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# The Great Vietnamese Famine of 1944-45 Revisited

Geoffrey C. Gunn

**Abstract:**

This article revisits the great Vietnam famine of 1944-45 in light of flaws in human agency as well as destabilization stemming from war and conflict. Although the great famine was never construed as a war crime by the Allies, the question of blame, alongside agency or lack of it, was an issue between the French and the Viet Minh in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese surrender and entered into propaganda recriminations. Both Japan and France were blamed. As one of the least well known tragedies arising out of the Pacific War, this article adopts a general truth-seeking approach to the disaster, not only as a contribution to war and memory studies, but equally to the literature on famine prevention.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Japan, French colonialism, Pacific War, agriculture, food sufficiency, famine, famine prevention

There is no question that the deaths stemming from the great famine of 1944-45, which reached its zenith in March-April 1945 in Japanese-occupied northern Vietnam, eclipsed in scale all human tragedies of the modern period in that country up until that time. The demographics vary from French estimates of 600,000-700,000 dead, to official Vietnamese numbers of 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 victims.<sup>1</sup> Food security is an age-old problem, and dearth, fa-

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<sup>1</sup> From a range of official and other sources, David Marr concludes that the death toll probably reached one million or ten percent of the population of the affected area perishing in a five month period. See David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, p. 104. Ngo Vinh Long asserts that two million people died in Tonkin alone during the few months at the end of 1944 to the early part of 1945. See Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French*, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 129. Bui Ming Dung, who sampled a range of sources, also estimates between one and two million victims. See Bui Ming Dung, "Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3, July, 1995, pp. 575-76.

mine, and disease have long been a scourge of mankind across the broad Eurasian landmass and beyond. While more recent understandings<sup>2</sup> allow that famines are mostly man-made, it is also true that in ecologically vulnerable zones, alongside natural disasters, war and conflict often tilts the balance between sustainability and human disaster.<sup>3</sup> Allowing the contingency of natural cause as a predisposing factor for mass famine, this article revisits the Vietnam famine of 1944-45 in light of flaws in human agency (alongside willful or even deliberate neglect) as well as destabilization stemming from war and conflict. While I have avoided the issue of impacts of the famine in deference to seeking cause - in any case a subject worthy of much closer attention - the human suffering of the famine has not been effaced by time. It was recorded in Hanoi newspapers of the time. It survives in local memory. It was fictionalized by Vietnamese writers.<sup>4</sup>

Although the great famine was never construed as a war crime by the Allies, the question of blame, alongside agency or lack of it, was an issue between the French and the Viet Minh in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese surrender and entered into propaganda recriminations. Indeed, as written into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) declaration of independence, both Japan and France were jointly blamed for the disaster. South Vietnam (the Republic of Vietnam) also raised the famine issue in postwar reparation negotiations with Japan. While such charged issues as the Nanjing Massacre, the comfort women, forced

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2 Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981. In this seminal text on food security, Sen broadly demonstrates that famine occurs not only or primarily from an insufficiency of food but from inequalities built into mechanisms for distributing food. See also, Sugata Bose, "Starvation amidst Plenty: The Making of Famine in Bengal, Honan, and Tonkin, 1942-44" (*Modern Asian Studies*, 24, no. 4, 1990: 699-727), "a study which puts into bold relief, the role played by the state, fluctuations in wider economic systems, and various social structures in the translation of chronic hunger into dramatic famine and the uneven social distribution of its costs. It also highlights the role of famine in undermining the legitimacy of the state and the pre-existing social structures." (pp. 726-27).

3 My intuitive understandings of this linkage also stem from a spell working with statisticians seeking to calibrate the number of conflict-linked deaths in East Timor versus mortality stemming from famine linked with forced relocation and political manipulation of relief aid.

4 Personal accounts of the famine have been collected as with Van Tao and Furuta Mota (eds), *Nan doi Nam 1945 o Viet Nam: Nhung Chung tich lich su* (Hanoi, 1995). Both Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*; Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination, 1861-1945*, Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph 25, University of California, Berkeley, Ca, 1985; and David Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 104, have offered partial translations or word pictures of the scope of the famine. According to Marr, the worst affected provinces were Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, Ninh Binh, Hai Duong, and Khien An, with particular districts even more affected. Neither was Hanoi spared the famine, though obviously certain classes were differentially affected. Notwithstanding these accounts and studies, it appears to me that the actual impact of the famine and its geographical impact is the least well researched aspect.

labor and unit 731 have long been the subject of intense debate in the historical memory wars, in textbook controversies and museum exhibits, the Vietnamese famine, and Japan's role in creating it appears to have disappeared from Japanese war memory and commemoration whether in textbooks or museum representations.

But, it may be asked, why is it important now to apportion blame? I would argue that the great Vietnam famine of 1944-45 is at least one of the underwritten tragedies stemming from the Pacific War. Outside of Vietnam, very few dedicated articles or studies have sought to contextualize this event from either the side of Vietnamese history, or the side of Japanese and/or French and American responsibility. No doubt a court of law would seek to distinguish between deliberate policy, benign neglect, and/or the unanticipated consequences of social action. But, rather than pinning blame as with a court of law or a war crimes trial, what I seek here is closer to a truth commission-style investigation that precisely seeks to uncover a number of thinly veiled truths that could possibly stimulate even further research, not only on war and memory issues related to the famine, but also in the field of famine prevention.

## **Background to the Famine**

The background to the great famine in northern Vietnam is the increasing scale and character of Japanese military intervention in Indochina from 1940 down to surrender in September-October 1945. While the Vichy French regime in Indochina and Japan existed in a tense albeit unequal cohabitation, matters changed absolutely on 9 March 1945, when Japan mounted a *coup de force*, militarily attacked and interned all French military personnel who did not escape to the mountains, and sequestered all French civilians. Japanese military figures took over full administrative responsibility alongside local puppet regimes as with the Tran Trong Kim cabinet in Annam, under a pliant Emperor Bao Dai. Economically, Japan had used Indochina under the Vichy administration as a source of industrial procurement, from coal to rubber, to a range of industrial crops and, especially rice from the surplus-producing Mekong delta region. Though notionally under French administration, Japanese military requisitions profoundly distorted the colonial political economy, shattered the import-export system, and eroded many bonds across communities and classes, sowing the seeds of disasters to come. Even with French administrative services continuing, including dike repair, the monitoring of agricultural activities, and the collection of taxes, the majority of the rural population - increasingly bereft of cash as market mechanisms collapsed - were obliged to cope in a situation of virtual economic autarky, just as Indochina at

large came to be subordinated within Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of the war, however, US bombing raids mounted from India and Yunnan in China, as well as the Philippines, and from carrier-based aircraft also began to take their toll on infrastructure, as with targeting the TransIndochinois rail line, linking north and south Vietnam, as well as mining harbors and launching submarine raids on Japanese and local coastal shipping. With all but a few French administrators behind bars, administrative services began to deteriorate, both federal (run from Hanoi) and local, whether run from Hanoi, Saigon or Hue. In this environment, customary rural statistical surveys were rarely conducted. Japanese military authorities, moreover, paid scant attention to local needs across Vietnam, not to mention traditionally rice-deficit Laos, and even rice surplus Cambodia, which was also ruthlessly exploited of its rice resources. The priority was fulfilling Imperial imperatives designed to feed Japan's own on the battlefronts and at home.

