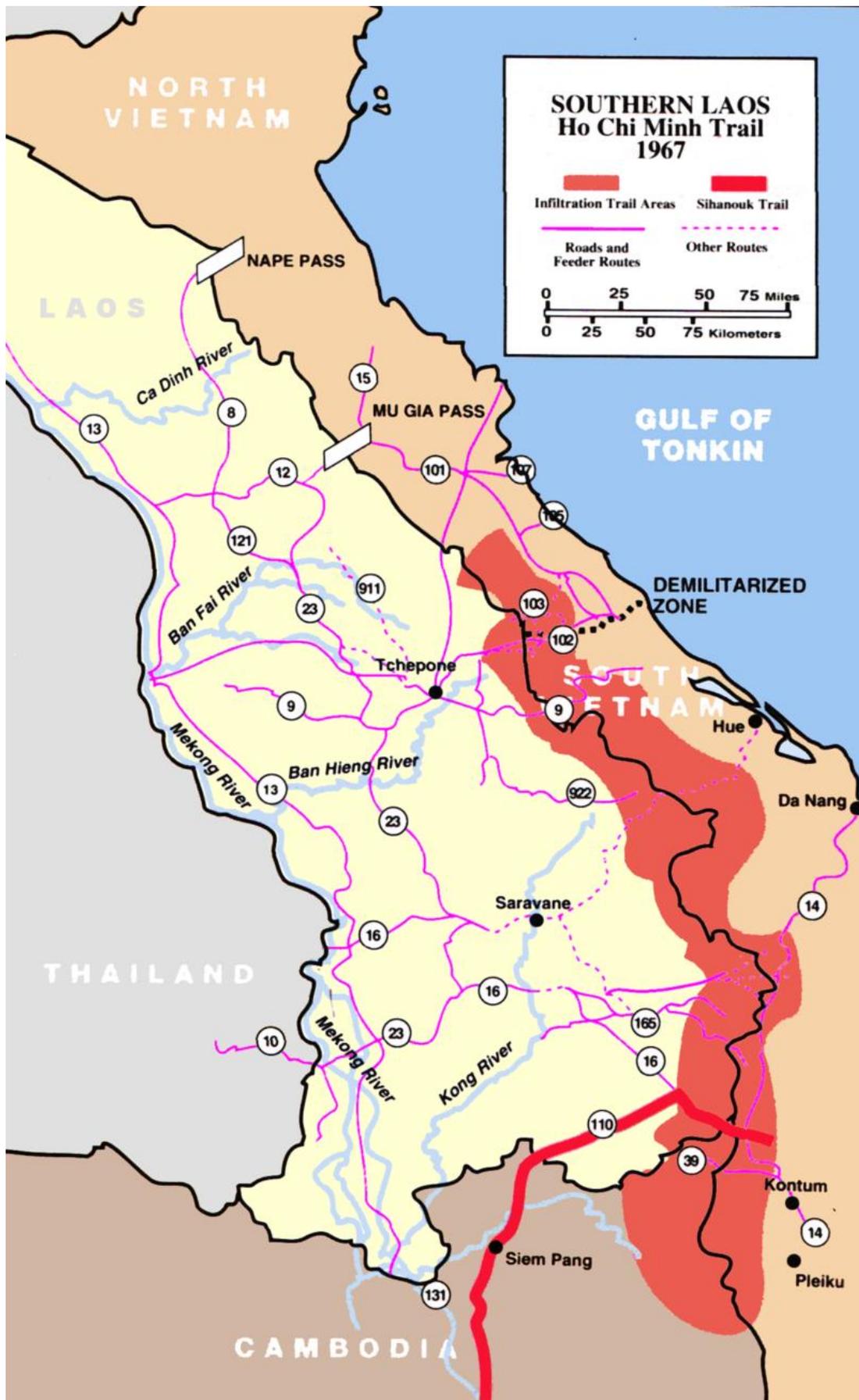
Colonial Indochina, 1899-1954 (Asselin 2018, xxxvi)



