

Le Mal Jaune:
The Memory of the Indochina War in France,
1954-2006

by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History
University of Toronto

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Abstract

National historical memory in France has often given rise to violent polemic. Controversial episodes of national history, such as the Second World War and Algerian conflict, have attracted considerable attention. Yet despite its obvious importance as a particularly violent war of decolonization and precursor to the Vietnam War, the First Indochina War (1946-54) has largely been ignored. In the context of decolonization and the beginning of the Cold War, however, Indochina offers a unique example of the complex relationship between event, commemoration, and memory.

This dissertation examines state commemorations, official and unofficial sites of memory, film and other media representations of the war, and several “flashpoint” events that have elicited particularly heated debates over the legacies of the war. The thematic structure allows me to bring together various vehicles and artefacts of memory, from monuments to commemorative ceremonies to veterans’ associations, along with less tangible expressions of memory expressed through public debates and film. I also analyze the tangible legacy of colonialism in the metropole: the ‘repatriate’ camps that housed primarily French

citizens of Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian origin after 1956. This chapter makes an important contribution to the history of immigration to France, which is critical to understanding issues currently facing this multicultural society.

Two dominant narratives emerge from my analysis. The first is maintained by a majority of veterans and elements of the political right and extreme right, and is characterized by themes of heroic soldiers combating communism and a belief in their abandonment by the metropolitan government and public. In some cases, a sense of duty to protect ‘Greater France’ is invoked, and in others, the duty to fight with the independent Vietnamese against their communist oppressors. The second narrative casts the conflict as a ‘dirty’ war of colonial reconquest. Though the primary goal of the dissertation is to elucidate the construction of particular narratives of war, I argue that this memorial process is inherently intertwined with the re-evaluation of the colonial project. The fundamental disagreement over the nature of the war, as either a battle against communism or a war of colonial reconquest, has prompted extensive debates over the relative merits of the colonial project and its putative resurrection in 1945.

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MAL JAUNE: [...] *Most veterans of the Indochina War keep their memories of Indochina close to their hearts, despite the war and their suffering. Many still talk about it with great emotion, as if they could still smell the fragrances, as if they were still watching the daily performance of Indochinese life. Cut off from the metropole for at least two years, dismayed by the news coming from France, many committed themselves completely to their mission of pacification. [...] For many, it was France that had become a foreign country [...]. When they returned, their memories set them apart from the rest of French society. They felt as though they no longer understood their compatriots, and more importantly that they were incapable of communicating with them. [...] The entirety of these reactions is known as le Mal jaune, and it separates the soldiers who served in Indochina from the others.*

~ Michel Bodin, *Dictionary of the Indochina War*

Introduction

“Actually, with respect to memory as with strategy, the French are often one war behind. The point of reference [for the Algerian War] is not the forgotten Indochina War, or even the Great War of 1914-1918. [...] The memory of the Algerian War has more in common with that of the Second World War: bitter memories of defeat and events that were decidedly less than glorious, that people would like equally to bury, of latent civil war and the guilty acts perpetrated by compatriots.”

~ Robert Frank¹

The Indochina War has often been referred to as ‘forgotten,’ which appears to be true when compared with the memorial processes of the German Occupation or the Algerian War. The Indochina conflict, so the story goes, was fought in the general indifference of the metropolitan public. It was a faraway conflict, and was fought by a professional army rather than by conscripts. Moreover, Indochina had never been a colony of massive settlement – the total French population was estimated at 23 700 in 1913, and at between 34 000 and 39 000 in 1940.² Although the war served as a dividing force within government and between political parties, groups and intellectuals, upon its conclusion it was largely overshadowed by the Second World War, which preceded it, and the Algerian War, which followed it. It was further eclipsed by the American war in Vietnam, which garnered far more media coverage and generated more interest and protest than the French conflict had. In fact, the American Vietnam War is often conceived of as the equivalent of the Franco-Algerian war (‘Algeria

¹ Robert Frank, “Les troubles de la mémoire française,” in Jean-Pierre Rioux, ed., *La Guerre d’Algérie et les Français* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), 604.

² To put these statistics in context, the total population in 1913 was 16 million, and in 1940, just under 23 million. In Algeria, on the other hand, the settler population was close to 1 million for a total population of approximately 8 million. The Indochina statistics 23 700 and 34 000 are cited by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë*, 2nd ed. (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 178. Eric Jennings cites figures closer to 39 000 for 1940 in *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe and Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 136.

was our Vietnam'), without any apparent awareness that France actually *had* its own Vietnam War. Moreover, as the above quote from Robert Frank illustrates, even when the 'forgotten' nature of the war is acknowledged, it is rarely presented as a worthwhile subject of investigation.

Yet this war, which doubled as a colonial conflict and a front of the Cold War, presents several unique opportunities for the study of historical memory. First, its dual nature provides the opportunity to engage with, and provide new perspectives on, the politics of memory of both decolonization and the Cold War.³ This is especially significant because studies of the decolonization of French empire have been overwhelmingly dominated by Algeria, and there are few studies of the memory of the Cold War outside of the former Eastern Bloc. Second, the memory of a traumatic event that has not experienced a real 'resurgence' in the public sphere offers new possibilities in the study of the construction and transmission of collective memory. In other words, how can we study the collective 'memory' of something that a majority of the collective is simply not particularly aware of?

To answer this question, this project engages with a variety of social, cultural and political vectors of memory. Although inspired by the work of Henry Rousso,⁴ Benjamin Stora⁵ and other historians of French memory, the objective of this dissertation is not to elaborate a chronology of the evolution of the collective memory of the Indochina War. Serge Tignères has already produced an excellent chronicle of the evolution of memory, which relies heavily on quantitative analysis.⁶ Rather, the goal here is to explore a variety of

³ In his article on "memory wars" in France, Daniel Lindenberg discusses the Boudarel affair within the context of communist and anticommunist memories. "Les guerres de mémoire en France," *Vingtième siècle* no.42 (1994), 84.

⁴ Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy(1944-198...)* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

⁵ Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

⁶ Serge Tignères, *Guerre d'Indochine et l'opinion publique française entre 1954 et 1994. Mémoire et histoire,*

vectors of memory, and to engage with the ongoing social and cultural impacts of the Indochina War. In many ways, these objectives mirror those of Jenny MacLeod in her edited volume *Defeat and Memory*, which presents cultural histories of defeat.⁷ Thus, while I explore ‘official’ commemorative sites and practices, as well as extensive media coverage related to the war, I also engage with the cultural production of film and literature. Moreover, the dissertation delves into the lived experience of the consequences of war through the analysis of an influential organization of veterans and former settlers, in addition to an examination of the so-called ‘repatriate’ camps that housed French citizens of ‘Indochinese’ origin beginning in 1955-56. An overview of the Indochina War and the evolution of collective memory are included below so as to provide a framework in which to place each of the chapters, which are each structured around particular themes. Due to this thematic structure, the dissertation does not proceed along strictly chronological lines, which necessarily entails covering the same periods several times.

What emerges from this study is the fact that there are at least two distinct narratives of the war which have given rise to different ‘memories,’ and that this division often coincides with political boundaries. On the one hand, there are those who interpret the war as being a war of colonial reconquest, one that was illegitimate in its objectives as well as its tactics. On the other hand, there are those who maintain that the war was first and foremost a struggle against communism. What is more, these narratives have evolved very little over time: they have been remarkably static. While these narratives appear to separate the colonial from the ideological aspects of the conflict, the two in fact are inextricably linked. As a

PhD dissertation, Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1999. Part of his dissertation was subsequently published in a volume co-written with Alain Ruscio entitled *Dien Bien Phu: Mythes et réalités, 1954-2004. Cinquante ans de passions françaises* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005).

⁷ Jenny MacLeod, ed., *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era* (London: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2008).

result, the subject of controversy or debate is never solely the Indochina War, but inevitably comes to include a discussion of the colonial system and the imperial project.