### ***Colonial Famine Protection***

From time immemorial coastal Vietnam had suffered frequent droughts, floods, and typhoons, yearly inflicting misery and suffering. According to Nguyen dynasty chronicles as interpreted by Ngo Vinh Long, destructive floods occurred on average every three years, usually around the seventh or eighth months, but sometimes in the fourth and fifth months as well. Prolonged droughts proved even more disastrous to crops. Added to that were crop failures owing to locusts and other insects.<sup>6</sup> In the official French discourse, protection of the population against the threats of famine was a constant preoccupation of the administration. It fitted colonial expedience that relief be provided to victims, just as the colonial economy was geared for export of rice, especially from the rice surplus Mekong River delta area of southern Vietnam. The colonial administration did not neglect the new and expanding modern communication links to re-supply afflicted regions. Neither, was the need to diversify crop production ignored given understandings of the risks of monoculture in situations of crisis and food insufficiency, just as the close monitoring of agricultural production and human needs became a finely honed bureaucratic procedure at the local, regional and federal (Indochinese) levels.

Writing half a century prior to the great disaster, Governor General Jean Baptiste Paul

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5 Undoubtedly the first detailed accounting in English language of these events owes to John R. Andrus and Katrine R.C. Greene, "Recent Developments in Indo-China: 1939-43," in Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina* (Oxford University Press, London, 1944), pp.351-89.

6 See Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*, p.32.

Beau ( October 1902-February 1908 ) reflected that there was no unique solution to the famine problem. One speaks of irrigation works as a solution, he opined, but Tonkin or northern Vietnam had not generally suffered drought over a ten year period commencing in 1896 . On the contrary, it had suffered an excess of water over this period, whether caused by heavy rainfall or floods. Irrigation systems, he argued, did not have incontestable value and could only be viewed as a partial solution to the famine problem. As well understood, several regions in Annam, the central region of Vietnam with its capital in Hue, supported excessive population densities. Prone to famine, it was not then possible to render assistance to these remote areas by either land or sea. At the time of Beau's writing, only northern Annam remained outside of access to the new colonial railway system. But thanks to the extension of the rail head to this area, timely rice assistance provided by the Hue government had helped \ the population of Thanh-Hoa, then suffering famine. Similarly, in Annam wherever the rail head reached, relief could be speedily facilitated. Alongside new transportation routes, the old system of rice stores that the imperial government hosted in each of the provinces was deemed a less practical solution, even though some individuals demanded their restoration. High population density in parts of Tonkin likewise aggravated the effect of famine. Alongside experiments in relocating emigrants from Tonkin to western Cochinchina - as the French called their colony in the south - incentives were also offered by the administration to peasant cultivators to move away from even rice monoculture.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the colonial period, a large number of irrigation works were created in northern and central Vietnam, in particular, using conscript labor and drawing upon local budgets with both flood control and expanded cultivation as objectives.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, famine conditions in the central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh did occur in 1930-1931 combined with falling rice prices and a constant tax burden igniting mass peasant protest along with communist-inspired attacks upon the administration.<sup>9</sup> It is true that the French introduced a range of plantation or export crops, as with rubber, tobacco, coffee, etc., but neither, as demonstrated below, did colonial economic managers ignore the need to maintain a basket

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7 Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer ( AOM ) Indo/NF/ Situation de l'Indochine française durée 1902-1907 , Rapport par Beau, Gouverneur General.

8 On irrigation, dike construction, and agricultural improvements in Tonkin and Annam, see Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina* , ( pp.222-25 ) , the classic colonial-era account in English of French agriculture practices in Indochina.

9 See, for example, James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1976; Ngo Vinh Long , " The Indochinese Communist Party and Peasant Rebellion in Central Vietnam , 1930-1931 , " *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol.10 , no . 4 , (1978) , pp . 15-35.

of food crops to tide over emergencies, such as fitting long-established peasant cultivator practice.<sup>10</sup> Generally, the *paix française* in Indochina was marked by its managerial response to famine and hunger, even as large numbers of people, as with mountain-dwellers and those in more marginal settings, barely survived in the natural economy.

## Managing the Food Crisis of 1937

Recovering from a low of 960,000 tonnes of rice, unhusked paddy, and rice derivatives exported from the port of Saigon during 1931, a depression year, the figure for 1934 rose to 1,505,493 tonnes. Major export markets were, in rank order, metropolitan France, other French colonies, Hong Kong, and China-Shanghai. A certain quantity of rice was also reaching Japan (60,000 tonnes in 1931-32), although still a new and irregular market. Cochinchina and Cambodia combined provided the overwhelming bulk of rice exports from Indochina, just as rice represented 27 percent of total tonnage exported, contributing up to 36 percent of total value of exports.<sup>11</sup>

By 1937, rice exports from Indochina had fallen away, owing to a generalized drought caused by a delay in the arrival of the monsoon rains which affected a wide swathe of territory from southern Tonkin, to northern Annam, north and central Laos, and even the north-east of Siam. As a remedial measure, the colonial administration, now coming under the socialist Popular Front government of Léon Blum, imposed a total ban on the export of rice from Laos (including rice surplus Bassac in the south), while seeking to reserve all quantities of rice for local consumption. With northern Annam suffering a marked lack of precipitation, especially in Vinh and Than-Hoa provinces, 50,000 piasters was earmarked for distribution of rice to victims. In order to prevent speculation on existing stocks of rice, the administration opened a 40,000 piaster line of credit with the official small loan institution, Credit Agricole Mutual, a measure seen as helping to regulate the price of rice. Answering back to the Minister of Colonies in France, the Indochina government claimed to be monitoring the situation with "extreme caution,"<sup>12</sup> and this is borne out by the facts.

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10 See Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina*, p.238, who also noted the need for or the wisdom of stressing agricultural diversification away from crops other than rice.

11 AOM Indo/NF/104/1004 Gouverneur de la Cochinchine Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Saigon, no. 734, 25 Dec. 1934; *Bulletin Economique de l'Indochine*, Dec. 1938. For a statistical analysis of the dramatic shift in trade from traditional markets (France, etc.) to Japan, see Andrus and Greene, "Recent Developments in Indo-China: 1939-43," in Robequain, pp.363-64. As they note, much of the rice shipped to Hong Kong and other Chinese ports was probably shipped to Japan or used to feed Japanese troops in China.

12 AOM Indo/NF/48/578-583, Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine M. le Ministre des Colonies, Paris.

In early 1937 , a number of locales in Thanh Hoa were drastically affected by poor harvests leading to a certain “ malaise ” ( read, major discontent ) on the part of the affected population. No doubt with memories of 1931-32 in mind, the authorities did not stand idly by. A series of public works projects, roads especially, were created offering indigent peasant farmers a stipend to cover their needs. This was not a small investment but translated into 192,000 paid workdays. Roads and bridges in the view of the authorities would open new markets, thus satisfying a long-held demand on the part of the population. More than that, the extra income earned would enable the peasant-workers to purchase rice-seeds ready for planting in the next season. In the words of an official rapporteur , “ Misery was banished owing to the generous support of the government and the agricultural rhythm reestablished in the best conditions while allowing even the most disinherited to receive support. ”<sup>13</sup>

