The Great Depression of the 1930s had a profound impact on Vietnam. The prices of rubber and rice fell, leading to rising rural debts, unemployment and rural uprisings, such as in the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh. These provinces were among the poorest, had an old radical tradition, and have been called the ‘electrical fuses’ of Vietnam – when the system was under pressure they were the first to blow. The French put these uprisings down with great severity, even using planes to bomb demonstrators.

In February 1930, Ho Chi Minh brought together competing nationalist groups to establish the Vietnamese Communist (Vietnam Cong San Dang) Party, later renamed the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. He was inspired by the militant demonstrations of the European communist parties.

In 1940 Japan occupied Vietnam, as part of its imperial drive to control Southeast Asia. So nationalists now had to fight against the Japanese as well as the French. The League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh), which came to be known as the Vietminh, fought the Japanese occupation and recaptured Hanoi in September 1945. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was formed and Ho Chi Minh became Chairman.

6.1 The New Republic of Vietnam

The new republic faced a number of challenges. The French tried to regain control by using the emperor, Bao Dai, as their puppet. Faced with the French offensive, the Vietminh were forced to retreat to the hills. After eight years of fighting, the French were defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.

The Supreme French Commander of the French armies, General Henry Navarre had declared confidently in 1953 that they would soon be victorious. But on 7 May 1954, the Vietminh annihilated and captured more than 16,000 soldiers of the French Expeditionary Corps. The entire commanding staff, including a general, 16 colonels and 1,749 officers, were taken prisoner.

In the peace negotiations in Geneva that followed the French defeat, the Vietnamese were persuaded to accept the division of the country. North and south were split: Ho Chi Minh and the communists took

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**Source B**

**Declaration of independence**

The declaration of the new republic began by reaffirming the principles of the declaration of independence of the United States in 1771 and of the French Revolution in 1791 but added that the French imperialists do not follow these principles for they

‘have violated our fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.

‘In the field of politics, they have deprived us of all liberties. They have imposed upon us inhuman laws … They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood.

‘They have fettered public opinion; they have practiced **obscurantism** against our people …’

‘For these reasons, we members of the Provisional Government, representing the entire population of Vietnam, declare that we shall henceforth have no connection with imperialist France; that we abolish all the privileges which the French have arrogated to themselves on our territory …’

‘We solemnly proclaim to the entire world: Vietnam has the right to be free and independent, and in fact has become free and independent.’

**Source**

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**New words**

**Obscurantist** – Person or ideas that mislead
power in the north while Bao Dai’s regime was put in power in the south.

This division set in motion a series of events that turned Vietnam into a battlefield bringing death and destruction to its people as well as the environment. The Bao Dai regime was soon overthrown by a coup led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem built a repressive and authoritarian government. Anyone who opposed him was called a communist and was jailed and killed. Diem retained Ordinance 10, a French law that permitted Christianity but outlawed Buddhism. His dictatorial rule came to be opposed by a broad opposition united under the banner of the National Liberation Front (NLF).

With the help of the Ho Chi Minh government in the north, the NLF fought for the unification of the country. The US

**Box 2**

At Dien Bien Phu the French were outwitted by the Vietminh forces led by General Vo Nguyen Giap. The French Commander, Navarre, had not thought of all the problems he would face in the battle. The valley where French garrisons were located was flooded in the monsoon and the area was covered with bushes, making it difficult to move troops and tanks, or trace the Vietminh anti-aircraft guns hidden in the jungle.

From their base in the hills, the Vietminh surrounded the French garrisons in the valley below, digging trenches and tunnels to move without being detected. Supplies and reinforcements could not reach the besieged French garrison, the wounded French soldiers could not be moved, and the French airstrip became unusable because of continuous artillery fire.

Dien Bien Phu became a very important symbol of struggle. It strengthened Vietminh conviction in their capacity to fight powerful imperial forces through determination and proper strategy. Stories of the battle were retold in villages and cities to inspire people.
Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969)

Little is known about his early life mostly because Minh chose to downplay his personal background and identify himself with the cause of Vietnam. Probably born as Nguyen Van Thanh in Central Vietnam, he studied at French schools that produced leaders such as Ngo Dinh Diem, Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong. He briefly taught in 1910, and in 1911, learnt baking and took a job on a French liner on the Saigon-Marseilles run. Minh became an active member of the Comintern, meeting Lenin and other leaders. In May 1941, after 30 years abroad in Europe, Thailand and China, Minh finally returned to Vietnam. In 1943 he took the name Ho Chi Minh (He Who Enlightens). He became president of the Vietnam Democratic Republic. Ho Chi Minh died on 3 September 1969. He led the party successfully for over 40 years, struggling to preserve Vietnamese autonomy.

watched this alliance with fear. Worried about communists gaining power, it decided to intervene decisively, sending in troops and arms.

6.2 The Entry of the US into the War

US entry into the war marked a new phase that proved costly to the Vietnamese as well as to the Americans. From 1965 to 1972, over 3,403,100 US services personnel served in Vietnam (7,484 were women). Even though the US had advanced technology and good

Fig. 12 – American soldiers searching rice fields for Vietcongs.
medical supplies, casualties were high. About 47,244 died in battle and 303,704 were wounded. (Of those wounded, 23,014 were listed by the Veterans Administration to be 100 per cent disabled.)