Because of the complex nature of the conflict, a brief synopsis of its origins and its evolution will be provided before moving on to a more in-depth discussion of the evolution of public memory from the war's end in 1954 until the first celebration of the national day of homage to the dead of the war in 2006. This discussion will not only break down this 52 year span into smaller periods and highlight key events, but will also engage with the emerging narratives and those who have contributed to them.

The Colonial Period, the Second World War and the French Indochina War

While the first French presence in Southeast Asia goes back to the missionary activity of the 17th century⁸ and the signature of the 1787 treaty between Louis XVI and Nguyen Phuc Canh (later known by his imperial name of Gia Long), formal French political and military involvement only came about in 1858 with the annexation of Cochinchina, the southern-most part of modern-day Vietnam. Successive campaigns resulted in the expansion of French control throughout much of the peninsula, and the Indochinese Union was established in 1887. Territorial expansion was essentially completed with the consolidation of control of Laos in 1893, following the Franco-Siamese war, although French and Siamese authorities continued to quarrel over borderlands. At its apogee, then, the Indochinese Union consisted of 5 territories: Cambodia, Laos, Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. Despite the common reference to Indochina as a single entity, union, or federation, it was in fact a patchwork of governing statutes ranging from formal colonies and protectorates to mixed

⁸ French Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes first went to Hanoi in 1624, and representatives of the Paris Foreign Missions Society established themselves in the region in the early 1660s.

regimes.

The Second World War brought a new dimension to colonial rule in Indochina with the fall of France in 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy regime. A power-sharing agreement was reached with expansionist Japan, which by 1942 wielded control over much of Southeast Asia. In fact, French Indochina soon became the only European or American colonial regime to be left in place anywhere in East and Southeast Asia – in the Dutch Indies, Hong Kong, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and elsewhere the Japanese removed the ruling powers. The impact of the Japanese presence on the indigenous populations, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, was to encourage resistance to European colonial powers. Japanese supremacy in Indochina was completed on 9 March 1945 with the overthrow (*coup de force*) of the French colonial government led by Admiral Jean Decoux, as a result of which the French population (military and civilian) was brutally attacked and forced into internment camps and designated areas of Hanoi and Saigon. Shortly thereafter, independence was granted to Cambodia, Laos and Annam-Tonkin (the fate of Cochinchina was yet to be decided). Barely five months later, the Japanese capitulated following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Armed with considerable popular support gained during the famine of 1945, the Viet Minh took advantage of the resulting power vacuum to establish a government on 16 August. Emperor Bao Dai, who had become head of an independent Vietnamese state under Japanese “tutelage” then abdicated on 25 August, transferring power to the new government. Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnamese independence on 2 September 1945,⁹ the same day that the Japanese formally surrendered.

⁹ Stein Tonnesson clarifies that this was a confirmation of independence rather than a declaration; strictly speaking, Bao Dai had declared Vietnamese independence on 11 March 1945 and ceded that authority to the government of the DRV when he abdicated. *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 12. For more on the August Revolution, see David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for*

Chinese nationalist and British forces were dispatched to the northern and southern regions respectively to oversee the transition from Japanese control.

In the meantime, the French provisional government under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle had outlined the postwar plan for Indochina in a declaration on 24 March 1945.¹⁰ This statement called for the creation of an Indochinese Federation, which would be part of the new French Union, all of which fell in line with the policies presented at the conference convened in Brazzaville in 1944 to discuss imperial reform. The Lao monarchy willingly sided with the French, as did the Cambodian monarchy, eventually. Ho Chi Minh and other representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), however, proved less enthusiastic. The *Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient* (CEFEO; French Far East Expeditionary Corps), led by General Philippe Leclerc, and sent ostensibly to defeat the Japanese, not the Viet-Minh, had re-established control of Cochinchina with relative ease in the last months of 1945. Despite this use of force, Leclerc himself was adamant that negotiation was the only way to restore the French position.

Negotiations between Ho and the French delegate Jean Sainteny began in September 1945, and the first agreement was signed on 6 March 1946. This agreement established the French government's recognition of the DRV as a 'free state' (*état libre*), albeit within the context of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union,¹¹ and the DRV's acceptance of the replacement of Chinese troops with French soldiers as required by international agreements. Finally, the agreement required that both parties agree to pursue future

Power (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Excerpts of the statement can be found in Philippe Devillers, *Paris-Saïgon-Hanoï: Les archives de la guerre, 1944-1947* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 53-54.

¹¹ The DRV was to have control over its government, parliament, army and finances, but its foreign policy was to remain under French control and it would be integrated into an economic union with the rest of the Indochinese Federation.

negotiations. The agreement was plagued with ambiguities: what was meant by “free state”? What were the territorial boundaries of the DRV? The reunification of all three *ky* (formerly Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina) was out of the question for the French. These ambiguities were to be resolved through negotiations at Dalat (beginning in April 1946) and Fontainebleau (beginning in July), but no firm conclusions were reached, despite the signing of a partial agreement in the form of a *modus vivendi* in September. For many, the failure of these negotiations represented a missed opportunity at peace.¹²

Tensions between the French and the DRV were on the rise, and were complicated by the differences in opinion of French leaders; while Leclerc and Sainteny favoured negotiation, High Commissioner Admiral Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu maintained that force was necessary. The French conviction that the Viet Minh was preparing an attack, and the Viet Minh conviction that the French intended to re-establish colonial authority left no room for manoeuvre. Pinpointing the actual beginning of the war is, as Alain Ruscio states, “not so easy.”¹³ The first major incident involved the French bombing of the port of Haiphong on 23 November 1946. This was followed in on December 19th by the Viet Minh attacks on French civilians and military in Hanoi. Both of these events have been identified as constituting the ‘true’ beginning of the war, but most historians recognize that a sequence of events, rather than a single incident, led to the outbreak of war. Others, like Michel Bodin, argue that while these events were critical, the war really began with the first skirmishes between the Viet Minh and French parachutists in August 1945.¹⁴ The complexity of the situation is such that regardless of whether one accepts the events of November 23rd or December 19th as the onset

¹² This thesis was first advanced by chief negotiator Jean Sainteny in his 1953 work *Histoire d’une paix manquée* (Paris: Amiot-Dumont).

¹³ Alain Ruscio, *La guerre française d’Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Éditions complexes, 1992), 92.

¹⁴ Michel Bodin, *Dictionnaire de la guerre d’Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris : Commission française d’histoire militaire; Institut de stratégie comparée; Economica, 2004), 282.

of war, it is still difficult to assign firm responsibility to one side or the other.¹⁵ The issue of origins has influenced debates beyond veteran and academic communities. Speaking in 1990 to the National Assembly about the wall of names planned for the Memorial to the Indochina Wars, Socialist deputy Jean-Louis Dumont inquired as to “which date to use as the starting point of the aforementioned Indochina War?”¹⁶

The war itself can be divided into two phases, the first of which lasted from 1946 to late 1949 and was characterized by the objective of colonial reconquest,¹⁷ although re-establishing complete control of the peninsula was eventually dismissed as impractical. The second phase, from 1950 to 1954, was heavily influenced by the Cold War context and the internationalization of the conflict.¹⁸ The victory of the Communists in neighbouring China in October 1949 exerted a significant impact on international power politics in general and the Indochina War in particular. The DRV gained not only military and ideological support, but the new Chinese government also officially recognized the DRV on 19 January 1950, followed by the USSR on the 31st. Barely a week later, the United States recognized the new State of Vietnam (*État du Viet-Nam*) under Bao Dai’s leadership, which was created as the result of years of negotiations between the former sovereign and the French authorities.

¹⁵ Philippe Devillers and Stein Tonnesson have both studied the archives extensively with respect to the events of December 19th, but neither was able to draw firm conclusions, although Devillers does argue that the Viet Minh were essentially manipulated and pressured by the French into war. The crux of the issue is whether the attack on the French was undertaken on orders of the Viet Minh leadership, or whether it was launched by soldiers on the ground. See Devillers, *Paris-Saïgon-Hanoï* and Tonnesson’s most recent work, *Vietnam 1946*.