Needled by Paris and the Governor General, the French Resident Superior in Hanoi scrambled to take stock of food reserves in Tonkin by conducting a province-level investigation. As the top French official concluded, the *soudure* or gap between the intervening harvests was not then at a critical level in Tonkin. From his investigation , 566,217 tonnes of rice were held in reserve ( stockpiled ) , amounting to some 56,000 tonnes in excess of ( annual ) consumption needs of 510,310 tonnes. To this was added stocks of maize then amounting to approximately 22,500 tonnes, along with a reserve or basket of secondary items of everyday consumption, including potatoes, soy beans, manioc, and taro , “ which also makes up an appreciable part of the diet of the indigenous population , ” albeit an amount difficult to accurately calculate owing to the small-scale or household character of its production) .<sup>14</sup>

From October 1938 , however, the price of rice began to fall. Between September and December 1938 , the price of rice on the Saigon market fell 30 percent with paddy diminishing 40 percent in value. Although the fall in price was less accentuated in the Haiphong marketplace, it also reached 15 percent. The reasons given for this alarming state of affairs was, paradoxically, the arrival in Saigon-Cholon of an abundant new harvest at a time when France and the major global cereal producers also experienced a good harvest, combined with a fall in demand in China owing to the war. Simultaneously, the cost of living index continued to increase in the fourth quarter of 1938 , affecting Europeans and middle class locals alike, and with an even deeper impact upon the ability of the working class to manage their budgets. Linked with a major devaluation of the piaster in September 1936 , the average

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13 AOM Indo/NF/104/1004 Indochine et Pacifique, p.7 , 17 Mai 1939.

14 AOM Résident Supérieur, Tonkin Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Hanoi , 10 Avril 1937.



cost of living in Hanoi during this period increased a steep 44 percent with an even more alarming 60 percent increase for working class.<sup>15</sup>

But with the worst of the 1937 crisis behind it, total rice production in Indochina ( including exports, reserves, and rice for local consumption ) rose to 1,650,000 tonnes in 1939 , declining to 1,500,000 tonnes in 1940 . The year 1940 also marked a shift away from traditional markets. Owing to the war, the China-Shanghai and Hong Kong market was lost. Shipping linking France and its colonies to Vietnam simply disappeared. In 1940 , Japan stepped in to this market in a big way, shipping 500,000 tonnes of rice on its own ships to homeland or Japanese-controlled territories.<sup>16</sup> Japan also benefited from the March 1941 annexation by Thailand of the rich rice producing province of Battambang in Cambodia, otherwise depriving Indochina of around 500,000 tons of padi between 1941-46 , not to mention rice consumed or requisitioned by arriving Japanese occupation forces.<sup>17</sup> Further, on 6 May 1941 , having entered a commercial agreement with the Vichy administration, Japan contracted deliveries of over one million tonnes of Indochinese rice a year.<sup>18</sup> This figure would increase as the war progressed, just as rice came to be extracted under duress including forced or compulsory deliveries outside of any market conditions or consideration for local needs.

According to the first Vichy Governor of Cochinchina, René Veber ( 1940-42 )( writing from Vichy in France and signing himself as Governor of Colonies ) , considerable effort had been made in 1940 to create rice producer cooperatives, notably the collective purchase of selected seed of the same variety in order to produce some degree of homogeneity in production, while adding value to the crop. In Veber's words , " peasant producers, proprietors and merchants would be rewarded with more homogenous rice of better appreciated varieties . " While Veber also acknowledged that such measures flew in the face of Vietnamese peasant

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15 *Bulletin Economique de l'Indochine*, Decembre 1938.

16 AOM Indo NF/330/2664 , " Rapport Gouverneur Veber , " Vichy , 23 Avril 1941 . According to Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina* , (p.329) , rice exports to Japan were never important and shrinking. Averaging 109,000 tons annually in 1913-1928 , they dropped to 36 tons in 1929-32 and barely 2 tons in 1933-37 .

17 Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization , 1858-1954* , University of California Press, Berkeley , 2010 , p.439 note 33.

18 See, Memorandum by the Acting Secretary of State ( Welles ) Regarding A Conversation With the Japanese Ambassador ( Nomura ) , 23 July 1941 , who stated that Japan was now importing a million tons of rice a year from Indochina. As Wells replied , " any agreement which Japan might have reached with the Vichy Government could only have been reached as a result of pressure brought to bear upon the Vichy Government by Berlin . " U.S., Department of State, *Peace and War: United States Foreign Policy , 1931-1941* ( Washington, D.C.: U.S., Government Printing Office , 1943 ) , 1983 , pp.692-96 .

“ individuality ” ( meaning resistance to cooperate ), he also believed that, with tact, they could be persuaded.<sup>19</sup> Given that Japan now commanded the lion’s share of Indochinese rice exports we can only speculate as to who was calling the shots as to rice type, but it does appear likely that the Japanese market was already pushing the Vichy French in the direction of standardization. Neither can we discount the importance of risk averse strategies typically adopted by peasant producers in avoiding the unknown, such as taking on a new untested rice strain, possibly exposing the harvest to new vulnerabilities as with pests and disease.

More generally, though, it is fair to conclude from the handling of the 1937 crisis that the French adopted a strict managerial approach to food sufficiency across Indochina, backed by the regular collation of province level statistics. The French not only kept and calculated rice reserves, but they also established a finely detailed picture of food needs across vast territory. Timely food relief and work-for-pay schemes was another feature of colonial policy under the Popular Front government. Vulnerable in the extreme to externalities or international factors, the French also vainly sought to micro-manage the macro-economy. Obviously, for the French, the threatening events of 1930-32 had to be avoided at all costs, just as they wished to lubricate the export economy of which rice constituted an important share. Still, even with peace, the cost of living was skyrocketing and the returns from rice production were diminishing. It would only take a few additional shocks, natural and man-made, to upset this state of equilibrium which, at least until the Japanese period, had cushioned the rural population and averted the worst effects of mass famine. But the disappearance of traditional markets linked with aggressive Japanese rice procurement methods outside of international free market mechanisms was already an ominous sign for rice producers, proprietors, and middlemen alike. Not even Vichy Governor Veber could have envisaged the day when Japan would command the total surplus rice exported from the port of Saigon, much less the American bombing of the TransIndochinois.

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19 AOM Indo NF/330/2664 , “ Rapport Gouverneur Veber , ” Vichy , 23 Avril 1941 . Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina* , ( p .238 ) , also contended that the biggest defect of Indochinese rice ( compared to Burma ) entering the market was its heterogenous character; different color, size, and hardness all mixed up from various fields with no indication of origin. There were then more than 2,000 varieties of rice cultivated in Indochina, well adapted to local conditions but , “ too many ” and selection was required.

## Origins of the Great Famine of 1944-45

According to Pham Cao Duong<sup>20</sup> a standard interpretation is that the origins of the famine of 1945 lie with the crop failures of 1943-45; this was compounded by lack of dike maintenance following US bombing of the north and the catastrophic rainfall of August-September 1944 causing flooding and loss of rice plants. To be sure, there are merits in a multi-cause approach to the famine. In the following few paragraphs I reassess some of the dominant arguments.

For Nguyen Khac Vien, a generally reliable source from the Hanoi-side,<sup>21</sup> the heaviest burden for the people under Japanese rule was the compulsory sale of rice to the administration. Even Tonkin, where food was tragically scarce, had to supply 130,305 tonnes in 1943; and 186,130 tonnes in 1944. Whether the crop was good or bad, each region had to supply a quantity of rice in proportion to the tilled acreage at the derisory price of 19 piasters a quintal, a small fraction of the market price. In lean years, people had to buy rice on the market at 54 piasters to meet that obligation. To provide gunny bags for the Japanese economy, people were obliged to uproot rice and plant jute. In 1944 when US bombing cut off northern supplies of coal to Saigon, the French and Japanese used rice and maize as fuel for power stations. They vied with each other to store rice. During that time agriculture was not improved, and dams and dikes were neglected. The slightest natural calamity caused food shortages, which developed into severe famines. Starting in 1943, famine began. It became more serious from 1944 onward.

