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French military policies in the aftermath of the Yên Bay mutiny, 1930

Old security dilemmas return to the surface¹

Tobias Rettig

Abstract: This paper provides a brief summary of the Yên Bay mutiny of 10 February 1930, before examining its links to a wider insurrectionary attempt by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in parts of Tonkin and the reasons why the attempted insurrection was to begin at Yên Bay but not in other garrison towns. It then places the mutiny in a context in which the use of Vietnamese soldiers in French service was necessary in order to maintain French supremacy as a colonial and protectorate power in French Indo-China. But instead of focusing on the mutiny itself and its causes, the main emphasis of this paper is on its consequences – in terms of the military and civilian policies subsequently adopted by the French. These included disciplinary measures, changes in the military and civilian intelligence services, as well as policies reducing the relative number of Vietnamese troops. While these measures aimed at reasserting French control and discipline in a key colonial institution, the conclusion briefly discusses their impact on the defence capability of French Indo-China and on the nature of French–Vietnamese relations.

Keywords: military; colonial policies; mutiny; French; French Indo-China; Yên Bay

This paper examines how long-standing French security dilemmas in Indo-China resurfaced in the wake of the Yên Bay mutiny of 10 February 1930, and how the French military and civilian authorities in

¹ This paper is largely based on archival research conducted in the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT) in Vincennes and the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (CAOM) in Aix-en-Provence in France from May 1998 to December 1999. A 'fees only' bursary from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as well as travel bursaries from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the Royal Historical Society supported these activities. The paper has profited in particular from the suggestions of Ian Brown, Karl Hack, Henri Eckert, Kimloan Hill and Richard Meixsel. I gratefully acknowledge the financial and intellectual input of these institutions and individuals, while fully accepting responsibility for the result.

Hanoi and Paris responded to this unexpected challenge. It provides a brief overview of the mutiny, the wider insurrectionary attempt by the *Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang* (VNQDD) – the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, and compares it with previous mutinies. It then argues that the mutiny brought to the fore a latent security problem centring around the use of Indo-Chinese soldiers. Although the latter were indispensable, most of the French were never too sure about the loyalty of soldiers who were both enforcers of colonial order and colonialized subjects. The measures taken as a result of the mutiny are then examined and compared with previous security measures. It is argued that they largely fitted into past response patterns to security threats from within the army, but that the response was crucially different in scope, due to the novel quality of a challenge that was rooted in new forms of anti-colonial organization. The concluding section assesses the impact of these measures on French Indo-China's internal and external security in the 1930–45 period.

The Yên Bay mutiny

At approximately 1.30 on the morning of Monday, 10 February 1930, about 40 soldiers belonging to the 2nd battalion of the Fourth *Régiment de Tirailleurs Tonkinois* stationed at Yên Bay, supported by roughly 60 civilian members of the VNQDD, attacked their 29 French officers and warrant officers.² They surprised and killed five of them, wounded another three seriously, isolated a few more from their troops, and even managed to hoist the flag of the VNQDD on one of the buildings. About two hours later, it became clear that the badly coordinated mutiny attempt had failed, as the remaining 550 Indo-Chinese soldiers refused to participate in the rising. Furthermore, the insurrectionists had failed to eliminate the *Garde indigène* post of Yên Bay town and were unable to win over the frightened civilian population to the revolutionary cause. At 7.30, a French–Indo-Chinese counter-attack dispersed the mutineers; two hours later, order was re-established in Yên Bay.

² The following synthesis draws largely on Hy van Luong (with the collaboration of Nguyen Dac Bang) (1992), *Revolution in the Village. Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925–1988*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu; Claude Paillat (1981), *Dossiers secrets de la France contemporaine. Tome 3. La guerre à l'horizon*, Robert Laffont, Paris; Henri Eckert (1998), 'Les militaires indochinois au service de la France, 1859–1939', PhD thesis, University of Paris IV (facsimile reprint, 2000, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, Paris); and my own archival research presented in the first chapters of my, as yet uncompleted, SOAS thesis: Rettig, 'Contested loyalties: Indo-Chinese soldiers in the service of France'.

On the same night, there were two further failed VNQDD insurrectionary attempts in the Son Duong sector.³ An attack on the *Garde indigène* post in Hung Hoa was beaten back by the native guards who had apparently been informed earlier about the insurrection. Not far away, in Kinh Khê, the instructor, Nguyễn Quang Kinh, and one of his wives were killed by VNQDD members, apparently in a revenge killing. After the destruction of the *Garde indigène* post in Lâm Thao, the VNQDD temporarily controlled the district seat. At daybreak, however, a newly arrived *Garde indigène* unit inflicted a heavy defeat on the insurgent group, and mortally wounded Nguyễn Khắc Nhu, one of the main leaders of the VNQDD.

A few more violent incidents occurred until 22 February, when Governor General Pasquier declared the insurrection over. On 10 February, a policeman was wounded by a VNQDD member at a car checkpoint in Hanoi; at night, arts students threw bombs at government buildings representing the colonial state's repressive power. On the night of 15/16 February, the nearby villages of Phu Duc (Thaibinh province) and Vinh Bao (Haiduong province) were taken for a few hours by the leader of the VNQDD, Nguyễn Thai Hoc, and his remaining men; in the latter village, the local mandarin (Tri-huyen) was savagely murdered. In response, on 16 February French warplanes bombarded the VNQDD's last base, Cô Am village; on the same day, Tonkin's Resident Superior, René Robin, ordered a mopping-up operation involving two hundred *Gardes indigènes*, eight French commanders and two Sûreté inspectors. The insurrection was officially declared over on 22 February, after Nguyễn Thai Hoc and his lieutenants, Pho Duc Chinh and Nguyễn Thanh Loi, had been arrested.

Neither the mutiny nor the insurrection came entirely as a surprise. The colonial authorities' first large-scale crack-down on the VNQDD in 1929 had considerably weakened the party, which had modelled itself on the Chinese Kuomintang. At the same time, it had exacerbated the violent tendencies within the VNQDD. Its remaining leadership was now willing to accelerate preparations for a violent overthrow of colonial rule to establish an independent Vietnamese republic. Most of the party's leaders, but not its lower-ranking members and affiliates, seem to have realized that they were too weak and too closely observed by the Sûreté to stand a real chance of success. At best, they could hope to trigger off a spontaneous uprising; at worst, and this was perhaps

³ This paragraph is based on Hy van Luong, *supra* note 2.

more realistic for a last-ditch insurrection effort, French repression would turn them into anti-colonial martyrs. Finally, there was disagreement – or a communication problem – about the timing of the insurrection: after Nguyễn Thái Học had ordered the postponement of the uprising, Nguyễn Khắc Nhu still proceeded.