¹⁶ *Journal officiel de la République française*, Débats de l’Assemblée nationale, 29 October 1990, 4504.

¹⁷ Martin Thomas has argued that the recommitment to empire was intrinsically connected with the reconstruction of a multi-party republican democracy in the post-1945 period. “French Imperialist Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950,” in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1130-151.

¹⁸ It should be noted that not all historians and historical writers periodize the war in the same way: among those who break the war into two phases, the dates can vary from 1945 to 1946 as starting points, and 1948, 1949 or 1950 as end points. Some choose to subdivide the war even further: Amédée Thévenet, for example, speaks of three phases (1945-1947, 1948-1950 and 1951-1954); Thévenet, *La guerre d’Indochine racontée par ceux qui l’ont vécue* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 2001).

Envisioned as early as 1947, the so-called 'Bao Dai solution' was in reality a scheme through which France could both maintain its influence in the region and have a stronger base with which to combat the Communist DRV. Negotiations had been officially initiated with Bao Dai in 1948, resulting in the granting of nominal independence to the State of Vietnam under his control, which would be an Associated State within the French Union. The initial agreement was signed in Halong Bay in June 1948, but was not confirmed until Bao Dai met with French president Vincent Auriol in March 1949. The State of Vietnam was envisioned as a nationalist stronghold that could combat the Communist forces of Ho Chi Minh; this was therefore a civil war in addition to being a war of decolonization and a hot spot of the Cold War. Moreover, while combat was heavily concentrated in Vietnamese territory, Laos and Cambodia were inevitably drawn into the conflict. The internationalization of the war was further reinforced with American contributions of funds and materiel; by 1954, the US was contributing between 60% and 80% of French war expenses.¹⁹

The final battle of the war was fought at Dien Bien Phu, close to the Lao border. Operation *Castor* was initiated in November 1953, with the objective of blocking the Viet Minh's path to Laos. It was also hoped that a decisive victory would enable a rapid cease-fire and give France the upper hand in peace negotiations. A fortified camp was built on a series of hills in the midst of what was often referred to as a basin (*cuvette*). This is a somewhat misleading label, since the camp was located on a plain of roughly 16 km in length, surrounded by hills so high that the French military command did not think it possible for the Viet Minh to establish heavy artillery there. This turned out to be a serious miscalculation, and the French camp, which was supplied by air, was under siege by March 17th with no

¹⁹ Michel Bodin, *Dictionnaire de la guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Éditions Economica, 2004), 93.

possibility of flying planes in or out. After 57 days of intense battle, the French suffered a major defeat. Of the 15 000 troops on the French side, nearly 10 000 were taken prisoner; approximately 3000 were killed, and some 2000 deserted (primarily ethnic minorities).²⁰ The Geneva accords, providing for the scheduled withdrawal of French troops and the division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel, were signed and ratified on July 20th and 21st. Between September 1945 and July 1954, a total of 488 560 soldiers were sent to the Indochinese peninsula; of these, there were 233 467 French, 72 833 legionnaires, 122 920 North Africans and 60 340 Africans.²¹ In addition, there were hundreds of thousands of Indochinese troops that served with the French forces or in associated armies. By the time of the Geneva conference, some 110 000 troops from the French side had been killed in combat or presumed dead.²²

French Public Opinion, Reactions and Resistance

The Fourth Republic was born during the Indochina War, and was arguably irrevocably damaged by it. The fledgling republic was faced with the void left by de Gaulle's departure, extensive reconstruction, new diplomatic alignments and initiatives in addition to turmoil in the colonies. The situation was compounded by instability: 19 governments succeeded one another in France during the period from 1945 to 1954. Politically, France was divided: the French Communist Party (PCF; *Parti communiste français*), which had garnered considerable support in the immediate postwar period, was forced out of government in May 1947 as a result of profound disagreements over the Indochina War.

²⁰ Jacques Dalloz, *La guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 232.

²¹ Michel Bodin, *La France et ses soldats, Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 7.

²² Bodin, *Dictionnaire de la guerre d'Indochine*, 214.

Although the Fourth Republic was not dissolved until 1958, many have concluded, as did the makers of the documentary *The Republic Died at Dien Bien Phu*,²³ that the Indochina War doomed the Fourth Republic.

Set against the background of this tumultuous political experience of the war, what were the reactions and opinions of the French public? Responses ranged from indifference to committed protest. Both Jacques Dalloz and Alain Ruscio have used opinion polls from the well-respected *Institut français d'opinion publique* (IFOP; French National Institute of Public Opinion) to contend that there was general indifference on the part of the metropolitan public towards the conflict.²⁴ Ruscio's study in particular reveals two major trends. First, opinions of various aspects of the war shifted considerably over the period 1945 to 1954. However, Ruscio argues that this shift in public opinion must be contextualized within the larger trend of what he terms "a massive disinterest" in the Indochina War.²⁵ Polls centred on what measures should be taken in Indochina were conducted between 1947 and 1954. In September 1947, 37% of respondents stated that "order should be restored and reinforcements sent" (as opposed to 15% who felt that France should negotiate with the Viet Minh and 22% who thought that France should end the war and recognize Vietnamese independence). By February 1954, only 7% of respondents maintained that order should be restored, while 42% felt that negotiating with the Viet Minh was the best approach.²⁶ These

²³ Philippe Devillers, Jean Lacouture, Jérôme Kanapa, *La République est morte à Dien Bien Phu* (1974).

²⁴ Dalloz, *La guerre d'Indochine*, 141; Ruscio, *La guerre française d'Indochine*, 93-104; Alain Ruscio, "L'opinion française et la guerre d'Indochine (1945-1954). Sondages et témoignages," *Vingtième Siècle*, no. 29 (1991): 35-45.

²⁵ Ruscio, *La guerre française d'Indochine*, 93.

²⁶ Statistics cited in Ruscio, *La guerre française d'Indochine*, 102. The option to negotiate with the Viet Minh gained steady support over the course of the war: from 15% in September 1947, to 24% in October 1950, 35% in May 1953 and 42% in February 1954. Likewise, the option to re-establish order and send reinforcements dropped from 37% in September 1947, to 19% in July 1949, back up to 27% in October 1950, 15% in May 1953 and 7% in February 1954. The increase in October 1950 may be explained by the intensification of the Korean war, which brought renewed attention to the region, as well as heightened fears of the spread of

statistics unequivocally indicate a significant shift in the public's commitment to maintaining French involvement in Indochina.

Both Ruscio and Dalloz have also used poll results to determine the degree of general interest in the conflict over time. When respondents were asked questions related to their interest in the conflict, rather than direct questions about how best to resolve the situation, they appear to indicate considerable disinterest. An IFOP poll conducted January 1948 about the most significant events of 1947 resulted in so few references to the war that they were collected under the 6% of "miscellaneous" answers. Furthermore, a poll from May 1953 asking how often respondents followed the news from Indochina revealed that only 30% did so regularly, while the remaining 70% did so "from time to time" or not at all. Overall, between 20% and 30% of respondents from 1945 to 1954 declared themselves to be without an opinion on events in Indochina, although there was a peak in interest in 1954.

While these appear to be damning statistics, and have been interpreted by a number of historians as such, public reception was likely far more nuanced in actuality. Pierre Cenerelli reminds us that while there was certainly a great measure of indifference in public opinion of the war, there were equally high levels of "no opinion" responses to polls on a variety of other topics.²⁷ The standard explanation for this lack of interest is that war was being fought in a far-off place by professional soldiers for control of a colony with a small European population. Dalloz and Cenerelli, however, also point to the "poorly informed" public whose ignorance was hardly corrected by politicians or the press. Cenerelli's dissertation on media coverage of the war reveals that the public was often on the receiving end of contradictory and incomplete news reports, which naturally made it difficult to fully appreciate the

communism. Ruscio also points to this larger context with respect to related statistics.