Historian of Vietnam, David Marr<sup>22</sup> contends that the prospect of dearth in Tonkin had been creeping up for some years prior to the climax. He asserts that paddy output had been slipping over two decades owing to gradual reductions in acreage and a failure to introduce new cultivation methods. In addition, a still small percentage of land had been given over to the production of industrial crops. Meanwhile, the northern population had increased by 36 percent, forcing increased dependence upon imports of Cochinchina rice. Drought and insects reduced the 1944 harvest by 19 percent compared to the previous year, with typhoons damaging the autumn crop. Farmers across northern Vietnam realized by October that they could not fulfill both tax obligations including obligatory deliveries to the government, and

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20 Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination, 1861-1945*, Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph 25, University of California, Berkeley, Ca, 1985, pp. 181-82.

21 Nguyen Khac Vien, *The Long Resistance (1858-1975)*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Hanoi, 1975, pp. 92-95.

22 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 99.

feed their families. While peasants started taking customary evasive actions, and while hoarders and black marketeers thrived in this environment, the French and Japanese continued stockpiling rice, with General Tsuchibashi Yuichi, commander-in-chief of the occupation army in Indochina and pro-governor general after March 1945, planning 6 months (or 3 years) stockpiling ahead of an anticipated Allied invasion.

Without citing sources, although offering statistics, Pham Cao Duong<sup>23</sup> argues that the decrease in crop yield during these crisis years was not drastic and there was still sufficient rice to avoid starvation. Rather, he sees the cause of the shortage as stemming from the practice of converting rice to alcohol used as a substitute for gasoline; illegal exports of rice by Chinese merchants and coastal traders; US interdiction of north-south communication routes cutting off the north from rice imports from Cochinchina (estimated at 100,000 tonnes a year). Added to that, Vichy French Governor General Jean Decoux ordered the stockpiling of rice (500,000 barrels), (a necessary measure in the circumstances), while the Japanese collected rice. But it was the human factor, he claims, namely intensified speculation, inflation and scarcity which contrived to drive up the price of rice. "The more the price of rice rose, the more the grain became scarce because of stockpiling." In 1944, traditional mechanisms of reciprocity linking large landowners to tenant farmers broke down. As Duong asserts, in 1944, all large landowners were obliged to deliver the bulk of their supplies to the French administration, while all paddy on the market was monopolized by Vietnamese and Chinese merchants.

According to Ngo Vinh Long, "beginning in late 1942, largely because of the Japanese demand for rice, the French colonial administration imposed upon the population "the forced sale of given quotas of rice, depending upon the area of land cultivated." In 1943, this amount reached three-fourths of his income or even exceeding the amount that a peasant could harvest, forcing him to purchase on the market to resell to the administration. While the procurement price was minimal, the black market price spiraled upwards. Long asserts that there was coastal junk navigation available but the French either discouraged this transport or taxed it heavily as a disincentive to operators. As with Pham Cao Duong, he agrees that the use of rice to make alcohol to run machines was "one of the major causes of death from starvation." Another was the French storage of rice and export to Japan (including the export of 300,000 tonnes of maize from 1942 to early 1945), along with forced conversion by French and Japanese demands that they plant industrial crops.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination, 1861-1945*, pp.181-82.

24 Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French*, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp.129-31.

For Brocheux and Hemery,<sup>25</sup> two close students of the Vietnam's social and political landscape, the predisposing background to the crisis was essentially demographic ( although the mishandling was Japanese ). Public health programs and vaccination campaigns did control mortality stemming from terrible cholera epidemics and, after 1927 , there were no longer any catastrophic ruptures of dikes in Tonkin, at least until the dramatic flooding of August 1945 ( during which 230,000 hectares were submerged, the most serious of the century ) . But, within a century of French contact, the population of Vietnam had increased by a factor of six, and cultivated surface by two. The balance of population and grain production therefore became extremely uncertain and the peasants were periodically wracked by agro-ecological crisis. Starting before 1930 , vast areas of rural misery expanded in the regions where the ratio of population to cereal production was most strained, namely the Red River, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, and Quang Ngai. In 1937 , there were from 2-3 million agricultural day laborers and more than a million unemployed in the Red River Delta. There was also extreme parcelization of land ownership, and a rising class of Chinese-style big landlords. Taken together, they argue, the situation approximated that of " agricultural involution " such as described by Clifford Geertz in his study of late colonial-early postwar rural Java.

## Failure

What went wrong? The American bombing, and distant resistance activities in the mountains by Free French and Viet Minh guerillas aside, the Red River delta region and northern Annam was not a major conflict zone. David Marr<sup>26</sup> contends that the only way that mass famine could have been averted would have been to arrange supplies of 60,000 tonnes relief from Cochinchina by October 1944 . Citing a French source, he demonstrates that, owing to American submarine operations, air patrols and harbor mining exercises, the amount of rice shipped from south to north dropped from 126 , 670 tonnes in 1942 to 29,700 in 1943 , to

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25 Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, pp: 262-65 . Geertz's classic study of the problem is *Agricultural Involvement: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* ( University of California Press , 1970 ) .

Writing in 1944 Andrus and Greene "Recent Developments in Indo-China: 1939-43," in Robequain p . 385 , reported that there had been numerous reports of food shortages in Tonkin. Citing the research of French agronomist, Pierre Gourou, population pressure was of the order of 3,500 persons per square mile. They also noted that the Japanese appeared to have been shipping northerners south but that such internal migration was unlikely to keep ahead of the birthrate.

26 Marr, *Vietnam 1945* , pp.99-100.

6,830 in 1944 . Given hazardous junk transport and portorage between unbroken sections of the rail link, the challenge was formidable. The knowledge and capacity were there but, he asserts, neither the French or the Japanese had the will to achieve this goal. Both remained preoccupied with their military logistics. Following the 9 March 1945 takeover, the Japanese ignored famine warnings for at least two weeks. By Tet ( March-April ) of 1945 , thousands, especially rural Vietnamese were dying. The Japanese did release some grain from captured French depots to urban people, in part to discredit the French. After much hand wringing and remonstrations also suggesting administrative malfeasance but also sympathy among better-off people in the south, relief started to be organized. Eventually, in late June, junks from Cochinchina bearing rice for Tonkin arrived, but by this time the worst of the crisis was over.

Having asserted the dual role of the French and Japanese in stockpiling rice, Marr makes no attempt to disentangle French and Japanese motives, which I think is important. In contrast to the Japanese motive of preparing for future battles and securing supplies for their armed forces, French stockpiling could not have had primary military intent. Surely the Japanese would not have allowed French military stockpiling when they were calling the shots. A case could equally be made that the French stockpiling of rice - at least while they were in charge - was an administrative response to a looming crisis and, indeed, a reversion to traditional practice. ( As noted, it was the French who, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had done away with the traditional practice of the imperial Vietnamese authorities in hosting rice stores in all provinces, suggesting that the Vichy French revival of this practice had some logic ). It also has to be said that French agricultural organization excelled precisely in monitoring deficits and surpluses across Indochina through regular and intensive statistical surveys, dike control, and in the development of rapid communications. Space precludes analysis, but French colonial administrative prowess in this area was no less lacking in efficiency than say, the British in Malaya or, indeed, the Japanese in Taiwan.

