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Vietnam 1917

One hundred years ago, Vietnam was not the socialist republic, communist country that it is today. Before the war that made Vietnam notorious in western culture, Vietnam underwent a rich history of power struggles, various colonial occupation, and growth. World history in the 1900s is very much western centric - the focus being on the countries involved in World War I; nevertheless, Asian history at this time was pivotal in forming the roles that Asian nations play today. This historical under representation of places like Asia, arises from the power of imperialism at the time. As the Western countries, such as Britain, Germany, and France, controlled the world, the Easter Asians began to grow and aim towards anti-imperialism and independence. In the year 1917, in the midst of World War I, Vietnam and much of Southeast Asia was under French control and known as the French Colony of French Indochina, or *Indochine Francaise*.

Consequently, the French involvement in World War I led to the involvement of the French colonies in the war. Though not as well documented as the major armies in WWI, colonial armies, composed of men from colonies like French Indochina, played a crucial role in the conflict of battle of WWI. The Vietnamese, also known as *Annamites* to the French, served in the war as both members of the French colonial labor army, *L'Armée Français D'Orient*, and as volunteers on the battlefield in combat battalions. In fact, it is estimated that more than

100,000 Vietnamese enlisted and served in WWI and up to 30,000 were killed, tho not officially documented (Starnes).

The Vietnamese involvement in WWI not only contributed to the French war effort and the success of the Allies, but it also planted the seed for anti-imperialistic sentiment among the Asian colonies.



Prior to WWI, the French thought of French Indochina as a purely economically profitable profit, a country ready for their economic exploitation of the plentiful raw materials and cheap labor. However the French justified their imperialism by their principle of *mission civilisatrice* or civilising mission, reminiscent of the English ‘white man’s burden’ (Llewellyn). The French colonial leaders forced the native Vietnamese into hard labor on rice and rubber plantations and imposed on them unreasonably high taxes. The only benefit of the French colonialism on Vietnam was the increased education from the French missionaries; still then, education only reached the cities, with little attempt to educate the peasant farmers, especially in the central highland region. For the most part, the Vietnamese already had a negative opinion on the French colonial rule due to these circumstances.

The Asian and African Colonial involvement in the war was one of the first instances that Europeans encountered other cultures, and vice versa. The recruitment and deployment of colonial troops on the European battlefield was initially heavily questioned, as some European nations, especially Germany, worried of its alleged impact on the future of the colonial system

and the supremacy of the 'white race' (Koller). This role of non-Europeans "as comrades in arms, as enemies at the front, or as prisoners of war"(Koller) produced new exacerbated feelings of "exoticism, racism, and paternalism"(Koller) among Europeans. Furthermore, as Africans and Asians wielded arms next to Europeans, the Europeans "became aware of the precariousness of their global dominance" (Koller). On the other hand, as colonials experienced European culture, their perception of their colonial rulers changed, prompting them to re-evaluate the overseas power, captivity of the imperialistic relationship. This is reminiscent of the well-known experiences of the American Revolutionary War against Great Britain.

In addition, the Indochinese Vietnamese were not just soldiers for the French armies, but they were also workers in France. As WWI hit France, 6 million Frenchmen were drafted, causing a severe labor shortage (Vu-Hill). Colonial people, including the Indochinese, were recruited to fill these roles in the French labor force. About 49,000 Vietnamese workers traveled to and lived in France for the duration of WWI (Vu-Hill). Many Vietnamese were falsely bribed to come work. During their stay abroad, these Vietnamese workers absorbed this new European culture, learning the language and about European government and power; this included "new skills needed for the development of its modern industries ... knowledge about the French labor movement and the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution"(Vu-Hill). The many Vietnamese workers that returned from France became revolutionary leaders for the Vietnamese, teaching them of these new ideas and connecting a revolutionary force; they were in a way an *intelligentsia* force, able to work in higher French speaking careers and to therefore spread the anti-imperialistic sentiment against France. Moreover, the Indochinese workers faced much mistreatment by the French during their stay. They suffered racism and violence; "brawls often broke out between Vietnamese and French workers because the latter were "ignorant" of the former's customs"(Vu-

Hill). The cultural divide and collision was evident. This mistreatment only exacerbated the disdain of the French rule on the Vietnamese homeland.

An example of these Vietnamese workers turned revolutionary is the famous communist leader Ho Chi Minh. In 1911, Ho worked as a seaman on a French liner. Once WWI broke out, Ho moved to London, working various jobs and coming in contact with the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist organization Overseas Workers' Association. In 1917, Ho lived in Paris, France, working as "a cook, a gardener, and a photo retoucher". When he wasn't working, he joined the French Socialist party, gained French sympathy for Vietnam and organized Vietnamese soldiers and factory workers for the cause of anti-imperialism. Later on, Ho Chi Minh would become heavily influenced by Soviet Russia, what he thought as "the champion of the oppressed people", leading him to become the founder and communist leader of the independent nation of Vietnam in 1945. ("Ho Chi Minh")

It can be concluded that the forced involvement of colonials in WWI, a war that was arguably not theirs to fight in, only exacerbated the ideals of anti-imperialism. Moreover, the Vietnamese experience abroad in Europe, especially in France, gave the Vietnamese the resources and motivations to set off the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialism movement.

As a Vietnamese-American, daughter to two Vietnamese immigrants, and an involved volunteer in service to Vietnam's underprivileged, the effects of Vietnam's involvement in the European world is very much evident today. For example, French culture is prevalent in Vietnamese cuisine and language. This time period was part of the reason that I chose to take French in high school.

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