²⁷ Pierre Cenerelli, *Revisions of Empire: The French Media and the Indochina War, 1946-1954*, PhD dissertation, Brandeis University (2000), 24.

intricacies of the conflict.²⁸

Although a significant portion of the public expressed relative indifference to the war, there was nonetheless a growing and active opposition movement. Protests never reached levels comparable to protests against the Algerian War, or even the American Vietnam War, but they can nonetheless not be underestimated. Early opposition was undertaken primarily to the French Communist Party and the *Confédération générale de travail* (CGT; General Confederation of Labour), as well as a few smaller organizations with ties to the PCF.²⁹ Following its ouster from the government in 1947, the PCF became all the more vocal about its opposition to the war, and by May 1949 had launched their slogan “Not one more man, not one more penny for the war in Indochina.” Actions against the “dirty war”³⁰ had evolved from distributing tracts and publishing antiwar articles in *L’Humanité* to workers refusing to load military equipment onto ships to be transported to the conflict. Many veterans have claimed that there was also rampant sabotage, over everything from medical supplies to weapons.³¹ By the end of 1949, incidents of refusal to load supplies had multiplied, and there were a number of strikes by the dockers of the port of Marseilles in 1950. In fact, the government perceived the potential threat of these obstructions to be severe enough to pass a law in March 1950 against “acts of sabotage against army equipment, those who obstruct the free movement of military equipment, and those who undertake the demoralization of the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ For more on the PCF and the war, see Alain Ruscio, *Les Communistes français et la guerre d’Indochine, 1944-1954* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985).

³⁰ The term was first used by Hubert Beuve-Méry in *Le Monde* on 17 January 1948.

³¹ Robert Bonnafous makes claims of sabotage in *Les Prisonniers de guerre du corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient dans les camps Viet-minh (1945-1954)* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 1985), 121-123. In his *Dictionnaire de la guerre d’Indochine*, Michel Bodin is careful to specify that there were many reports of sabotage, and that veterans are certain that it contributed to their defeat, but that ultimately responsibility is nearly impossible to assign (pages 238-240).

army.”³² This law increased the number of protestors who were subsequently incarcerated: by July 1950, forty-four had been sentenced to time in prison. Some, like Raymonde Dien and Henri Martin, gained considerable notoriety. Along with approximately a hundred other protestors, Dien had tried to block the departure of a train carrying military equipment in Saint-Pierre-des-Corps (Indre-et-Loire) by lying on the tracks. Sentenced to a year in prison, she was released after nine months. Henri Martin’s experience was both more complicated and the subject of greater attention; he quickly became a *cause célèbre* for protestors and left-wing intellectuals.

A former member of the Resistance, Martin had volunteered for service in the navy, ostensibly to liberate Indochina from the Japanese. By the time he arrived, however, the Japanese had been defeated and French troops were soon engaged in anti-Viet Minh activity. Opposed to such actions, he asked to be repatriated, but his multiple requests were denied, until he finally returned to France in December 1947. He was arrested in March 1950 and charged with the distribution of antiwar pamphlets and the sabotage of the *Dixmude*. While he admitted the former, he strenuously denied the latter, and yet was sentenced to five years in prison despite a lack of evidence. The “Henri Martin Affair” lasted until his early release in August 1953, thanks to a pardon from president Vincent Auriol. In that time, he became a symbol for antiwar protest: special issues of magazines were devoted to him,³³ poems and songs were written about him or dedicated to him,³⁴ Picasso and others sketched portraits of

³² Law of 8 March 1950, cited in Dalloz, *La guerre d’Indochine*, 166.

³³ *Regards*, special issue, “Henri Martin, marin de France,” 20 October 1950; *Regards*, special issue, “Henri Martin, marin de la liberté,” 22 February 1950, supplement to issue 340; *La Défense*, special issue, July 1952.

³⁴ Jacques Prévert dedicated *Entendez-vous, gens du Vietnam* to Martin, Raymond Lavigne published a book of twelve poems about the affair in *Poèmes pour Henri Martin* (Paris: Éditions Pierre Seghers, 1951) and Serge Nigg and Françoise Monod wrote the *Cantate pour Henri Martin*, which also referred to Raymonde Dien.

him, a play entitled *Drame à Toulon* was written about the events,³⁵ a support committee was created,³⁶ and numerous intellectuals rallied to the cause. Jean-Paul Sartre in particular headed a collective to publish *L’Affaire Henri Martin*.³⁷ There was a backlash, naturally, which targeted Martin as well as PCF militants more broadly speaking.³⁸ Henri Martin was not the only volunteer who disagreed with the campaign he was being asked to wage; writer Jules Roy, who served in Indochina in 1952-53, also had a very public break with the army.³⁹

The PCF and affiliated groups were not alone in protesting the war, although they have certainly monopolized the leftist antiwar and anticolonial narrative of the conflict. The left-wing Christian newspaper *Témoignage chrétien* in particular was active in reporting news from the war, and was actively engaged in publicizing the use of torture by French troops.⁴⁰ The use of torture by the French forces during the Indochina War is a topic that has yet to gain the kind of attention that it has in the context of the Algerian War.⁴¹ Roy’s memoirs evoke the fact that “in the colony, we systematically tortured suspects, we burned

³⁵ Claude Martin and Henri Delmas, *Drame à Toulon*. According to Ted Freeman’s foreword to a 1998 re-edition of the script, the play was performed some 300 times to a total audience of 100 000 (University of Exeter Press, 1998).

³⁶ The committee was headed by André Marty, and was involved in many of the aforementioned initiatives, as well as publishing pamphlets, including the small booklet *Pour la libération d’Henri Martin* (Société nationale des entreprises de guerre, undated), *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*, O pièce 41398.

³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre et al, *L’Affaire Henri Martin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953). Hélène Parmelin, a member of the PCF, also published *Matricule 2078. L’affaire Henri Martin* (Paris: Les Éditeurs Français Réunis) in 1953.

³⁸ See, for example, *Le cas Henri Martin* (Paris: MLS, 1953), which opens with a section entitled “How the Communist Party builds a symbol.” *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*, PS pièce 1329.

³⁹ See his reflections on the war in *Mémoires barbares* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989). His reflections on his 1953 *Bataille de la rizière* (Paris: Gallimard), a book which was criticized by the left and the right, are also very informative.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Jacques Chegaray, “A côté de la machine à écrire, le mobilier d’un poste comprend une machine à faire parler. Les tortures en Indochine,” *Témoignage chrétien*, July 29 1949. For more on the Christian opposition to the war, see Sabine Rousseau, *La colombe et le napalm: des chrétiens français contre les guerres d’Indochine et du Vietnam, 1945-1975* (Paris: CNRS, 2002)

⁴¹ See, for example, Henri Alleg, *La Question* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1958); Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La torture dans la République. Essais d’histoire et de politique contemporaine (1954-1962)* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972) and most recently, Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l’armée pendant la guerre d’Algérie: 1954-1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

villages with napalm, we snuffed out everything that moved: peasants, women, children, buffalo.”⁴² After witnessing the use of the *gégène* on a group of peasants, one after the other, in a pagoda, Roy made his decision to leave the army.⁴³ Civilian Lyliane Veyrenc, a film operator, also describes the torture that she witnessed during the war.⁴⁴ In terms of memory, the use of torture is yet another aspect of the war that has garnered little attention, despite its prominence in narratives of the Franco-Algerian and American-Vietnam wars.