In fact, French and Japanese motives and actions were entirely at variance. According to a Free French intelligence report of September 1944 ( in turn derived from an anonymous American informant ), on top of an economic agreement contracting 1,200,000 tonnes of rice ( date unspecified but alluding to Japanese commercial agreements foisted upon the Vichy administration of January 1940 ), the Japanese demanded an additional 400,000 tonnes of rice for military provisions. Undoubtedly sensitive to the kind of intolerable pressures that this measure would impose upon Vietnamese producers, the Vichy administration under Admiral Decoux balked. The Japanese answered back with an ultimatum ( deliver or else ). In a highly exceptional display of autonomy, the Vichy administration

sardonically replied that, if they ( the Japanese ) wanted the rice then they would have to take it and bear full responsibility for the consequences.<sup>27</sup>

All elements of Pham Cao Duong's argument are cogent and convincing, as the paradox of food availability and unaffordability still haunts international relief agencies confronting analogous situations to the present day . ( For instance, an overproduction of grain could translate into a loss of income and even famine, such as occurred in Ethiopia in 2003 . It is one thing to host large stockpiles of food, as with the current situation in some sub-Saharan countries, when the majority of the population lack the means to purchase or have it delivered ) . Even so, Duong is shy about attributing first cause to Japanese occupation policies which shattered the market mechanisms which the French had superimposed upon traditional practices, albeit made more efficient by Indochina-wide stocktaking, stockpiling, and modern transport. Behind Decoux of course it was the Japanese military that had siphoned off rice surpluses and, it was Japanese desperation that pushed the Vietnamese farmers to plant industrial crops and convert paddy to biofuels. In general, Decoux was obliged to follow Japanese orders on rice requisition, whatever the consequences ( although the Japanese - correctly - assumed that the Vichy French were also subverting their orders towards the end ) .

A full accounting would also have to examine the specific stages in the development of the famine in northern Vietnam, from the first crop failures of 1943-44 , to the abrupt transition from Vichy French administration to Japanese military rule in March 1945 , to the period of social breakdown ( August-October 1945 ) , to the complex transition to Viet Minh rule, and partial French administrative responsibility ( March-November 1946 ) , coinciding with the re-entry of French forces into the Red River delta area following Japan's defeat. The issue of who controlled the keys to the rice stockpiles is also important. If, as Brocheau and Hémery<sup>28</sup> assert, the Japanese lacked the shipping capacity after 1943 to send rice north ow-

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27 " Controle Japonais sur l'Administration Française en Indochine, " *Bulletin de Renseignement*, No.323/BO, DGER , 14 Sept . 1944 . For details of the January 1941 rice agreement between the Vichy authorities with Japan, see Andrus and Greene , " Recent Developments in Indo-China: 1939-43, " in Robequain, pp.367-78 . According to these authors , " In addition to the rice guaranteed to Japan, that country was to receive any unused portion of the 200,000 ton quota allotted to France and other colonies, plus any export surplus of white rice beyond a total of 1,020,000 tons. " ( p.369) .

28 Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, p.90 . Specifically, when a 1945 agreement on rice delivery to Japan was signed in March, the Japanese had more than 100,000 tons in stock that they had been unable to transport ( p.346) . In September 1945 , when arriving British forces inventoried the rice supply in Cholon, they estimated that 69,000 tons remained in Mitsui Company warehouses , 66,000 in stores of the Vichy-created Comité des cereales ( grain ) , and with Japanese stocks in Cochinchina, Cambodia, and northern Annam amounting to 25,000 tons ( p.348) .

ing to losses incurred due to US air raids and submarine attacks, then it does seem likely that rice stocks were accruing in the south rather than declining. Even so, Japan was still leaching food out of Indochina, overland via Cambodia or, via the sea route, notwithstanding the American submarine risk.

## American Bombing

Although the bombing of strategic Japanese targets in northern Vietnam started in 1942 , first by the American Volunteer Group ( AVG ), better known as the “ Flying Tigers , ” the tempo increased under the Yunnan-based China Air Task Force ( CATF ) of the Tenth Air Force, and later by the Fourteenth Air Force, as with the bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area in April 1944 . Additional attacks were made by B-29s of the XX Bomb Group flying out of India and by Liberators, Mitchells, and Lightnings belonging to the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces operating from bases in the Philippines. Beginning in December 1944 , attacks on Japanese targets in southern Vietnam were made by the U.S. Navy Seventh Fleet’s Catalinas, B-24s, and Privateers as well as by carrier aircraft from Admiral William Halsey’s Third Fleet.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning, in April 1944 , US India-based B-29's targeted the Saigon Naval Yard and Arsenal. Japanese shipping at Cap St. Jacques ( Vung Tau ) also became a bombing target with 5-7 ships sunk in a raid of 15 April 1944 , just as American submarines began to take their toll on both Japanese and French shipping ( delivered up by Decoux to the Japanese, notwithstanding the resistance of French crews ). For example, on 29 April 1944 , two French ships heading north were sunk by submarines off the coast of Vietnam, one a French destroyer lost with all hands, the other a merchant vessel which, according to Allied intelligence, was “ carrying badly needed rice to Tonkin and Annam . ” This is actually an important revelation - or admission - as the Allies would have known something of the human consequences of their actions beyond the mere sinking of ships. Notably, on 12 January 1945 , US T-38 aircraft attacked four large enemy convoys off the Vietnam coast ( location and destination unclear ) sinking 25 vessels and severely damaging 13 . Among the losses was the French light cruiser, *Lamotte-Picquet*. Shipping losses along the coast were reported as heavy, just as port arrivals in Saigon-Vung Tau began to trend downwards. The French

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29 See Martin L. Mickelsen , “ A mission of vengeance: vichy French in Indochina in World War II, Air Power History. FindArticles.com . 17 Dec . 2010 . [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_hb3101/is\\_3\\_55/ai\\_n28571920/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3101/is_3_55/ai_n28571920/)



announced their losses while the Japanese remained silent.<sup>30</sup>

The above leads to the question as to what kind of shipping was entering French Indochinese ports, for what purpose and what destination? Saigon and its ocean-going port of St. Jacques/Vung Tau were the most important for Japanese shipping between Taiwan and Singapore with shipping movements in 1943-44 averaging between five (Saigon) and Cap St. Jacques (13) ship visits a day. As the assembly point for Japanese ship convoys plying between the South Seas and Japan, during the same approximate period up to 33 ships a day sometimes anchored off Cap St. Jacques. Allied intelligence offers highly detailed weekly summaries of shipping movements into and out of these ports. In April-June 1944, a large number of Japanese troop-carrying vessels reportedly arrived in the Saigon River and immediately reloaded with rice directly from barges floated down from the Mekong delta rice fields. Summarizing from a single day's maritime activity out of Saigon in early August 1944, Allied intelligence stated that the Japanese were shipping considerable rice from Saigon to occupied Java, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai as well as Japan. For example, in August 1944, Macau Governor Gabriel Teixeira gained Japanese agreement to send a vessel (the SS *Portugal*) to northern Vietnam to load coal and beans for shipment to Macau at a time when the Japanese choke on Portuguese-controlled Macau had reduced sections of the population to cannibalism.<sup>31</sup> The picture that emerges through 1944-early 1945, besides intense Japanese naval activity in and around Saigon port, is one of near total command of rice produced in rice-surplus Cochinchina and Cambodia and its export under Japanese military auspices to virtually all parts of the Japanese empire.<sup>32</sup>