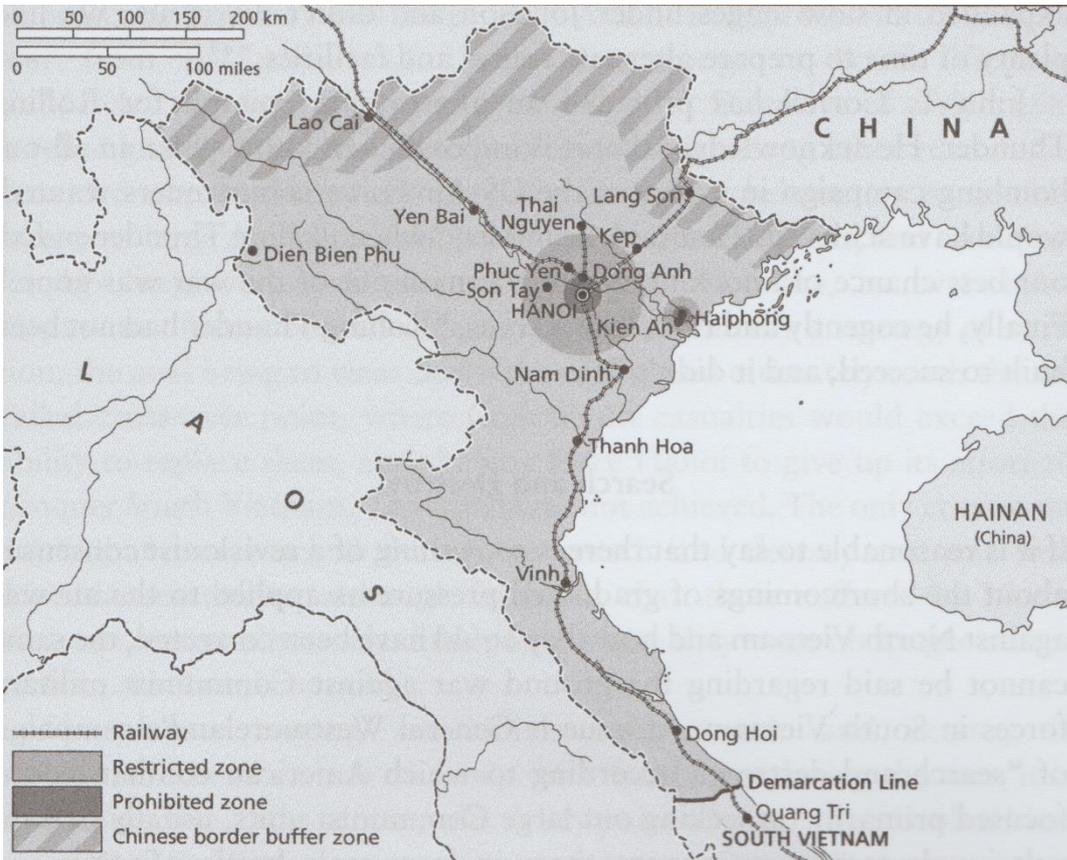
Segregated Vietnam after the Geneva Accords, 1954-1975 (Kort 2018, 99)



The Ho Chi Minh Trail (Asselin 2018, xxxvii)



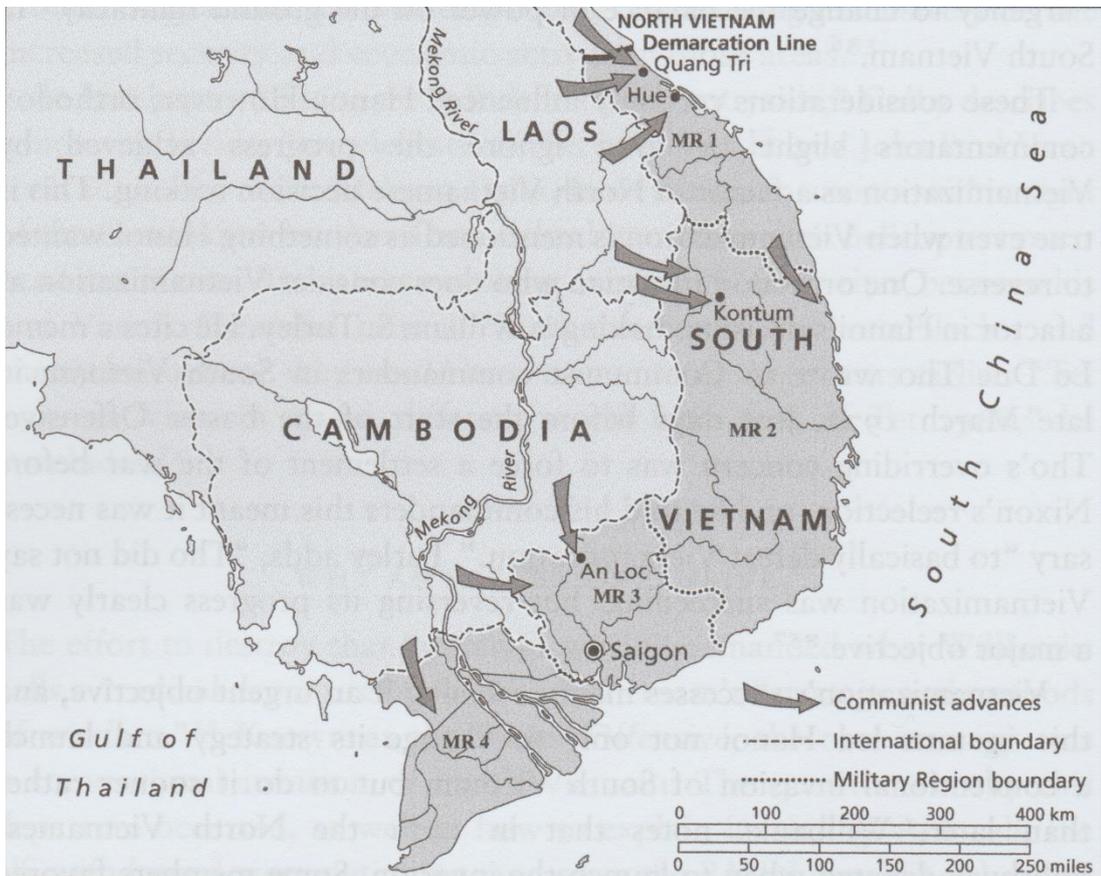
The Ho Chi Minh Trail in Southern Laos and South Vietnam, 1967 (Staaveren 1993)