A love–hate relationship with Indo-Chinese soldiers

The Yên Bái mutiny focused attention again on long-standing tension over the use of Indo-Chinese soldiers, and on the ways in which it might be resolved. This tension could be traced back to the beginnings of French colonial rule in Indo-China. It centred around the French dependence on native soldiers to maintain colonial control. This need was problematic because Indo-Chinese soldiers were both enforcers of the colonial order and colonial subjects, and this created constant French doubts about their loyalty. Despite several attempts to deal with it, this basic tension between the need for and wariness of Indo-Chinese soldiers could never be entirely resolved. It was too deeply rooted in the issue of continued French rule in Indo-China, which was, at that time, beyond question. As a result, it resurfaced at fairly regular intervals, either as a result of proposals to improve the position of Indo-Chinese soldiers in the army, or after mutiny had raised serious questions about the soldiers' loyalty.

The need for Indo-Chinese soldiers – auxiliaries first, regular troops later – had been present since the beginning of France's conquest of the territories which, in 1887, were brought together in the Indo-Chinese Union.⁴ The key factor was that French troops were never sufficient in numbers to take control of, and then maintain the *Pax Gallica* in French Indo-China, thus requiring the support of local troops. Metropolitan troops were lacking because they were too expensive for Paris and Hanoi,⁵ in contrast to the considerably cheaper, locally raised indigenous troops. Manpower shortages in the metropole that resulted from other imperial pursuits and the demographic trough caused by the Great War furthermore made it necessary to recruit Indo-Chinese troops. Because French Indo-China was a domination and exploitation colony – and not a settler colony such as the United States – the pool of local French men was far too small to create a 'settler-army'. Indo-Chinese

⁴ The Union consisted of one colony (Cochin China) and four protectorates (Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and Laos).

⁵ Military expenses were usually partially borne by Hanoi.

troops, who generally knew the territory and the population much better, could be used in terrain that foreign troops found particularly difficult. They were far more readily available than metropolitan troops, whose dispatch to Indo-China was a time-consuming, costly and ultimately uncertain enterprise. Apart from the risks associated with the closure of sea-lanes, the emergency dispatch of metropolitan troops from Paris could not be guaranteed. In addition, particularly after 1915, French Indo-China was expected to contribute financially to the French defence of Indo-China and even to send Indo-Chinese troops to France.

The Indo-Chinese troops fulfilled a number of different functions. Initially they were required for the conquest of Indo-China and then in its pacification. After the pacification phase was officially concluded in 1897, the two main functions of the French–Indo-Chinese army were the assurance of internal peace and external security.⁶ Both these tasks were fulfilled in conjunction with other armed institutions, such as the *Garde indigène* (later *indochinoise*), the gendarmerie, the police, and the partisans in the border regions.⁷ These organizations were more closely involved in guaranteeing internal security than the army, which tended to be only a means of last resort, not least because the Governor General specifically had to request their use. Thus the *Garde indigène*, a paramilitary force, was mainly responsible for dealing with breaches of the peace and hence played an important role in the suppression of public demonstrations and movements of popular unrest.⁸

In the territories bordering China, the military had a much more active role in securing the border against incursions by smugglers, bandits, and more politically motivated, armed groups; even so, it was complemented by locally recruited partisans. Although the French–Indo-Chinese army had the duty to defend the Indo-Chinese Union against foreign armies, it was very doubtful whether it ever had the means or thinking to fulfil that obligation against a serious enemy with a strong and modern army.⁹

⁶ From 1915 onwards, Indo-Chinese troops were used in Europe and in the Mediterranean to support France's military needs. Cf *Histoire militaire de l'Indochine française. Des débuts à nos jours*, établie par des officiers de l'Etat-Major du Général de Division Aubert, Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, Hanoi-Haiphong, 1930, 2e édition, revue et complétée; Mireille Le Van Ho (née Favre) (1986), 'Un milieu porteur de modernisation: travailleurs et tirailleurs vietnamiens en France pendant la première guerre mondiale', Thèse d'école des Chartes, Paris.

⁷ There is insufficient space here to examine the other civil institutions, such as the Sûreté, which ensured French rule at a different level.

⁸ Such as the 1908 tax revolt, or the 1930–31 movements of unrest that affected the Vietnamese parts of French Indo-China, briefly touching Tonkin, but which hit Cochin China and rocked Annam.

Instead, the defence of Indo-China relied on a favourable international situation in which the great powers ensured the colonial status quo.¹⁰

The participation of indigenous soldiers in the French–Indo-Chinese armed forces could be used – at a political–symbolic level – as proof that the Union’s five territories were rightfully under French tutelage, as evidenced by the population’s contribution of troops to a common army under French command. This was the ‘blood toll’ they had to pay for the *Pax Gallica*. In their paradoxical position as colonizers and colonial subjects, Indo-Chinese colonial troops could also serve as buffers between the French and the unarmed local population. Finally, by their sheer presence they demonstrated French control and power to the ordinary population, and posed a considerable obstacle to those who were intent on overthrowing French domination by violent means.¹¹

The basic dilemma, then, was that the French needed Indo-Chinese soldiers to maintain the Indo-Chinese Union’s internal and external peace, but could not rely too heavily on them because of a deeply rooted distrust of them. French concerns about loyalty resulted from a fear that Indo-China’s colonized soldiers would turn their weapons against them, or abandon them in an emergency situation. These fears were deeply institutionalized in the army in the form of ‘safe’ ratios of ‘white’ and ‘yellow’ soldiers,¹² the division of the army into its various Indo-Chinese constituencies, and the establishment of racialized access to command hierarchies that excluded Indo-Chinese from rising to officer rank until 1929. The Yên Bay mutiny triggered the old fears about the loyalty of Indo-Chinese soldiers, as well as many time-honoured French counter-reflexes.