But with the US interdiction of Japanese shipping taking its toll, the deployment of available shipping also added to the problem of servicing the coastal trade. Dated 19 July (1944), an unreliable Allied intelligence source stated that, at Saigon, "there are 300,000 tons of rice awaiting shipment, part of which is rotting on the quays. Even if the figure covers all Japanese-held rice in Saigon including quantities earmarked for local Japanese consumption and production of alcohol, the account continued, "the accumulation during the first six

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30 National Archives of Australian (NAA) A 3269 G5/4 [South China Sea, South China, French Indochina and North] SHARK. In this operation, Vice Adm John S. McCain operating in the South China Sea hit Japanese shipping, airfields, and other shore installations in southeastern French Indochina. For this and other detailed logs of Japanese shipping losses inflicted by US sea and, with less detail, air power, see Robert J. Cressman, *The Official Chronology of the U. S. Navy in World War II* <<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/USN-Chron/index.html>>

31 See Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Encountering Macau: A Portuguese City State on the Periphery of China, 1557-1999*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1996, p. 126.

32 NAA A 3269 G5/4 [South China Sea, South China, French Indochina and North] SHARK.

months of 1944 amounts to over a quarter of the total tonnage scheduled for shipping this year. <sup>33</sup> With a superabundance of rice rotting in the harbor, we may ask, why wasn't even a proportion of this food surplus freighted north to cover the then apparent rice deficit in northern Annam and the lower Tonkin delta?

Another measure undertaken to alleviate the lack of shipping was a concerted attempt by the Japanese authorities in Saigon to construct some 200 wooden ships of 500-ton capacity, an industry involving over 1,000 local Chinese and Vietnamese craftsmen. Mitsubishi even set up an engine plant while other engines arrived by freighter from Hong Kong. But rather than deploy these vessels in the coastal trade, the first four were dispatched to Singapore carrying a total of 900 tons of rice. One foundered and two others returned to port badly leaking. Other motor-driven wooden ships were directed towards Thailand and the Kra Isthmus. On 2 September 1944, the Japanese commanded four Chinese-owned steamships, to carry military personnel and supplies between Phnom Penh and Saigon. Although we lack parallel data for Haiphong port, the point is that almost all of this maritime activity was geared to meet Japan's greater strategic needs, while coastal navigation such as would connect up the south, center and north of Vietnam apparently still undertaken by the French - was neglected, fatally as it turned out.<sup>34</sup>

Even so, as mentioned, the main transport conduit for the domestic movement of rice was the rail system. Rail transport was of course the more reliable north-south communication link especially during the typhoon season ( July-October ), when any kind of maritime activity was hazardous. The Saigon-Hanoi TransIndochinois was single track, meter-gauge, with double track at all stations. The steepest gradient was 1:100. Normally - or before the bombing started to interrupt the timetable - a journey from Saigon to Hanoi took 42 hours, at an average of 42 km per hour with a somewhat reduced speed on newly opened track between Nha Trang and Quang Ngai. The capacity of the line was six trains in each direction every 24 hours. According to an Allied intelligence report of 1944, express trains ran daily between the two centers.<sup>35</sup>

Obviously with such an efficient transport system in place there would have been no technical obstacle to moving food from surplus to deficit areas. But, use of the line also needs to

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33 Ibid .

34 Ibid. On the Japanese wooden ships, also see Andrus and Greene, " Recent Developments in Indo-China: 1939-43, " in Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina*. p.385.

35 This was not a disinterested report, but offered four optimum target sites for submarine-based landing parties where the line was at its closest point to the sea, from Thanh Hoa in the north to Quang Nam-Danang in the south. NAA A3269 E3/4 Lower South China Sea, Singapore OPTICIAN copy [South China Sea] .

be considered. According to an unconfirmed Chinese intelligence report of late 1944 , owing to the movement north of 50,000 Japanese troops from Saigon to Hanoi, all civilian traffic on the line was suspended through 7 September 1944.<sup>36</sup> Whatever the veracity of that report, it does fit generalized accounts contending that the Japanese military subordinated use of the line to their military needs, both before and after the 9 March 1945 *coup de force*. Undoubtedly, the Allies were also acting upon this kind of assessment, in targeting the TransIndochinois line.

There is also some conflict in Allied intelligence reporting. A report from September 1944 indicates that American bombing and strafing attacks destroyed or damaged several bridges on the Saigon-Hanoi line resulting in dislocation of transport services. The tenor of this account is confirmed by a 10 October 1944 report citing the “ poor condition ” of the line, making possible a maximum of 4,000 tons of cargo monthly and with possibilities of repair “ negligible. ” But, we know that different sectors of the line were not subject to irreparable damage ( Saigon-Danang-Ninh Binh ), just as repair ( and undoubtedly portorage ) were also ways around the problem. According to an intelligence assessment of January 1945 , the Japanese army had demanded of the French ( still technically in charge of the line ), that six pairs of trains per week should run between Saigon and Tourane ( Danang ), with one train a day running in both directions from Vietri ( northwest of Hanoi ) to Laokay ( at the Vietnam terminus of the Haiphong-Kunming line ).<sup>37</sup> This assessment suggests that there was no breakdown in the rail transportation system at this stage, and there is no reason why rice could not have been entering this traffic if there had been the will.

But, by 29 November 1944 , traffic over the railway bridge at Ninh Binh ( in the lower southwestern Red River delta ) had been stopped by aerial bombing, with two railway cars destroyed. On 30 November 1944 , the railway was also damaged at Phu Ly ( mid-way between Ninh Binh and Hanoi in the mid-lower delta ). It is fair to comment that, if these two sections of the line had not been speedily repaired then traffic in and out of the southern Red River delta would have been drastically interrupted. Much of course would also have depended upon non-rail transport from Phi Lu to local markets and the administration and distribution of rice within the deficit zones. Summarizing, we can state, with the famine crisis beginning to bite, rail traffic was still reaching Ninh Binh from Danang via Hue, Vinh, Dong Hoi, and Thanh Hoa, without major interruption.<sup>38</sup>

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36 NAA A 3269 G5/4 [South China Sea, South China, French Indochina and North] SHARK.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid. On 1 July a bridge and railway line at Phu Lang Thuong ( now known as Bac Giang ) was hit. Although a strategic line connecting with Lang Son, this was not in the delta region.