This phase of struggle with the US was brutal. Thousands of US troops arrived equipped with heavy weapons and tanks and backed by the most powerful bombers of the time – B52s. The wide spread attacks and use of chemical weapons – Napalm, Agent Orange, and phosphorous bombs – destroyed many villages and decimated jungles. Civilians died in large numbers.

The effect of the war was felt within the US as well. Many were critical of the government for getting involved in a war that they saw as indefensible. When the youth were drafted for the war, the anger spread. Compulsory service in the armed forces, however, could be waived for university graduates. This meant that many of those sent to fight did not belong to the privileged elite but were minorities and children of working-class families.

The US media and films played a major role in both supporting as well as criticising the war. Hollywood made films in support of the war, such as John Wayne’s Green Berets (1968). This has been cited by many as an example of an unthinking propaganda film that was responsible for motivating many young men to die in the war. Other films were more critical as they tried to understand the reasons for this war. John Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979) reflected the moral confusion that the war had caused in the US.

The war grew out of a fear among US policy-planners that the victory of the Ho Chi Minh government would start a domino effect – communist governments would be established in other countries in the area. They underestimated the power of nationalism to move people to action, inspire them to sacrifice their home and family, live under horrific conditions, and fight for independence. They underestimated the power of a small country to fight the most technologically advanced country in the world.

**Box 4**

**Agent Orange: The Deadly Poison**

Agent Orange is a defoliant, a plant killer, so called because it was stored in drums marked with an orange band. Between 1961 and 1971, some 11 million gallons of this chemical was sprayed from cargo planes by US forces. Their plan was to destroy forests and fields, so that it would be easier to kill if there was no jungle cover for people to hide in. Over 14 per cent of the country's farmland was affected by this poison. Its effect has been staggering, continuing to affect people till today. Dioxin, an element of Agent Orange, is known to cause cancer and brain damage in children, and, according to a study, is also the cause of the high incidence of deformities found in the sprayed areas.

The tonnage of bombs, including chemical arms, used during the US intervention (mostly against civilian targets) in Vietnam exceeds that used throughout the Second World War.

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*New words*

**Napalm** – An organic compound used to thicken gasoline for firebombs. The mixture burns slowly and when it comes in contact with surfaces like the human body, it sticks and continues to burn. Developed in the US, it was used in the Second World War. Despite an international outcry, it was used in Vietnam.
6.3 The Ho Chi Minh Trail

The story of the Ho Chi Minh trail is one way of understanding the nature of the war that the Vietnamese fought against the US. It symbolises how the Vietnamese used their limited resources to great advantage. The trail, an immense network of footpaths and roads, was used to transport men and materials from the north to the south. The trail was improved from the late 1950s, and from 1967 about 20,000 North Vietnamese troops came south each month on this trail.

The trail had support bases and hospitals along the way. In some parts supplies were transported in trucks, but mostly they were carried by porters, who were mainly women. These porters carried about 25 kilos on their backs, or about 70 kilos on their bicycles.

Most of the trail was outside Vietnam in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia with branch lines extending into South Vietnam. The US regularly bombed this trail trying to disrupt supplies, but efforts to destroy this important supply line by intensive bombing failed because they were rebuilt very quickly.

Fig. 14 – The Ho Chi Minh trail. Notice how the trail moved through Laos and Cambodia.

Fig. 15 – Rebuilding damaged roads. Roads damaged by bombs were quickly rebuilt.
Letters of Mr Do Sam

Do Sam was a colonel in the North Vietnamese artillery regiment. He was part of the Tet Offensive started in 1968, to unify North and South Vietnam and win the battle against US. These are extracts from his letters written to his wife from the scene of battle. They show how, in the nationalist imagination, personal love mingles with love for the country and the desire for freedom. Sacrifice appears necessary for happiness.

Letter dated 6/1968

‘You ask me what “you miss most when you think of me?” I miss the environment of our wedding ... I miss the small cozy room with lots of memories. I miss ...

‘Right after our wedding I had to again leave to fight in order to protect the coastal areas of our country. What a short time we had before I had to station permanently in the South. The more I think, the more I feel for you; therefore I would have to be more determined to protect the country in order to bring happiness for millions of couples like us ...

‘Last night the car kept heading south. This morning I am writing to you sitting on a stone, surrounded by the sound of streams and the rustle of trees, as if they were celebrating our happiness. Looking forward to the day when we can return victoriously. Then we could live in greater happiness, couldn’t we? Wish you good health and miss me always …’

Letter dated 6/1968

‘Though you are always in my mind I have to focus on my work to contribute to the victory of the ongoing struggle of our nation ...

‘I have promised myself that only when the South is liberated and peace and happiness return to the people, only then could I be free to focus on building our own happiness, only then I could be satisfied with our family life …’

- Hung, Dang Vuong, ‘Những lá thư thời chiến Việt Nam’ (Letters Written during the War in Vietnam), publication of Hoi nha van (Writers' Association), 2005. Translation by Nguyen Quoc Anh.