The French response to the challenge of Yên Bay

The mutiny at Yên Bay had serious consequences within the colonial military in Indo-China.¹³ Trust in the loyalty of Vietnamese soldiers –

⁹ Pierre-Edouard Côte (1997), ‘La défense de l’Indochine Française entre 1901 et 1941’, *Mémoire de maîtrise d’histoire*, Aix-en-Provence.

¹⁰ Nicholas Tarling (1998) puts forward this argument with regard to all of colonial South East Asia, in *Nations and States in Southeast Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

¹¹ That is, of course, in conjunction with French–European troops.

¹² Varying over time, depending on such factors as the perceived external threat, one European soldier for between two and three Indo-Chinese soldiers.

¹³ Chapter five of my thesis (Rettig, *supra* note 2) examines whether the decisions taken were influenced by the peasant unrest of 1930–31. There is no evidence in the sources of a link between the mutiny and the peasant uprisings. More importantly, the decisions were taken before the uprisings had begun or before their scope was understood.

never high anyway – and in the institutions and mechanisms purportedly safeguarding the French presence, was seriously damaged. Nevertheless, because of the army's important role in guaranteeing France's control over Indo-China, it mattered enormously that the reliability of this instrument of imperial power should be reconfirmed. In the aftermath of Yên Bay, therefore, civilian and military policy makers – in both Indo-China and France – had to focus on resolving the question of the loyalty of Indo-China's indigenous troops. They offered a wide range of suggestions with regard to the future service of Indo-Chinese soldiers in the colonial army, while at the same time they tried to push forward the interests of their own institutions.

Punishment and purification: civilian judicial repression

One of the first measures taken in the aftermath of Yên Bay was the '[p]urification of units and the sending of those contaminated into detention or into isolated disciplinary units'.¹⁴ This involved an internal army purge organized by the military authorities, and the prosecution of civilian and military participants in the mutiny and in the VNQDD uprising in general by the civilian authorities.

'The judicial repression was undertaken by the Criminal Commission of Tonkin, instituted by Governor General Pasquier on 12 February, and presided over by Jules Bride. It gathered five times in four different places during 1930.'¹⁵ It prosecuted 547 individuals – both soldiers and civilians – and pronounced 80 death penalties (not all of which were carried out), 102 life terms of forced labour, 243 deportations, 37 terms of forced labour for 20 years, six shorter terms of forced labour, two life-term detentions, and one term of detention to 20 years. There were 18 acquittals, and 58 individuals could not be prosecuted due to lack of evidence.¹⁶ In addition to the Criminal Commission, provincial tribunals were also involved in the repression.¹⁷

¹⁴ Anon, 'La situation au cours de l'année 1930', not dated, not signed, 14 pages, microfilm of a document in the Centre Militaire d'Information et Documentation d'Outre-Mer (CMIDOM) at Versailles, contained in SHAT 15H 103, Dossier 2, Part II, p 10. It is very likely to be a report drafted by General Commandant Superior Aubert's successor, General Billotte, at the end of 1930. Cf Eckert, *supra* note 2, at p 667.

¹⁵ Patrice Morlat (1990), *La répression coloniale au Vietnam (1908–1940)*, Harmattan, Paris, p 123. The Criminal Commission was an extraordinary judicial institution that was generally instituted only as a means of last resort.

¹⁶ Cf the table in Morlat, *supra* note 15, at p 122. One further Criminal Commission gathered in Kiên An in January 1931, where 189 convictions were secured for events that had taken place in Haiphong in 1930.

¹⁷ Morlat, *supra* note 15, at p 123.

The largest number of death penalties was pronounced by the first Criminal Commission, which had gathered at Yên Bay to judge those involved in the mutiny and in the nearby insurrectionary attempts. Among the 87 people condemned at Yên Bay, 46 were servicemen. Some of them argued that they had been 'surprised and forced to take part in the insurrection'.¹⁸ Of the 87 convicted, 39 were condemned to death, five to deportation, 33 to life terms of forced labour, nine to 20 years, and one to five years of forced labour. Among those condemned to death, 24 were civilians and 15 were servicemen.

In France, the severity of the punishments led to a campaign by the French Communist Party and to various protests that resulted in the arrest and repatriation of those Vietnamese involved.¹⁹ Because of the high number of death penalties pronounced, the Minister of Colonies, Piétri, intervened with Governor General Pasquier, with the consequence that no execution could be carried out unless the case had been examined by a pardoning commission.²⁰ The presidential pardon reduced the number of death penalties pronounced at Yên Bay from 39 to 13, refusing pardon only to those who had killed a French officer, warrant officer, or an indigenous soldier. The civilians profited proportionately more from this, as the soldiers had carried out most of the killings at Yên Bay. Among the 13 who were guillotined on 17 June 1930 were also the top VNQDD leaders, Nguyen Thai Hoc and Pho Duc Chinh.²¹

In contrast to these punishments, the measures taken against the French officers whose negligent behaviour had contributed to the mutiny at Yên Bay were rather lax. Resident Superior Robin released Resident Massimi from his duties immediately after the mutiny. No action was taken against Commandant Le Tacon, the main person responsible for the security shortcomings at Yên Bay. Neither Robin nor General Aubert, who were ultimately responsible for the shortcomings of their subordinates, were punished. The former remained in Indo-China as governor general until his retirement in 1936. Aubert returned to France when his three-year term in Indo-China came to an end in the autumn of 1930.

Punishment and purification: the army's internal repression

Running parallel with the prosecutions of the Criminal Commissions, General Commandant Superior Aubert, who had been so lenient towards

¹⁸ Paillat, *supra* note 2, at p 499.

¹⁹ Paillat, *supra* note 2, at pp 499f.

²⁰ Morlat, *supra* note 15, at p 123.

²¹ Eckert, *supra* note 2, at pp 660f.

Le Tacon, organized an internal army purge.²² It aimed at reasserting control over the indigenous armed forces in Tonkin by identifying, punishing, isolating, and perhaps re-educating disloyal soldiers, and thus setting an example to the others. According to Morlat, ‘545 tirailleurs and warrant officers were the object of sanctions: 164 were transferred into disciplinary companies in Tonkin, 94 to Africa . . . , 57 were handed over to the civilian jurisdiction, and 160 were reduced to the ranks and put on leave without pay.’²³ These measures showed the extent to which the army had been infiltrated, and clearly demonstrated that the prime responsibility for the mutiny was seen to reside on the Vietnamese rather than the French side.