In mid-April 1945 , precisely at the peak of the famine, Australian commandos landing by American submarine inside Danang Bay successfully sabotaged a train or, at least, a locomotive ( one of two trains observed heading north ). Their mission was precisely directed at north-bound trains. As observed, the first two carriages of this 10-18 carriage train held passengers with - as surmised - the remaining covered carriages reserved for troops. While the Australian commandos reckoned they only immobilized the line for 24 hours, the picture they offer of Danang ( lights blazing ) and with rail activity at full spate was one of near normalcy. They also observed an extremely well-maintained track The view from the submarine periscope was one of active and organized offshore night fishing activity by a multitude of multi-sailed boats all along the coast from Saigon to Danang Bay ( 200-300 fishing vessels, all numbered as if part of a fishing cooperative exercise ). This suggests some degree of food self-sufficiency along the coastal literal of Vietnam, but that would also depending upon distribution networks, markets, and many other factors.<sup>39</sup>

US bombing of the rail line may not have been the critical factor in starving the north of southern rice, especially as it appears that north-south communication was not completely ruptured in the run-up to March-April the peak of the northern famine but, combined with attacks on coastal shipping, it did not make life easier for the concerned Japanese or French authorities dealing with transport and food issues. While we do not have a complete log of American bombing targets over Vietnam, railway lines may not have been the main target, alongside military and industrial centers as with Hanoi and Haiphong. As Mickelson explains in a rare study of Allied bombing of Vietnam during the Pacific War, neither did Americans control the skies over Vietnam. Facing down both Vichy anti-aircraft batteries and Japanese fighters the Americans suffered 414 casualties in the course of these missions, alongside a host of downed fliers. For instance, in late 1943 , three B-24 Liberators were shot down in a single raid over Haiphong by 35 or more Japanese fighters. For a time, Mickelson also argues, the Americans were diverted away from the main mission by acts of “ vengeance ” against the Vichy French who betrayed the downed American aviators, just as a turn-around in attitude by Admiral Decoux was one of the leading reasons behind the

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39 NAA A 3269 E7/A [Lower South China Sea, Singapore, POLITICIAN project copy [Tourane Bay, Indo-China] Dubbed the Politician project, a first attempt to blow up the track some way south of Danang was mounted on 5-6 April 1945 but foiled by an armed maintenance group. Part of a series of operations mounted out of Western Australia involving American submarines and Australian commandos, other missions included raids on railroads in Java, a successful and celebrated raid on Japanese shipping in Singapore, operations in Malaya, attempts to create bases in the Paracels and Natuna Islands, and even a planned raid on Japanese shipping in Nagasaki and Sasebo.

Japanese decision to carry out the March 1945 coup and assume direct military rule.<sup>40</sup>

## A Contrarian View

Against the view that the French and Japanese, and perhaps even the Americans, all shared responsibility for the tragedy which appears in a number of official Vietnamese and other writings, a view which explores a determinant Japanese role might be construed as contrarian. Bui Ming Dung<sup>41</sup> makes the argument - and I agree - that the Japanese exacted rice not only for their local use or exports to Japan alone, but for other parts of the empire, even at the height of the starvation. At the heart of Dung's analysis is a refutation of certain of the more enduring attributions of causes of the famine. First, he dismisses the argument that Tonkin ( as opposed to Annam ) suffered a subsistence crisis ( Tonkin rice production exceeded that of Annam, while demographic increase was greater in Annam than Tonkin ). Second, he refutes the arguments of certain Japanese interlocutors ( General Tsuchibashi Yuichi included ), who assert that bad weather or typhoons were the tipping factor ( the big floods actually occurred in August after, not before, the famine ). Third, inflation, he argues, hit urban rather than rural dwellers harder. Fourth, to the extent that the French were active under Japanese duress, that role of course ceased abruptly after 9 March with Japanese seizure of direct power. Nor does he find the French complicit in the making of the famine. To the extent that the French implemented policy changes, they were ordered by the Japanese to meet Japanese not indigenous demands. Fifth, notwithstanding American bombing, the transport system did not entirely collapse, it was simply reoriented to Japanese military use ( rice transport took less volume than other commodities ). Sixth, the Japanese forcibly introduced not only jute, but cotton, vegetable oil plants and other industrial crops in northern Vietnam at the expense of maize, rice and other food crops. Maize also began to supplant rice in exports to Japan ( and the Philippines ) in 1945 , although rice was also exported to other places during this year ). Seventh, the Japanese stockpiled rice ( in Laos )

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40 According to Mickelsen , " A mission of vengeance , " the commander in chief of the French army in Vietnam, General Eugene Mordant, was convinced that the Fourteenth Air Force had deliberately bombed Hanoi in December 1943 , and again in April 1944 in retaliation for Decoux's policy of surrendering downed American fliers to the Japanese. Notably, on 10 and 12 December 1943 , Hanoi ( and not the usual target of the nearby Japanese airfield at Gia Lam ) had been attacked for the first time, causing 1,232 casualties and 500 deaths. On 8 April 1944 , Hanoi was hit again by the 308th Bomb Group ( H ) , when the Yersin hospital complex was targeted, leaving 46 civilians dead with 141 wounded in the Vietnamese and Chinese residential areas. Mordant's fears were supported by a warning from Fourteenth Air Force commander, Claire Chennault, that all the major towns in Tonkin would be bombed if similar incidents occurred in the future.

41 Bui Ming Dung , " Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45 , " pp.573-618.

right up to the point of their surrender. Finally, overarching all considerations, the export of Indochinese rice to Japan and the empire appears to have been a Japanese policy from the outset.

## **Apportioning Blame**

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, according to Marr,<sup>42</sup> famine survivors most readily blamed the French, who were still in charge until March 1945, and were less inclined to blame the Japanese. According to Marr, no blame was attributed to the Allied forces in destroying infrastructure or the Viet Minh who were supporting Allied actions. Also, as mentioned in the DRV Declaration of Independence of 2 September 1945, both the French and the Japanese were targeted. [From 1940] “Our people were subjected to the double yoke of the French and the Japanese. Their sufferings and miseries increased. The result was that from the end of last year to the beginning of this year from Quang Tri province to the north of Vietnam, more than two million of our fellow citizens died from starvation.”<sup>43</sup>

While responsibility for the famine remains controversial, there is no question that the Viet Minh derived maximum propaganda advantage from the tragedy. In an undated memorandum addressing a Viet Minh allegation that it was the French who were to blame for the famine of 1944-45, French intelligence responded that, to the contrary, owing to the fact that the harvest of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of 1944 had resulted in a shortfall, the French administration had built up reserve stocks in each province. However, the Japanese had distributed most of these stocks. Moreover, the Japanese had reduced rice production and area under cultivation owing to a switch to industrial crops to service their own requirements. In defeat, according to French intelligence, the Japanese had removed rice stocks and thrown them into the Mekong River at Thakek and Paksane in southern Laos. This vandalism condemned thousands of Indochinese people to die of famine. The harvest of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of 1945 revealed another compromise owing to the floods which ravaged the rice fields of the Red River delta causing major losses of life. While the postwar French administration in central and south Vietnam exercised protective measures, by provoking or encouraging “disorder and pillage,” the “provisional government,” namely the Hanoi authorities, “also hampered French government assistance in these regions. It is they who should be

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42 Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, p. 109.

43 See King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China 1938-54*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1969, Append II, p. 337.

held responsible for launching the famine as much for its aggravation and continuing disorders. <sup>44</sup>

## After the Revolution

The Viet Minh August revolution of 1945 in the north, leading to the DRV proclamation of the following month, was not exactly propitious from the point of view of food security and we wonder how the Viet Minh coped with the situation. King C. Chen<sup>45</sup> confirms that the food situation was on the verge of disaster. According to Viet Minh estimates, the 1945 autumn harvest was poor and hardly sufficed to feed eight million persons for three months. To avoid nation-wide starvation, the Viet Minh government launched an All-out Campaign Against Famine. The entry of 152,000 Nationalist Chinese army personnel in northern Indochina to accept the Japanese surrender increased the difficulty of food supply. The problem was only gradually alleviated with the arrival of supplies from Saigon though, as Chen contends, the French also tried to delay shipments to the north.