‘Memory’ and the Emerging Narratives of the War

The characterization of the war as utterly ‘forgotten’ is somewhat misleading; as Serge Tignères and Alain Ruscio have demonstrated, the battle of Dien Bien Phu has remained a potent symbol over the decades since the French defeat. As Ruscio has argued elsewhere, it stands out among other brutal French battles like Sedan and Verdun as being “the greatest blunder in centuries and centuries of strategy.”⁴⁵ However, the prominence of Dien Bien Phu has not carried over to the war as a whole; rather, the conflict itself remains fairly obscure. Hugues Tertrais and Pierre Journoud have argued that this ‘repression’ was actually enabled by the battle’s acquisition of mythical status even before the defeat.⁴⁶

There has been no ‘resurgence’ of the memory of the war, as there has been for France’s other ‘black holes’ of memory. There has been no breaking of the mirror, the likes

⁴² Jules Roy, *Mémoires barbares* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 396. The *gégène*, which would become associated primarily with tactics of the Algerian War, was developed first in Indochina and involved using the electrical current generated by machines like field telephones and tape recorders to shock would-be informants.

⁴⁴ Lyliane Veyrenc, *Opératrice de cinéma en Indochine* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Debosses, 1955), 59-61.

⁴⁵ Alain Ruscio, “Dien Bien Phu: Du coup de génie à l’aberration. Ou, Comment les contemporains ont vécu l’ultime bataille de la guerre française d’Indochine,” *Revue française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* tome 72, issue 268 (1985), 335.

⁴⁶ Pierre Journoud and Hugues Tertrais, *Paroles de Dien Bien Phu. Les survivants témoignent* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004), 13.

of which Henry Rousso has chronicled for the Vichy period. This is not to say, however, that there have not been similar processes of constructing and maintaining memories of the war; quite the opposite. Veterans and some members of the political right and extreme right have been quite active in the promotion of their interpretation of the war, and in lobbying the government for greater official commemoration of those who fought it.⁴⁷ Portions of the left, and particularly the French Communist Party, have also sought to present a different interpretation of the conflict. These two primary narratives of the Indochina War have evolved little since the mid-1950s, arguably *because* they have not been challenged by French society at large in the same manner as the Occupation and the Algerian War.

The divisions between pro and anticolonial groups, pro and antiwar groups, communists and non-communists, along with the numerous other divisions generated by the Indochina War have resulted in two primary narratives of the war. These narratives were established in the postwar years, and have remained fairly static over the decades since. Groups and individuals have been more or less vocal about their interpretations of the war depending on context and circumstances, but even these ebbs and flows have not contributed to any significant evolution of memory. In the case of group memory, the narratives promoted by veterans' groups continue to emphasize sacrifice and heroism on the one hand, and the evils of communism on the other. There is also a strong sense among these groups of having been overlooked or forgotten, a theme evident in Erwan Bergot's *Secret Services in Indochina: The Forgotten Heroes* (1979), Louis Stien's *The Forgotten Soldiers* (1993) and Alain Vincent's *Indochina: The Forgotten War* (2007).⁴⁸ The static nature of these narratives

⁴⁷ Stephen Tyre has examined the ways in which veterans and the pro-colonial French right have shaped a particular memory of the battle of Dien Bien Phu in "The Memory of French Military Defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Defence of French Algeria," in Jenny MacLeod, ed., *Defeat and Memory*, 214-232.

⁴⁸ Erwan Bergot, *Les Services secrètes en Indochine: Les héros oubliés* (Bagneux: Le Livre de Paris, 1979);

is apparent in individual testimony as well. The case of air ambulance nurse Geneviève de Galard represents a good case study to illustrate this phenomenon, as the narrative *about* her is as unchanging as the testimony that she herself relates to the public. Hailed during the siege at Dien Bien Phu as a hero for her medical assistance to, and moral support of, the wounded, she was also presented as the only woman on site, despite the fact that there was at least one group of prostitutes (the women of the *bordel militaire de campagne*) who became makeshift nurses.⁴⁹ Even as this fact became more widely known, Galard continued to be referred to as the only woman at Dien Bien Phu. Moreover, her own stories about her experiences centre on a few select incidents, such as the story of the young soldier who had lost both arms and a leg, but who was convinced that when the war was over he would take her dancing.⁵⁰

The dual nature of the war as a colonial conflict and a hot spot of the Cold War is reflected in the narratives that have been created and transmitted by particular groups, who are seeking to impose their interpretation as the standard for collective memory. The narrative of the ‘dirty’ war of colonial reconquest has been maintained by many members of the political left. The PCF has long touted its position as the primary defender of the interests

Louis Stien, *Les soldats oubliés: De Cao Bang aux camps de rééducation du Viêt-minh* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993); Alain Vincent, *Indochine: La guerre oubliée* (Paris: A. Sutton, 2007). Bergot and Stien are both veterans of the war.

⁴⁹ Laurent Greilsamer addresses this phenomenon in “Il y a 50 ans la légende de Geneviève de Galard,” *Le Monde*, July 13 2004. Former colonial administrator Edouard Axelrad’s novel *Marie Casse-croûte* includes a fictionalized account of a BMC at Dien Bien Phu (Paris: Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1985). This phenomenon is obviously indicative of the desire to cast the heroes of the story as those who are morally beyond reproach; the question of honouring prostitutes has been a contentious one. Moreover, the focus on de Galard reveals the construction of a very masculine memory of the war; she is described, and often describes herself, in nothing but the most feminine terms. She was a nurse, a friend and a mother who helped ease the suffering of the wounded, never a masculine woman fighting alongside the men. The gendered dimension of the battle is also evident in the choice of feminine names for the hills that the French sought to defend (Isabelle, Dominique, Huguette, etc.).

⁵⁰ One of the first incarnations of this story is published in Lucien Bornert, *Les rescapés de l’enfer. Les héros de Dien Bien Phu* (Paris: Nouvelles Presses Mondiales, 1954), 53. It has since been published in her memoirs, *Une femme à Dien Bien Phu* (Paris: Éditions des Arènes, 2003), 86. It has also been featured in several television and radio interviews over the years.

of the colonized, and whenever the subject of the war is raised, takes the opportunity to remind the public of its antiwar position. As a symbol of antiwar protest, Henri Martin continues to figure prominently in this rhetoric, and provides an alternate hero to those like Marcel Bigeard and Geneviève de Galard, so favoured by the political right.

In contrast to this narrative of the war as one of colonial reconquest, the second dominant narrative emphasizes the Cold War dimension, characterizing the conflict as a battle against the expansion of communism. This narrative also places a heavy emphasis on the courage and heroism of the soldiers, of every nationality, who fought for France. This heroism is reinforced by two key claims: that the French expeditionary corps was in fact fighting to protect the Vietnamese people from the horrors of a totalitarian state, and that the military had been all but abandoned by the government and the French public. The first claim entails the outright rejection of the argument that the war was one of colonial reconquest. It is also often an opportunity to redress France's colonial reputation, not only by portraying the French forces as fighting to defend their long-time colonial partners, but by contrasting life under colonial control with life under Communist control. The plight of refugees fleeing the peninsula in the mid to late 1970s following the establishment of Communist regimes is frequently used as evidence for this claim. A quote from Geneviève de Galard sums this position up nicely:

It's horrible to think that it took the boat people and the fall of the Berlin wall to open the eyes of those last few who still believed that in 1954 the Indochina War was a colonial war. For my part, I never felt that I was participating in a colonialist battle, but rather than I was helping the Vietnamese combat communism – a war of liberation.⁵¹

The second claim, of a general abandonment, is not unwarranted. The succession of French governments did not elaborate consistent and clear objectives, and there were frequent

⁵¹ M.R., "Portrait de Geneviève de Galard. Des mots pour se souvenir," *Historia*, March 1992, 61.

miscommunications, and even outright clashes, between authorities in Paris and civilian and military authorities in Saigon and Hanoi. As has been demonstrated, the general public was both ill-informed and often indifferent to the war and those who were fighting it. In addition, many veterans felt victimized by protesters at the port in Marseilles as they were returning from or departing for Indochina; many claim to have been verbally or physically attacked because of their military service, and maintain that even the wounded were subjected to this treatment.⁵²

In the last days of Dien Bien Phu and the immediate postwar period, public attention focused on a handful of heroes of the siege, most notably commander Christian de Castries, doctor Paul Grauwin and air ambulance nurse Geneviève de Galard, who was heralded in France and the US as the “angel of Dien Bien Phu,” and Major Marcel Bigeard, who distinguished himself in leading counteroffensives after having been parachuted into the fortified camp. Of these four, De Castries quickly drew back from the spotlight, granting only a handful of interviews before secluding himself altogether. After the initial media blitz in the immediate postwar period, Geneviève de Galard also took a step back from the spotlight. She would later return, however, and along with Marcel Bigeard and the veteran and filmmaker Pierre Schoendoerffer, would constitute a ‘holy trinity’ of commentators on the Indochina War.⁵³

It was not until 1964 that the Bigeard-Schoendoerffer combination fully took form.