In comparison with the first wave of repression of the VNQDD in 1929, when 121 soldiers suspected of being members of the VNQDD were punished and 40 were investigated by the Sûreté, the measures taken this time were far more severe and extensive. More than 500 out of Tonkin’s 12,000 indigenous soldiers – that is 4.5%, or one in every 22 soldiers – were punished as a result of the army’s internal repression, thus revealing the extent to which Vietnamese soldiers in Tonkin were seen to be involved in activities contrary to their military duty.

Moving soldiers around

In addition to the above punishments, further punitive internal measures were taken in order to make the army safe again. According to Rives, who does not give the source of his data or any rationale for this measure, ‘[t]he transfer of 10,000 Tonkinois [was] pronounced’.²⁴ If this information is accurate, then more than 80% of Tonkin’s roughly 12,000 *Tirailleurs Tonkinois* were transferred, a movement of enormous proportions, and indicating the extent to which Indo-China’s

²² Parallel with this, the civilian administration was also purged. Cf Morlat, *supra* note 15, at p 124.

²³ Morlat, *supra* note 15, at pp 124f. The 57 soldiers handed over to the civil jurisdiction seem to have been mainly those implicated in the mutiny at Yên Bay. Morlat’s figures for soldiers sent to disciplinary companies are confirmed (though differences remain) by two other sources. Cf ‘Chronique coloniale. Le problème indochinois. Août–Septembre 1930’, Société d’études et d’informations économiques, p 2, contained in CMIDOM microfilm, SHAT 15H 103; and Paillat, *supra* note 2, at p 499.

²⁴ Eric Deroo and Maurice Rives (1999), *Les Linh Tâp. Histoire des militaires indochinois au service de la France (1859–1960)*, Lavauzelle, Paris, p 74. This book does not provide a source, but (retired) Colonel Rives confirmed this figure in a letter dated 27 September 2001, referring to a 21 November 1930 report by General Billotte, General Commander Superior in French Indo-China.

military command felt unsafe about discipline among its Indo-Chinese troops, and the extent to which it was determined to make future Yê Bays impossible.

One likely rationale for this measure, however, could have been a wish to break up yet undiscovered cells and to sever personal ties, both in units and between soldiers and local civilians. Furthermore, the transfer of soldiers could have envisaged – and certainly had the effect – of creating a state of constant mobilization in which it was impossible to find either the time or opportunity for anti-colonial organization. It would also force French officers and warrant officers to be more vigilant, as '[t]roops which do not work sufficiently and which are not looked after properly, lose their spirit of discipline; or rather, unoccupied troops cannot be disciplined.'²⁵

Reduction of Indo-Chinese soldiers serving in the metropolitan services

In addition, 2,000 Indo-Chinese soldiers returning from the metropole were sent on leave and apparently not replaced.²⁶ The reason appears to have been that military discipline in the metropolitan services – non-combat military units – was much weaker than in Indo-China and in the metropole's colonial garrisons, where the colonial military and social order could be more easily reproduced. The metropolitan services' lack of officers specialized in commanding colonial troops was said to be one of the root causes of unruliness, as they did not know – in contrast to their colonial colleagues – how to command Vietnamese soldiers. Seen from a different perspective, however, this could have meant that metropolitan officers treated their Vietnamese subordinates on a more equal basis. If so, this would have subverted the hierarchies in Indo-China's colonial army, which was based on the inequality of colonizers and colonized.²⁷

Removed from the discipline and the colonial environment they were used to, these soldiers would become so alienated that they were easy

²⁵ Bôn Mat, *La nuit rouge de Yê-Bay*, no date, no publisher, but very likely in 1930. In this book, Bôn Mat, the pseudonym of a French officer who had first served in Indo-China before 1910, vents his anger over the failures of the military authorities, which had led, in his opinion, to the mutiny.

²⁶ Deroo and Rives, *supra* note 24, at p 74; Anon, *supra* note 14, at p 10.

²⁷ The right of Indo-Chinese warrant officers to command and their right to be saluted were the most obvious differences between metropolitan services and service in Indo-China. In Indo-China, only French soldiers had a right to command and to be saluted. Cf Eckert, *supra* note 2, at p 618.

targets for communist propaganda. After their return to Indo-China, they would try to proselytize other soldiers with their communist ideas. This train of thought also, justly or unjustly, perpetuated the perception that subversive ideas came from the outside rather than the inside: of the 57 soldiers involved in the mutiny, 17 of them had served abroad. According to the Thiry Report, however, the proportion of soldiers with overseas experience at Yên Bay was no higher than in other garrisons, so was not abnormal.²⁸

Whether military duty in the metropolitan services was productive or not, the academic literature on these ‘sojourning’ soldiers notes that the time spent in France was a deeply transformative socializing and individualizing experience.²⁹ Both inside the barracks and outside, Vietnamese soldiers were often treated more equally than in the colony. They came into contact with ideas not expressed openly in Indo-China. They could relate to Frenchmen, have relations with French women, and with other colonized peoples. Moreover, they could see that all was not well in France. In brief, as a result of their service abroad, it was likely that at least some of the returning soldiers would try to rationalize the differences between their experience in France and their experience in French Indo-China: and this could lead, together with the differences in colonial and metropolitan discipline, to a more critical stance towards their superiors, to a lack of discipline, and perhaps to a more critical attitude towards the colonial order.

Easier dismissal of soldiers

Related to the above attempt to identify, isolate, re-educate or eliminate ‘contaminated’ soldiers were efforts to change the dismissal regulations. The military authorities regarded these as being too much

²⁸ Brigade General Thiry’s Report to the Colonial Consultative Defence Council (CCDC) and to the Minister of Colonies for the Council’s 21 May session, not dated, but written between 30 April and 21 May 1930, CAOM, NF (Nouveau Fonds), dossier 2936, p 5; advice of Consultative Colonial Defence Committee, 21 May 1930, CAOM, Direction des Affaires Militaires (DAM), Carton 202–203, pp 10f.