Gabriel Kolko<sup>46</sup> is one who has appreciated the political importance of the famine in preparing the ground for the revolution that followed. He notes that the communists broke open the rice stores to avert famine. Nguyen Khac Vien<sup>47</sup> affirms that it was the Viet Minh who took the lead in calling upon the peasants to resist orders to plant jute and led opposition to the forced sale of rice, terming this a joint French-Japanese oppression. This view is not contradicted by the head of the American OSS delegation in Hanoi, Archimedes Patti, who argues that the unplanned effects of Viet Minh seizures of paddy stocks had the effect of providing relief from the famine as the price of rice fell; identification of the Japanese and French as the common enemy; encouraging people to organize for self-defense; highlighting the importance of organized resistance, and recruiting for the Viet Minh.<sup>48</sup> But, as Brocheux and Hémery hedge, the famine in the north provided an ideal basis for denouncing the deficiencies of the colonial regime, and even a supposed Franco-Japanese collusion at physi-

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44 AOM Indo NF 134/1219 Direction d'Information , " Les Japonais et leurs collaborateurs sont responsable de la famine, " nd.

45 Chen, *Vietnam and China 1938-54* , p. 133.

46 Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of War: Vietnam, the United States and Modern Historical Experience*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1985 , p.36 . Also see Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began*, University of California Press, Berkeley , 2010 , p.201.

47 Nguyen Khac Vien, *The Long Resistance ( 1858-1975)* , pp.92-95 .

48 Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross*, University of California Press, Berkeley , 1982 , p.133 .

cally liquidating the Vietnamese population. The Viet Minh, not only used the famine as a weapon of propaganda, but also to mobilize the population to seize stocks stored by the French, which were in Japanese hands after March 1945 . with Japanese encouragement.<sup>49</sup>

## Remembrance

At least up until , 1975 , the DRV did not have a monopoly on official Vietnamese remembrance of the famine, just as the question of “ ownership ” of Japanese war reparations was contested between the north and the south. Yet another version of the famine was replayed postwar by the President of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem ( October 1955- November 1963 ) , in discussions with the Japanese ambassador in Saigon, Konogaya Yutaka. Ambassador Konogaya informed Australian diplomats on 15 February 1957 that, in reclaiming war reparations Diem made the argument that, towards the end of the war, the Japanese army requisitioned enormous quantities of rice from the north and the south, apparently with the intention of building up large stocks in the mountains to enable it to continue fighting regardless of whether the emperor surrendered. This requisition led to the disastrous famine in the north and the death of more than one million Vietnamese. Dismissively, Konogaya asserted, aside from the figure of one million dead, the Vietnamese side had supplied no statistics to support its claims for exaggerated amounts of reparations and that, in fact , “ no statistics exist. ” Setting aside the question of reparation claims ( eventually paid to the Republic of South Vietnam after protracted negotiations and bitter recriminations ) , Diem also placed his finger on a popular perception held in south Vietnamese elite circles, at least, of the causes of the famine.<sup>50</sup>

As Bui Ming Dung<sup>51</sup> remarks, not too much remembering of the tragedy in Vietnam has gone on in Japan. Rather, it is often argued there that “ the Vietnamese starvation was the

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49 Brocheux and Hémy, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*, p. 34.

50 NAA A1838 3014/11/89 Part I, Vietnam Foreign Policy Relations with Japan, Australian Legation, Saigon, to External Affairs, Canberra , 11 Feb . 1957 . As Australian diplomatic sources reveal, Diem felt nothing but contempt for the Japanese in general, and read back history accordingly. The last of the Southeast Asian countries to receive Japanese reparations under the terms of the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 , or rather, a watered down version, in May 1969 the Republic of Vietnam accepted US\$39 million over a period of five years, albeit bitterly opposed by the DRV. Cambodia and Laos accepted “ free technical aid ” rather than formal reparations.

51 Bui Ming Dung , “ Japan’s Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45, ” pp . 576-77 . We do allow that some Japanese academic writing has acknowledged the DRV claims as to the number of victims and general attribution as to cause.



result of many confused ' war time conditions. ' ” Undoubtedly, the pro-Saigon business-industrial lobby - eager to pick up where they left off - and which the combative Ambassador Konogaya seemed to represent, helped to consolidate this view. At the helm of this group stood the Japan-Vietnam Friendship Society, inaugurated at a meeting in Nihonbashi in 1955 although , 55 years on, it is now appropriately pro-Hanoi. Present was Tsukamoto Tsuyoshi ( Takeshi? ) , former Japanese consul general in Hanoi, and Shigemitsu Mamoru ( 1887-1957 ) , Japanese foreign minister at the end of the war and, following release from internment in Sugamo prison on war crimes charges, postwar foreign minister ( 1954-56 ) .

## Conclusions

Although Hanoi, together with a number of independent researchers, remains equivocal in apportioning blame to both French and Japanese, it has to be said that French and Japanese motives in stockpiling rice differed in fundamentals, and answered to entirely different needs. It also has to be said that, even if Tonkin had become increasingly dependent upon imports of Cochinchina rice over the previous two decades, France can hardly be blamed for the demographic increase in the north. The wild card in this equation was of course the US recourse to bombing in Indochina that often did not discriminate between civilian and military targets. In fact, the Americans were warned by the French of the consequences of destroying dikes in the north at this juncture.<sup>52</sup> The other somewhat inexplicable act - although believed - was the willful destruction of rice stocks at war end by the Japanese military.

If the law of unintended consequences has to be spelled out, then it is clear that continued rice requisitions demanded by the Japanese and implemented by the Vichy French in a situation of administrative breakdown and even semi-anarchy after the Japanese coup, magnified the impact of the disaster. Human failure and agency combined to betray the people of northern and north-central Vietnam. Affirming perhaps the more general thrust of Sen's arguments, food distribution mechanisms broke down, not in a situation of absolute scarcity as in some conflict situations, but in an environment where all signs pointed to the urgent need for surplus rice to be moved north from the Mekong delta. More than that, more rational and humane policies directed at northern Vietnam would have seen more land under rice cultivation, less rice diverted to industrial alcohol, etc., corn and other crops planted and reserved as a backup, fewer forced deliveries, greater availability of food crops in the marketplace, and the rational and humane use of stockpiled rice.

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52 Bui Ming Dung , “ Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45 , ” p . 618 .

Finally, I am in agreement with Bui Ming Dung<sup>53</sup> who argues that “ the Japanese occupation of Vietnam was the direct cause, in the final analysis, of several other factors, in turn affecting the famine, but their military efforts together with their economic policy for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere *per se* seem to have systematically played a role considerably greater than any other factors in the Vietnamese starvation. ” Even if the statistics are wanting as Ambassador Konogaya highlighted - especially as we remain largely ignorant of province and county level dynamics in the crucial months of 1945 - the basic facts surrounding the great starvation of 1944-45 are still persuasive of the general truths we have determined.

## Notes

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53 Fortunately, more sober minds prevailed in consideration of US bombing of the northern delta. On 6 August 1945 , Joseph C. Crew, Acting Secretary of State, communicated to the Secretary of State that military operations in Tonkin and the prospect of serial bombardment of the dikes in the Red River Delta - as evidently contemplated by military planners - would cause “ formidable danger to the population of this area. “ This was no understatement. At risk were the lives of eight million people in densely populated land cross-cut by dikes built up over the centuries. The gravity of the situation had been conveyed initially by the French Military Mission in Kunming to the Commander of the US Fourteenth Air Force. See *State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee ( SWNCC )* 35 Crew to Secretary of State , 6 August 1945 , SR. Ironically, the question of bombing of the dikes was replayed by Pentagon planners in the 1960s, just as nuclear options were weighed in some quarters.