⁵² See, for example, the claims made by Jean-Marie Le Pen in “Le message de Léonidas,” *Chant funèbre pour Pnom Penh et Saïgon* (Paris: SPL, 1975), 206-213. He concludes that “in short, the Communists were waging war in France against France” (p211). Several accounts of this treatment are also rendered in Thévenet’s *La guerre d’Indochine racontée par ceux qui l’ont vécue*, 571-578.

⁵³ This is not to say that commentary was limited to these three actors, but rather that they became de facto representatives of the veteran community. Other veterans, including prominent ones like Jacques Massu and Raoul Salan were also frequently quoted and interviewed, but the trio of Bigeard, Schoendoerffer and de Galard were frequently front and centre.

Bigéard had gone on to serve in Algeria, and so was not fully involved with commentary on Indochina until after 1962. Schoendoerffer, on the other hand, was a relative unknown until 1964 and the release of his film *La 317ème section*, based on his novel of the same name. The film was well received, and when the televised current affairs program *Cinq colonnes à la une* sought commentators for the screening of Viet Minh footage from Dien Bien Phu, they contacted Schoendoerffer as well as Bigéard. Since then, documentaries, interviews and special editions of magazines or television shows on the topic of Indochina have more often than not featured one or both of these figures. Schoendoerffer and Bigéard have each penned several prefaces to works on the war, and are expected to comment on other historical works. De Galard did not return fully to the spotlight until the early 1990s, though she did make a point of publicly voicing her opinion when she felt that veterans were being badly treated. In 1984, for example, she published an open letter to documentarian Henri de Turenne in *Le Figaro*, in which she protested his recent work.⁵⁴ Bigéard and Schoendoerffer's opinions were solicited as well. The three gained special prominence in the early 1990s, and were solicited for comment on films, the Georges Boudarel affair, Mitterrand's trip to Vietnam, and other events and incidents. They have been interviewed for the evening news, have been guests on current affairs programs like *Bouillon de culture*, and have been the subject of, or featured in, numerous documentaries.

The Chronology of Memory

While the substance of the two dominant narratives has changed little over time, the degree of public engagement with the Indochina War has experienced ebbs and flows since

⁵⁴ Geneviève de Galard, "Dien Bien Phu à la télévision. Lettre ouverte à Henri de Turenne," *Le Figaro*, February 4-5 1984.

1954. Given the thematic approach of the chapters, it is useful to establish an overarching chronological framework.⁵⁵

1954-1963

Not only did the defeat at Dien Bien Phu shock the nation, but the immediate postwar period was characterized by a series of inquests and trials. First, a hearing was held in 1955 with the objective of establishing responsibility for the French defeat, which was followed by Henri Navarre's publication of his *Agonie de l'Indochine*, in which he finds fault with the government and the public for abandoning the military in Indochina.⁵⁶ Second, there were numerous trials resulting from a series of *affaire des fuites* – that is, documents and reports that had been leaked by the press, *L'Express* and the *France Observateur* in particular. This was only one of many affairs that had cast shadows over the French during the war: there was also the generals' affair of 1949-50, in which a critical report by General Revers ostensibly found its way into the hands of the Viet Minh, and the illegal trade in piastres.⁵⁷ The attention paid to these inquests and affairs, however, was not matched by a strong presence of soldiers and veterans speaking about their experiences. Many of them were serving in Algeria, where the avoidance of another Dien Bien Phu became a mantra. Others simply felt that they would not be heard, given that they had not received a warm welcome upon their return to the metropole. A handful of veterans did, however, write extensively

⁵⁵ Serge Tignères provides a very detailed periodization from 1954 to 1995 in *Dien Bien Phu: Mythes et réalités*; although this is an excellent framework, a general overview will suffice for the purposes of this dissertation.

⁵⁶ Henri Navarre, *Agonie de l'Indochine, 1953-1954* (Paris: Plon, 1956).

⁵⁷ The piastre was set at 17 francs following the end of the Second World War, but the going rate in Asia was between 7 and 10 francs. Transferring funds to the metropole thus allowed for tidy profits to be made on the exchange; since such transferrals required permission, there was an unofficial system of 'rewards' for certain people. This fraudulent system was not exposed until 1953, when a report was published attacking certain high-ranking government officials.

about their experiences; Roger Delpey and Erwan Bergot were all especially active.⁵⁸

Public commemoration was minimal in this period: there was a small ceremony organized by veterans at the eternal flame under the Arc of Triumph in Paris in 1955 to mark the one-year anniversary of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu, but this was not a state-led affair. Press coverage of the commemorative genre was rare, even in 1959 for the 5th anniversary. Beginning in 1956, French repatriates of Indochinese origin, following on the heels of their European counterparts, arrived to start new lives in France. While the new arrivals created quite a stir in the regions in which they were housed, there was little coverage at the national level. The war in Algeria (1954-1962), which mobilized public opinion to a greater degree than the Indochina War had, certainly drew some of the attention away from commemorating the earlier defeat.

1964-1975

Compared to the dearth of media attention paid to the first and 5th anniversaries of the end of the war, the 10th anniversary in 1964 garnered comparatively more attention. Publications like *Paris-Match*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, as well as specialized magazines like *Historama* all published at least one article about the war. The televised current affairs show *Cinq colonnes à la une* aired a special episode on Dien Bien Phu on May 8th.⁵⁹ Pierre Schoendoerffer and Marcel Bigeard were the invited guests, and were asked to comment on what was presented as Viet Minh film footage of the fall of the French-held position. Bigeard maintains a certain degree of suspicion of the segment depicting the actual defeat, arguing

⁵⁸ Delpey's first work, volume one of *Les soldats de la boue*, was actually published during the war itself, in 1950. Bergot's *Deuxième classe à Dien Bien Phu* was published in 1964, the first of an expansive body of work that includes over a dozen books on Indochina alone.

⁵⁹ *Cinq colonnes à la une*, channel 1, 8 May 1964.

that some of the details were not accurate (a flag-bearer leading the troops, attacks in broad daylight, French prisoners waving white flags while marching to the camps). The footage, it was later discovered, was not in fact of the actual defeat, but a reconstruction of events filmed by the Soviet filmmaker Roman Karmen. This footage would be used in a number of documentaries over the decades, most controversially in Henri de Turenne's 1984 documentary *Vietnam*. The reaction was similar, though on a smaller scale, in 1964: the extreme right-wing publication *Minute* attacked the producers of the show in several articles, including an interview with Paul Grauwin.⁶⁰

Although the impact of the Algerian War had largely overshadowed the earlier conflict in Indochina, the intensification of the US war in Vietnam arguably reminded the French of their own war experience. Articles appeared in *Le Monde* and *Combat*, for example, tying together the 10th anniversary of the end of the first war with the contemporary American experience.⁶¹ Scholars and journalists writing on the two conflicts, such as the French-raised American professor Bernard Fall, further contributed to this phenomenon.⁶² The long-term impact of the Vietnam War on the French memory of the Indochina War was, however, much like the Algerian War: a total eclipse of the battles waged from 1946 to 1954.

1975-1994

The establishment of Communist regimes in Laos, Cambodia and the newly-unified Vietnam in 1975 marked a distinct turning point for many veterans who had previously been

⁶⁰ "Le toubib n'oublie pas Dien-Bien-Phu," *Minute*, 22 May 1964.