²⁹ Le Huu Khoa (1985), *Les Vietnamiens en France: insertion et identité*, Harmattan, Paris. Mireille Le Van Ho (née Favre), *supra* note 6. Tran-Nu Liem Khe (1988), ‘Les travailleurs indochinois en France de 1939 à 1948’, mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Nanterre. Tran-Nu Liem Khe (1989), ‘Les travailleurs indochinois en France de 1939 à 1948’, *Bulletin du Centre d’histoire de la France contemporaine*, Vol 10, pp 5–21; Marie-Eve Blanc (1994), ‘La pratique associative vietnamienne: tradition et modernité’, PhD dissertation, University of Aix-en-Provence. Henri Eckert, *supra* note 2, at pp 660f. Kimloan Thi Vu Hill (2001), ‘A westward journey, an enlightened path: Vietnamese Linh Tho, 1915–1930’, DPhil dissertation, University of Oregon.

in favour of the soldiers. This had given rise to the complaint that while the chief French provincial administrator could dismiss a suspicious native *Garde indigène* without notice,³⁰ this was practically impossible in the army for legal reasons: this explained the supposedly lower incidence of mutiny in the *Garde*.

The military authorities managed to get the regulations changed. A decree of 8 April 1930 allowed the General Commandant Superior 'to discharge those soldiers who had been the object of convictions in excess of three months imprisonment by a military tribunal, or who would have rendered themselves guilty of activities contrary to military duty'.³¹ While the grounds for dismissal remained fairly stringent – and only the highest officer in Indo-China was authorized to take these measures, and only under certain conditions – the last clause above could be interpreted rather freely. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of this new regulation for want of sources indicating how often it was applied, but its thrust is very clear.

Improving the military intelligence service (SRM)

The punishment of soldiers, changes in dismissal regulations, and the reduction in the number of Vietnamese servicemen in France did not seem sufficient to the military authorities. In order to prevent future Yên Bays, they realized that it would be necessary to improve the military intelligence service. This was to be achieved by reinforcing military intelligence through closer contacts with the Sûreté,³² and by internal improvements.

With respect to the first, investigations into the mutiny at Yên Bay clearly demonstrated that cooperation between Resident Massimi and Commandant Le Tacon had been nonexistent, despite repeated requests, and that this was in part responsible for the failure to prevent the mutiny. Although relations between the military and civilian authorities in Tonkin were traditionally fraught with rivalry, Yên Bay uniquely appears to have suffered from a complete breakdown in military–civilian cooperation. Further planned VNQDD mutinies in other garrisons, such as Kiên An, were uncovered and prevented at the last minute.³³ Nevertheless, even though intelligence shortcomings had been particularly severe

³⁰ Anon, *supra* note 14, at p 8.

³¹ Anon, *supra* note 14, at p 10.

³² Anon, *supra* note 14.

³³ Report of Resident Superior Robin [to Governor General Pasquier] on the events of Yen Bay, 9 March 1930, CAOM, NF, Dossier 2936, p 34.

at Yên Bay, the military authorities in Indo-China realized – under pressure from the civil authorities who claimed that the military had not been sufficiently cooperative in the past – that they had to improve cooperation with the Sûreté in order to prevent future Yên Bays. For these reasons, writes Patrice Morlat, the mutiny at Yên Bay allowed the Sûreté to ‘penetrate indirectly into the military sector which had till then been inaccessible’.³⁴

It is important to bear in mind, however, that this indirect penetration arising from the Yên Bay mutiny seems to have involved the completion of a process which had begun at least half a year earlier. Several sources indicate that this process was triggered off by the colonial state’s crackdown on the VNQDD and other anti-colonial organizations in early 1929. This had brought to light the VNQDD’s systematic infiltration of the army, and had necessitated a military crackdown on soldiers with links to anti-colonial organizations. By October 1929, after heavy civilian criticism of the military’s information policy in July, the military authorities had finally realized the need to gather information systematically to counter the threat from new forms of anti-colonial organization.³⁵ As such information could be provided only by the Sûreté, the implication was that the military authorities now had to collaborate more closely with the colonial political police. Indeed, three weeks before Yên Bay, Governor General Pasquier had congratulated General Commandant Superior Aubert on the ‘most favourable results’ of ‘close [military–civilian] collaboration’.³⁶

The Yên Bay mutiny and the discovery that the VNQDD had undermined many other units reaffirmed the need for closer military–civilian relations and brought to completion the process of improved relations. According to Morlat, the Sûreté’s indirect penetration of the military sector involved linking the military intelligence service (SRM) to the Sûreté and the information provided by it, thus making itself dependent on the political information and even political judgement and agenda of the civilian authorities.³⁷ The central SRM then passed this information to its local branches in the form of its SRM Bulletin. There, ‘ALL

³⁴ Morlat, *supra* note 15, at p 127.

³⁵ Robin, quoting from his ‘July 1929 Report to Governor General Pasquier’, in his 9 March 1930 report to Pasquier, p 44; SRM [Service de Renseignement Militaire] notice 1582, 17 October 1929, cited in General Aubert’s SRM Note de Service 660, Hanoi, 11 March 1930, CAOM, NF, Dossier 2936, p 9.

³⁶ Governor General Pasquier to General Commandant Superior, Number 383, 18 January 1930, CAOM, NF, Dossier 2936.

³⁷ Morlat, *supra* note 15, at p 127.

OFFICERS (and not just those of the SRM)' [capitals and brackets in original] were to be involved in the study of these revolutionary parties.³⁸

As a result of the mutiny, then, the SRM became more closely linked to the Sûreté and its methods of analysing Vietnamese anti-colonial organizations. The number of recipients of such information was substantially increased due to the decision to involve all officers in the study of revolutionary parties. The focus hence seems to have shifted away from observing only activities within the army to taking into account developments among Vietnamese anti-colonial organizations at large. This did not mean that the military intelligence service completely fell under the sway of the Sûreté, as rivalries between military and civilian institutions continued to exist, but that it was much more affected by this institutionalized cooperation and the Sûreté's way of analysing Vietnamese anti-colonial politics: it also benefited from the better flow of information between the two intelligence agencies.