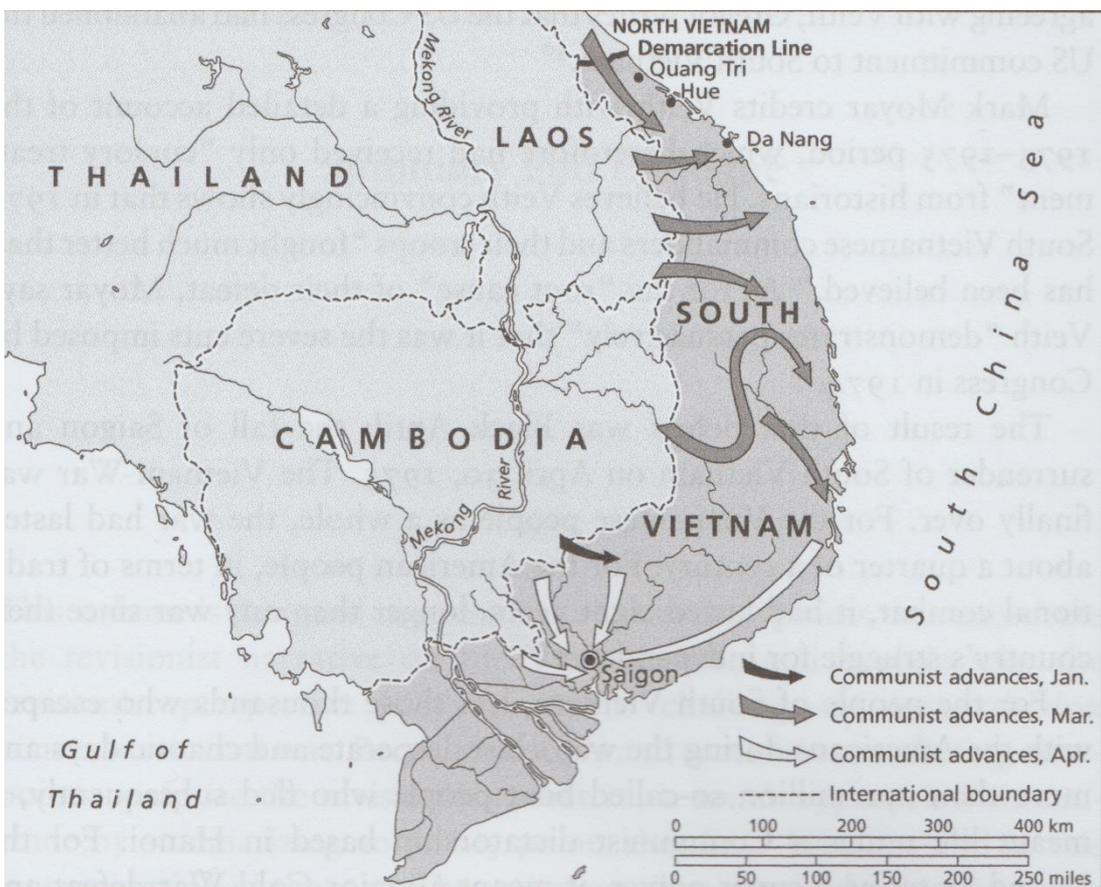
Operation Rolling Thunder, 1967 (Kort 2018, 137)



The Tet Offensive, 1968 (Kort 2018, 159)



The Easter Offensive, 1972 (Kort 2018, 188)



The Spring Offensive, 1975 (Kort 2018, 215)

## 10.2 Images



The visible Ho Chi Minh Trail due to the use of 'Agent Orange' (Scholl-Latour 1988, 105)



Supply coming via the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Feldbauer 2019)



Ho Chi Minh (Praller 2016)



A Vietcong soldier gets shot after the 'Tet Offensive' (Festerling 2018)



Fleeing children after an American airstrike with Napalm (Ketels 2019)

### 10.3 Statement of Authorship

Ich versichere, dass ich die Arbeit selbstständig und nur mit den angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmitteln angefertigt habe und dass alle Stellen, die aus anderen Werken dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach entnommen sind, eindeutig unter Angabe der Quellen als Entlehnungen kenntlich gemacht worden sind.

Im Falle der Aufbewahrung meiner Arbeit in der Bibliothek bzw. im Staatsarchiv erkläre ich mein Einverständnis, dass die Arbeit Benutzern zugänglich gemacht wird.

Lauf, 23.03.2020

Ort, Datum

Jonas Hoffmann

Vor- und Zuname

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