⁶¹ "Dix ans après Dien-Bien-Phu. La nouvelle guerre du Vietnam connaît une brusque accélération," *Le Monde*, May 6 1964; "Dix ans après Dien-Bien-Phu...Le Vietcong se déchaîne contre les Américains," *Combat*, 4 May 1964.

⁶² Among his works are *Street Without Joy* (first published 1961) and *Viet-Nam Witness* (first published 1966).

unwilling to speak publicly about their experiences.⁶³ For those who had understood their objective as being the containment of communism, the establishment of totalitarian states and the flight of refugees were proof that they had been justified in pursuing that objective.

Speaking to the National Assembly, Marcel Bigeard succinctly stated that

when you see what's happened in the last ten years, when you see 500 000 Vietnamese who fled and died in the China Sea, when you see what's happening in the world, I believe – and I say this good and loud – that this war was just and that we were defending freedom.⁶⁴

As a result of this turn, there was a marked increase in veterans' activity in terms of testifying to their experiences, publishing their accounts, and lobbying for greater state recognition and commemorative efforts. Indicative of this shift, among veterans and others, was the publication in July 1975 of a volume of collected works entitled *Requiem for Pnom Penh and Saigon*.⁶⁵ Within weeks of the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the *Société de Production Littéraire* publishing company was soliciting contributions from military officers, politicians, writers and journalists. Among the more prominent contributors were Henri Navarre, Marcel Bigeard, Jacques Soustelle, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Roger Holeindre. The tone was overwhelmingly anticommunist and, as the title implies, encouraged a collective browbeating over the loss (or abandonment, according to many) of the former colony to totalitarianism.

The impact of the change in regimes in the former Indochina, in conjunction with domestic factors,⁶⁶ was evident in the increased coverage of the 25th anniversary (1979) and 30th anniversaries (1984) of the end of the war. The years 1974 to 1979 witnessed a steady

⁶³ Pierre Brocheux, "La mémoire contre l'histoire: l'affaire Boudarel 1991-1997," conference paper, *Decolonisations, Loyalties and Nations. Perspectives on the Wars of Independence in Vietnam, Indonesia, France and the Netherlands*, Amsterdam, 2001.

⁶⁴ *Journal officiel de la République française*, Débats de l'Assemblée nationale, 22 Octobre 1986, 5116.

⁶⁵ Jean-Yves Alquier et al, *Chant funèbre pour Pnom Penh et Saigon* (Paris: SPL, 1975).

⁶⁶ Including the election of a the Socialist François Mitterrand as president in 1981, and particularly the subsequent reaction of the political right and extreme right, the rapid rise in popularity of the latter, along with an attendant increase in emphasis on military and conservative values.

rise of media coverage, and an exponential increase as of 1984. In 1980, veterans' groups, including the ANAI, had finally succeeded in their quest to have an unknown soldier of the war honoured and buried along with the unknowns of France's other major twentieth century conflicts. This was the first 'official' commemorative site honouring the Indochina War. From this point forward, the war experienced a relative surge in the public sphere, beginning with the extensive space devoted by the press to the war and the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Henri de Turenne's documentary series *Vietnam* aired in January and February of that year, provoking controversy and vicious criticisms from many veterans, and especially the political right and extreme right. Despite the greater publicity, veterans still opted to commemorate the fallen privately, away from the prying eyes of the public, as they had done each May 7th for decades.

After 1984, interest, or at least awareness, of the war snowballed. In 1985, the first dissertation addressing the experience of soldiers, and prisoners of war in particular, was published.⁶⁷ In 1986, an agreement was reached with the Vietnamese government allowing for the repatriation of the remains of over 25 000 French and colonial soldiers, which prompted the design and construction of the Memorial to the Indochina Wars (*Mémorial aux guerres d'Indochine*). Ground was broken in 1988 on a site that included an earlier monument (itself built in 1983) and the whole complex was completed in 1996. In 1989, after years of lobbying, former prisoners of war were granted legal status akin to that of those deported by the Nazis.⁶⁸ All of this activity culminated in the Georges Boudarel affair of

⁶⁷ Robert Bonnafous, *Les Prisonniers de guerre du corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient dans les camps Viet-minh (1945-1954)*, PhD dissertation, Université Paul Valéry, 1985).

⁶⁸ "Loi no. 89-1013 du 31 décembre 1989 portant création du statut de prisonnier du Viet-Minh," *Journal officiel de la République française*, 3 January 1990, 63. Transcriptions of the debate in the National Assembly over the creation of this status are available in the *Journal officiel*, Débats de l'Assemblée Nationale, 18 December 1989, 6762-6771.

1991, which brought opposing interpretations of the war and the colonial period into direct confrontation. In the wake of the Boudarel affair and the attendant publicization of the experiences of prisoners of war, the 40th anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu was more mediatized than any before. For the first time, a highly placed representative of the government – in this case Minister of Defence François Léotard – attended the commemorative events, which themselves were a more public affair. The war also maintained a heavy presence on the big screen (*L'Amant*, *Indochine*, and *Diên Biên Phu* were all released in 1992), as well as on the small screen through documentaries and special editions of current affairs programs. Current affairs played their role as well: diplomatic relations between France and Vietnam changed significantly in this period. Following a period of reform in the mid to late eighties, Vietnam opened its borders to tourists from the West, and a number of French veterans took advantage of the opportunity to revisit the country for which they had experienced such nostalgia, commonly known as *le mal jaune*, or the 'yellow sickness'.⁶⁹ In 1993, Mitterrand became the first French head of state to visit the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the first Western head of state to visit the country since the end of the Indochina wars.

1995-2006

Although the decade from 1984 to 1994 represents a high point in cultural, legal and commemorative manifestations of the Indochina War, it was by no means a period of resurgence in the manner of the Algerian War or the Vichy period. Both of these periods were the subject of considerably more press, more public debate, and more intellectual and

⁶⁹ Some 400 veterans visited Vietnam in 1993 alone. Journoud and Tertrais, *Paroles de Dien Bien Phu*, 274 (they in turn cite *Le Figaro* of 7-8 May 1994).

academic investigation. For example, Fayard published the proceedings of two major conferences held by the Contemporary History Institute (IHTP; *Institut d'histoire du temps présent*) in 1990 and 1992: *The Algerian War and the French People* and *The Vichy Regime and the French People*, respectively. These hefty volumes brought together contributions from top scholars, and both include sections on the politics of memory. The Indochina War, on the other hand, has not been the subject of a comparable study, nor has it experience a similar resurgence and integration into French politico-cultural life.⁷⁰ In fact, the period from 1995 to 2006 demonstrates that even as veterans make progress in terms of state recognition – the president of the Republic participated in the 50th anniversary celebrations in 2004, and a national day of homage was instituted in 2005 – they are still fighting for the acknowledgment of the public, and for their narrative of the war to gain common acceptance. Moreover, outside of the realm of state-led commemoration, manifestations of the war seem to be a pale replica of the previous decade. The Boudarel affair, which dragged on through suits and countersuits until 1997, no longer prompted the violent reactions it initially had. There were two major films released in 2004 and 2006, which mirrored the films of 1992 in that one was a film by Schoendoerffer, and the other was an adaptation of a novel by Marguerite Duras; neither, however, has been the subject of much controversy, whereas a mere mention of the Sétif massacre in Rachid Bouchareb's *Hors la loi* (2010) triggered intense controversy and soured relations between France and Algeria.