Whether the institutionalized sharing of intelligence with the Sûreté and enhanced awareness of the activities of anti-colonial organizations more broadly could be used effectively, depended, to a large extent, on the internal functioning of the military intelligence service. The mutiny had shown up failures in both the local and central SRM, the result of both personal and institutional flaws. Commandant Le Tacon, who had been responsible for organizing the local SRM, had been unable to understand the gravity of the situation despite several warnings. The central SRM might have prevented the mutiny if its officer responsible for Yên Bay, Slouchez, had informed his local contact, Tran Uc Sinh, about his absence on leave, or if he had taken the measures necessary to provide cover during his absence. These failures were particular to Yên Bay, whereas planned VNQDD mutinies in many other garrisons, such as Kiên An, Phulangthuong, Namdinh and Sept-Pagodes, were prevented at the last moment. Thus the intelligence failure at Yên Bay does not seem to reflect weaknesses in the overall organizational structures of the SRM, or failures in the decentralization measures, which had begun in early 1929 but which had not yet been completed.³⁹

Although Yên Bay had been shown to be the exception, this did not mean that the SRM in general ran smoothly or that it could not be improved. One month after the mutiny, General Commandant Superior Aubert circulated SRM Notice 660, on 11 March 1930, to describe

³⁸ General Aubert's 11 March 1930 SRM Service Note, p 8.

³⁹ Aubert to Minister of Colonies, 25 February 1930, CAOM, NF, Dossier 2936.

(and prescribe) the morale and techniques necessary for a good intelligence service.⁴⁰ It highlighted the importance of learning about the goals and organizational means of anti-colonial parties and then advised on the means by which the revolutionary threat could be countered. The note also deemed it necessary to remind its recipients about two previous intelligence communications – of 25 February and 17 October 1929 – thus indicating that they had not been adopted wholeheartedly. One of the reasons for this seems to have been the complacent attitude of many officers, in assuming that they could ‘preserve [their] units from revolutionary propaganda’ and, probably related to this, the low morale of many European warrant officers who regarded ‘their [intelligence] role as ending when their working hours are over’.⁴¹

Apart from spelling out what officers should be paying attention to, Aubert’s notice also indicated how important intelligence information could be obtained. This depended to a large extent on close collaboration with indigenous warrant officers who had a crucial intelligence role in their position as mediators between their French superiors and the Indo-Chinese troops. The flow of information between French officers and Indo-Chinese warrant officers, however, was not smooth. Apparently, the former were often not sufficiently tactful and discreet; more importantly, many were not – perhaps due to a lack of language skills or interest – ‘in real contact with the indigenous warrant officers’.⁴² The latter, on the other hand, do not seem to have been very forthcoming with regard to the provision of information, and thus did not assume (co-)responsibility ‘for the maintenance of the troops’ good spirit’.⁴³ Moreover, and perhaps more crucially, despite the good appearance and behaviour of indigenous warrant officers and tirailleurs, they were often treacherous. This posed a serious problem in intelligence gathering, necessitating the cross-checking of information, on top of threatening severe sanctions should information not be provided.

Improved Vietnamese and French language skills

Aubert’s notice had pointed out the importance of close contact between officers and their Indo-Chinese warrant officers in order to improve French intelligence, but left it open as to whether this also required French officers to improve their Vietnamese language skills. The 1930

⁴⁰ General Aubert’s 11 March 1930 SRM Service Note, p 8.

⁴¹ Aubert, *supra* note 40, at pp 8 and 19f.

⁴² Anon, *supra* note 14, at pp 9f.

⁴³ Anon, *supra* note 14.

annual report states that this was considered a problem because '[i]t would be . . . desirable that the biggest possible number of officers and warrant officers had a sufficient Annamite language knowledge in order to permit them to do without an interpreter when dealing with the Tirailleurs.'⁴⁴ The report presents the establishment of a 'centre of Annamite studies' in Toulouse as a step in the right direction and places high expectations on the fact that the 'number of tirailleurs speaking French is increasing constantly'.⁴⁵ Such measures would ideally have led to more direct communication between French officers and NCOs and their Indo-Chinese subordinates. However, it was not an improvement in horizontal communication that the report principally had in mind – it never even mentions this – but rather language skills as a tool of command, which would have primarily reinforced hierarchical relationships.

The report also discussed the possibility of using specialized Vietnamese language skills as a means of gathering intelligence and to control the minds of Indo-Chinese soldiers, but rejected this. The presence of three language specialists at Yên Bay had not been able to prevent the mutiny; the chronic anti-colonial contamination of the civil administration had occurred in spite of its many specialists. Furthermore, the experience of the missionaries – the specialists par excellence – indicated that language specialization was increasingly ineffective as a means of countering the trend towards better and more secretive anti-colonial organizations. The report thus came to the conclusion that deeper specialization would fail to improve intelligence and that a modicum of specialization – to improve command skills – was all that one could aim for.

In fact, the report argued that too much specialization would be detrimental to the army, in that it would be counterproductive. It vehemently opposed extensive specialization because it required extended stays in Indo-China, which were detrimental to the specialist's health. Perhaps more importantly, specialists were thought to become too trustworthy of their indigenous subordinates, to the extent of becoming indigenophiles. This apparently ran counter to the needs and functions of a colonial army in which hierarchies and distance – even linguistic distance – from subordinates had to be maintained. Finally, specialization was said to be counterproductive because it would not only make Vietnamese soldiers more secretive, but would very likely improve their

⁴⁴ Anon, *supra* note 14, at pp 10f.

⁴⁵ Anon, *supra* note 14.

organizational methods, since they would need to ‘take even more precautions’.⁴⁶

Achieving a ‘safer’ proportion of troops

Although the changes considered above – punishment, new regulations, SRM institutional reform, fewer Vietnamese in the metropolitan services, just a bit more specialization – were considerable, civilian and military authorities in both Indo-China and France did not deem them sufficient for them to reassert control over their Indo-Chinese troops. Thus a further four decisions were taken, which aimed at striking the right racial balance among French Indo-China’s troops.⁴⁷ The number of ethnic Vietnamese troops was perceived to be too high and thus threatening as a result of the mutiny: a more secure level had to be found, one that would counterbalance the too numerous Vietnamese troops. This safer mixture aimed at an overall proportion among Indo-China’s colonial troops of 50% Vietnamese to 50% European and indigenous ethnic minorities. This shows not only the French distrust of Vietnamese troops but, more importantly, the apparent belief that the loyalty of Vietnamese soldiers was best achieved by creating a racial balance within the army that was tilted towards demonstrating to all Vietnamese soldiers – and by extension to the Vietnamese population at large – the futility of attempting mutiny and insurrection.

The first of the four such measures aimed at ensuring the reliability of Vietnamese soldiers which also aimed at achieving the right racial proportion of troops in each garrison. The lack of European troops at Yên Bay – aside from Massimi’s and Le Tacon’s personal failures – had been identified as the cause of the mutiny. It was argued that if the local commander had had more European troops at his disposal, their presence would have discouraged the local troops from participating in the mutiny in the first place.⁴⁸ Although plausible – after all, one of the leaders of the mutiny had encouraged the other mutineers by pointing to the feeble French presence – this argument ignored the fact that bad command and security shortcomings were the two main causes of

⁴⁶ ‘Anon, *supra* note 14, at pp 10f. This mirrors Morlat’s *supra* note 15 argument that the restrictive political and intelligence situation in Indo-China led modern anti-colonial organizations, notably the communists, to become more radical and better organized.

⁴⁷ Four of the seven decisions mentioned in Anon, *supra* note 14.

⁴⁸ Direction des Services Militaires, Cabinet du Directeur, Secret. ‘Incidents de Yên Bay (Tonkin)’, 14 February [‘First Peltier report’], CAOM, NF, Dossier 2936, p 1.

the mutiny. Alternatively, it was argued, loyal European troops could have quickly suppressed a mutiny:⁴⁹ but this ignored the fact that the mutiny at Yên Bay had been suppressed largely by indigenous troops, despite a feeble presence of only 29 European officers and warrant officers, half of whom had been eliminated or incapacitated right at the beginning of the mutiny.

The decision to 'return to the old system of white safety garrisons next to important detachments of tirailleurs' was taken after an intense debate between Indo-China's civilian and military authorities.⁵⁰ It was such a hotly disputed issue, partly because it reversed a major reorganization of the army that had been launched by General Aubert in 1928.⁵¹ The fact that it was reversed clearly demonstrated a serious concern about the impact of revolutionary propaganda on the loyalty of indigenous troops, and the consequent uncertainty about the safety of this instrument of colonial rule. It was a measure aimed at demonstrating French strength and superiority over indigenous soldiers and violent revolutionaries, and made clear that physical power formed the heart of French colonial rule in Indo-China.

If the racial proportion of troops was considered to be a crucial safety issue at the local level – where the 'right' ratio was intended to check the disloyal instincts of Vietnamese soldiers or, in the worst case, to squash them rapidly – then it would certainly be even more so at the overall level. Various options were open: to reduce radically the number of Vietnamese troops, to reduce them more moderately, or to leave troop levels unaltered.

The most radical suggestion was made by Resident Superior Robin who wanted to 'completely and radically abolish all regiments of *Tirailleurs tonkinois* in the service in the delta and the middle regions' and replace them with 'white [Foreign] Legion or even North African Battalions'.⁵² This proposal was countered by General Aubert who 'initially proposed the abolition of four tirailleurs companies to compensate for the dispatch of a [Foreign] Legion Battalion, and the replacement

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Anon, *supra* note 14. It is not reported by whom, when, or why the decision was taken.

⁵¹ The nature of Aubert's plan and the effects of its implementation are not well documented in the following reports – in the sense that references are limited and often contradictory. For the military position: First Peltier report, 14 February 1930; Second Peltier report for the Minister of Colonies, Paris, 22 March 1930, CAOM, NF, Dossier 2936. For the civilian position: Robin's 9 March report to Pasquier, p 45.

⁵² These two quotations are taken, respectively, from Robin's 9 March 1930 report to Pasquier, p 58, and Thiry, *supra* note 28, at p 4.

of three Annamite [Vietnamese] companies by three Montagnard ones'.⁵³ Governor General Pasquier finally arrived at a compromise proposal with General Aubert, which was then submitted to the Minister of Colonies. It suggested the '[abolition] of one Regiment of Tirailleurs Tonkinois [13 companies, one company HR, and four machinegun sections]'.⁵⁴

Two major arguments, however, clearly spoke against any reduction in Indo-Chinese troops. Thus the Cabinet of the Director of the Military Services Direction had argued that a reduction in the number of Vietnamese troops would lead to bitterness among dismissed soldiers and turn them into 'declared enemies of France'; more important, however, was that it would weaken the defence of French Indo-China.⁵⁵ The latter argument was repeated forcefully in the Colonial Consultative Defence Council's advice to the Minister of Colonies, arguing that the reduction in the number of Indo-Chinese troops in Indo-China could not 'be envisaged under any pretext' due to the 'necessities of external defence'.⁵⁶

In spite of these counter-arguments, however, the decision to abolish two Annamite battalions – rather than an entire regiment – was taken.⁵⁷ It is interesting that French policy makers were thus willing to risk both discontent among dismissed Vietnamese troops and weakness against external threats: their distrust of Vietnamese soldiers was just too great. This decision seems to have been made easier by the calculation that Vietnamese soldiers – in particular if they could not be entirely trusted – were not that important for the internal control and external defence of French Indo-China, as they could be replaced. Policy makers calculated that the reduction in Vietnamese troops could be made up by a concomitant increase in the number of European and ethnic minority troops.

The third decision aimed at achieving a safer racial ratio in the army was the '[r]einforcement of the occupation corps' troops by three white battalions: one Foreign Legion battalion, [and] two Colonial Infantry battalions'.⁵⁸ This decision was causally related to the first two decisions

⁵³ Summarized in Thiry's report, *supra* note 28, at p 3.

⁵⁴ Thiry, *supra* note 28, at pp 3, 6.

⁵⁵ First Peltier report, *supra* note 51, at p 4.

⁵⁶ Thiry, *supra* note 28, at pp 1f.

⁵⁷ Anon, *supra* note 14. The date of this decision, as well as who made it, does not emerge from the documents.

⁵⁸ Anon, *supra* note 14, at p 10. As with the decision to abolish the two 'Annamite' battalions, the decision-making process could not be entirely reconstructed, as further information on the dispatch of the two colonial infantry battalions could not be found.

and complemented them. If European troops were to be placed next to Vietnamese ones, then very likely – despite the reduction in indigenous troops by two battalions – more European troops would be needed. Moreover, as the Colonial Consultative Defence Council had advised the Minister of Colonies that the overall level of troops in Indo-China could not be reduced for external defence reasons, it was necessary to replace at least the two disbanded Vietnamese battalions.⁵⁹

Although the Department of War had clearly indicated before the mutiny that it would not be able ‘to provide for one more European Battalion in Indo-China in the 1931 Budget’ for reasons of financial constraint, manpower shortages and organizational problems,⁶⁰ the Yên Bái mutiny quickly produced the political willingness to send more European troops to French Indo-China. As early as mid-March 1930, the Colonial Consultative Defence Committee advised the Minister of Colonies ‘that the troops actually stationed in Tonkin would be advantageously increased, *from right now*, by a European Colonial Infantry Battalion’.⁶¹ Ultimately, however, the post-mutiny situation in Indo-China was deemed so dangerous that a political decision to send two, rather than one, European battalion was taken. It was complemented by ‘the urgent dispatch of a Foreign Legion Battalion to Tonkin’, an action decided by the French government on 30 April 1930.⁶²

However, far from deeming it sufficient to decrease the number of Vietnamese troops by two battalions while at the same time increasing the occupation corps by three battalions, the French authorities also considered it necessary to increase the number – and thus the proportion – of ethnic minorities among the Indo-Chinese troops. Thus, in order to achieve a less threatening proportion of Vietnamese troops among the overall number of soldiers present in Indo-China, the ‘[i]ntensification of recruitment of non-Annamite indigenous people: Thos, Laotians, Mois, Cambodians’ was decided. The aim was ‘to attain, if possible, a proportion of fifty per cent for the non-Annamite element (including the whites)’ in France’s colonial troops in Indo-

⁵⁹ I am not entirely sure about the causal link, if any, between these decisions. Were the Vietnamese battalions disbanded before the dispatch of the Foreign Legion was decided, on 30 April 1930? Or were the battalions disbanded only after it was known that the Foreign Legion was to be dispatched to Indo-China?

⁶⁰ First Peltier report, *supra* note 51, at p 3.

⁶¹ Consultative Colonial Defence Committee, 18 March 1930, CAOM, DAM, Carton 202–203, p 22.

⁶² Thirty, *supra* note 28, at p 5; Consultative Colonial Defence Committee, *supra* note 28, at p 1.

China; this was an indirect way of proportionately decreasing the number of Vietnamese troops.⁶³ The rationale for this new racial policy was clear, as the ‘Montagnards of Indo-China, hostile by nature to the Annamites’ would be ‘opposed in principle to the Annamites’, and were ‘better adapted to the defence against inner perils’.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The Yên Bay mutiny and the VNQDD mutiny attempts in other garrisons led to an unprecedented package of measures that directly affected the lives of French and Indo-Chinese soldiers: they also produced changes in the legal, institutional and structural arrangements of the French military presence in Indo-China. More than 500 out of Tonkin’s 12,000 soldiers were punished, and about 10,000 were transferred to new garrisons. The law regulating the dismissal of criminal or politically active soldiers was changed in the military authority’s favour. Improvements in the operation of the military intelligence service were brought to a conclusion, reaching from internal changes to better cooperation with the civilian Sûreté. Duty in the metropolitan services – perceived as producing at best undisciplined soldiers and at worst anti-colonial revolutionaries – was sharply reduced. Finally, a half-hearted attempt was made to improve the local language skills of colonial officers in order to improve their command methods.

The loyalty of Vietnamese soldiers was considered so unreliable as to require a rebalancing of the racial make-up of Indo-China’s armed forces, which involved reducing the number of Vietnamese soldiers. An ideal racial make-up of 50% Vietnamese and 50% non-Vietnamese was identified as a guard against future mutinies and insurrection attempts, as it would keep Vietnamese soldiers and the Vietnamese population at large in check. Loyalty ultimately came down to demonstrating French superiority and numerical force. This racialized policy of divide and rule – between colonial master and Indo-Chinese subjects, and among the various colonialized and ‘racialized’ groups in the army – led to a reduction of Vietnamese troops in Tonkin by two

⁶³ Anon, *supra* note 14, at p 10.

⁶⁴ First Peltier report, *supra* note 51, at p 4. The French use of indigenous minority groups dates back to the beginning of the conquest. Later, in the 1890s, Pennequin and Galliéni used a policy of ‘divide and rule’, backed up by ethnographic knowledge, to subjugate the ethnic minorities in the middle and high regions. See Greg Lockhart (1989), *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People’s Army of Vietnam*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, pp 25, 36.

battalions, while colonial and Foreign Legion contingents were increased by three battalions. At the same time, a policy aimed at increasing the number of ethnic minority troops was also announced.

The extent of these measures was unprecedented. It reflected the response of the colonial army and the colonial state to the new and more secretive forms of Vietnamese anti-colonial organization. The latter had developed since 1925 as part of a new (and novel) wave of Vietnamese [mass-]nationalism that threatened to politicize Vietnamese soldiers and turn them against the French. The broad response of the colonial military and civilians was to seek to pre-empt future surprise strikes by means of improved legal, institutional and structural arrangements.

The French security measures considered above tended to ignore, or take for granted, two important issues. These were the deeper factors underlying Yên Bái – why had anti-colonial organizations tried to subvert the military, or why were some soldiers so susceptible to anti-colonial propaganda that they took an active role in a mutiny? According to Eckert, these issues would have required consideration of the ‘taboo question of national independence’,⁶⁵ and consequently were not faced – apart from one or two vague references to the need to change the colony’s political and social policies. But these were not followed up because the colonial situation was taken as fixed. This closed off the prospect of taking the measures necessary to prevent further unrest, both inside and outside the army.

Policy makers in Paris and Indo-China also failed to take into account the implications of their policies for the defence of the Indo-Chinese Union. The emphasis on having safe ratios – which was closely tied to the limited number of European troops available – made mass mobilization impossible because it would have given too much weight to the Vietnamese. At the same time, the organization of guerrilla forces was also impossible, as the army was not rooted in the population due to its colonial nature and its divide and rule tactics – reaffirmed and reinforced by the measures taken after Yên Bái. A further consequence of the safe ratio policy – in combination with an emphasis on maintaining French hierarchical superiority in the army, which blocked the development of indigenous leadership abilities and discouraged autonomous decision making – was the lack of suitably qualified Indo-Chinese officers. This in turn mitigated against mass mobilization and the formation of guerrilla units that would have required more troops.

⁶⁵ Eckert, *supra* note 2, at p 678.

As a result of the measures taken in the aftermath of the mutiny at Yên Bay, control was temporarily reasserted over Indo-Chinese soldiers, and continued French domination was thus guaranteed. At the same time, the subservience of the French–Indo-Chinese army to the principle of continued French domination made it, and thus colonial rule, extremely vulnerable to a conjunction of external and internal threats between 1939 and 1945.