The stark difference between the evolution of the place of the Algerian and Indochina

⁷⁰ There was a tripartite conference on the topic of the Indochina War held in 2004 in Paris, Hanoi and Beijing in honour of the 50th anniversary. A second conference was also held in Paris on the subject of “The Henri Martin Affair and the Struggle Against the Indochina War.” The *Institut d'histoire du temps présent* also held a conference in 1995 on the Indochina wars from 1945 to 1975, the proceedings of which were edited and published by Charles-Robert Ageron and Philippe Devillers, eds, *Les Guerres d'Indochine de 1945 à 1975: Actes de la table ronde tenue à l'IHTP 6-7 février 1995* (Paris: IHTP, 1996).

wars in the French collective memory is evident in the publication in the early 2000s of, on the one hand, Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora's *The Algerian War, 1954-2004: The End of Amnesia* and Amédée Thévenet's *The Indochina War Told by Those Who Lived It*.⁷¹

While the former indicates a certain collective reconciliation with a traumatic event, the latter seeks to redress "the persistent misunderstanding among the public of the significance of the Indochina War, the reasons for the struggle we undertook with great pain, but always with the goal of being worthy of the great country that sent us there."⁷² The volume is explicitly envisioned as part of a duty to remember (*devoir de mémoire*).

Sources and Structure

I have chosen a thematic approach to allow for thorough investigation of specific themes and vectors of memory, resulting in an evaluation of the construction and transmission of the memory/ies of the Indochina War that is more qualitative than quantitative. I undertook research in a range of holdings: municipal, departmental and national archives (including the military archives at the *Service historique de l'armée de terre*, the diplomatic archives at the French Foreign Ministry, and the colonial archives at the *Centre d'archives d'outre-mer*). Audiovisual archives were consulted at the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* and the *Bibliothèque du film*. I also consulted primary source material at the *Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*, and was fortunate enough to be granted access to the Fonds Georges Boudarel at the *Institut d'Asie Orientale*, even

⁷¹ Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora, *La guerre d'Algérie, 1954-2004: La fin de l'amnésie* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2004); Amédée Thévenet, *La guerre d'Indochine racontée par ceux qui l'ont vécue* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 2001). The comparison between these two works should not be taken to extremes, given that the former is a scholarly publication while the latter is not.

⁷² Thévenet, *La guerre d'Indochine racontée par ceux qui l'ont vécue*, 17.

though the collection was in the process of being catalogued.

The first chapter focuses on the Georges Boudarel affair of 1991. Boudarel was a professor of Vietnamese studies at the University of Paris VII who was accused of having been a political commissar at a Viet Minh camp that housed French prisoners of war, staggering numbers of whom died in captivity. Although Boudarel admitted to having spent time at the camp, he claimed that his role as a low-level political educator did not permit him to effect any real change with respect to the prisoners' living conditions. The denunciation, and Boudarel's admission, provoked a media scandal that lasted several months. Beyond constituting a 'flashpoint' of memory, the affair provoked significant debates over the nature of the Indochina War (as a war of colonial reconquest or a battle against communism), as well as over the relative merits of the colonial project.

The second chapter explores the role of one of the most prominent associations with a connection to French Indochina and the war. The *Association nationale des anciens et amis de l'Indochine* (ANAI; National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina) bears the unique feature of a diverse membership made up of former settlers, veterans, and as of the late eighties, anyone with an interest in the region. The ANAI's commitment to promoting public awareness of the Indochina War and a positive interpretation of the colonial project through commemorative activities and pedagogical initiatives make it a particularly interesting case study for the creation and transmission of memory. Their narrative of the war is also representative of that maintained by many other veterans and members of the political right and the extreme right. In broader terms, this case study illustrates the processes by which special interest groups impact official and public discourses.

The third and fourth chapters address official and unofficial commemoration. The

former chapter focuses primarily on state-led commemorative sites and activities, as well as surveying veterans' commemorative practices. The state's involvement dates only from the honouring of an unknown soldier in 1980, and it only gained momentum with the construction of the Memorial to the Indochina Wars in Fréjus in 1988. The latter chapter moves beyond 'official' commemoration to address two particular 'unofficial' sites of memory, namely the so-called repatriate camps (*camps de rapatriés*). These camps, or 'welcome centres' as they were euphemistically known, were converted military barracks or workers' housing used to house French citizens of 'Indochinese' origin. The small communities of Noyant (Allier) and Sainte-Livrade-sur-Lot (Lot-et-Garonne), which hosted the two largest centres, have maintained the influence of their Asian residents; in fact, the site at Sainte-Livrade continues to house a number of repatriates and their descendants. Informed by the extensive files on the camps and their residents maintained at the departmental archives of the Allier and the Lot-et-Garonne, as well as material from current and former residents' associations and the municipal library of Sainte-Livrade, this chapter seeks to explore the very tangible legacies of the Indochina War and the decolonization of the peninsula through the lived experiences of these repatriates. In addition to examining the camps through the lens of the legacy of empire, the chapter makes contributions to the broader history of immigration to France.

The final chapter examines representations of the Indochina War in film. Rather than present an exhaustive study of all films that have addressed the conflict directly or indirectly,⁷³ this chapter focuses on key films and filmmakers, and in several cases, their literary inspirations. While the earlier films under consideration met with little commercial

⁷³ For a more detailed and exhaustive study, please see Delphine Robic-Diaz, *La Guerre d'Indochine dans le cinéma français (1945-2006). Image(s) d'un trou de mémoire*, PhD dissertation, Paris III - Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2007.

success or critical acclaim, a number of films released in the 1980s and 1990s prompted considerable interest, and in some cases, considerable controversy. Henri de Turenne's documentary series *Vietnam* met with particularly violent criticism when it aired on French television in January and February of 1984, and the release of three major films in 1992 met with similar, though far more muted reactions. Whereas the majority of the films offer a sympathetic portrayal of the soldiers and a muted critique of colonialism, there is one that addresses the protest movement in France, specifically the dockers in Marseilles. Paul Carpita's *Le Rendez-vous des quais* is interesting not only because of this unique characteristic, but also because of its own trajectory. The film was censored, forgotten and rediscovered. Together, this collection of films and the reactions to them reveal a great deal about the dominant narratives of the war and the ensuing debates over the colonial project.

The topics addressed in these five chapters by no means paint a complete picture of the political, social and cultural manifestations of the memory of the Indochina War. Further study of fiction and literature, the consideration of a broader spectrum of veterans' groups and other associations with a connection to the Indochina War, and a dedicated analysis of veteran and settler memoirs are needed. Such work will be, I hope, the next step.

Chapter 1

'La sale affaire': Collaboration, Resistance and the Georges Boudarel Affair

“And so there is a ‘Boudarel affair.’ One of these Franco-French affairs in which one finds, once again, a mix of anger and disgust, sorrow and pity, regret and forgetting.

A small, greying man, practically on the brink of retirement, has suddenly unleashed a new debate on ‘revisionism’ and forced the French to face their fractured history. But what is it really all about?”¹

~ Yves Cuau, *L'Express*

On 13 February 1991, just as he was about to present his paper for a conference on Vietnamese current affairs at the Senate in Paris, Professor Georges Boudarel was interrupted by a member of the audience who introduced himself as Jean-Jacques Beucler, a former prisoner of war and a government minister under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Accompanied by a small group of veterans who had all gained access to the conference armed with false invitations purportedly designed by the *Association nationale des anciens et amis de l'Indochine* (ANAI; National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina),² Beucler described a letter he had received in 1986 from a certain Colonel Mitjaville, another former prisoner of the Viet Minh. Mitjaville claimed that he had recently discovered that the French political commissar who had abused him and other prisoners was living in France, and he asked Beucler to track him down. Mitjaville had died soon after from complications related to his internment, and Beucler had vowed to fulfill his promise to find his ‘torturer.’ He reminded the stunned audience that the death rates of the Viet Minh camps had been

¹ Yves Cuau, “Affaire Boudarel: l’Histoire en face,” *L'Express*, 21-27 March 1991, 62.

² Jean-Luc Einaudi makes this claim in *Viêt-Nam! La guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954*, and it is supported anecdotally by a conversation with the president of the ANAI in 2007.

proportionally higher than the Nazi deportation camps,³ and then spoke directly to Boudarel, interrogating him on his activities during the Indochina War: “Were you in Indochina between 1950 and 1954? Did you desert and join the Viet Minh? Were you the tormentor of camp 122?”⁴ Boudarel readily acknowledged that he had been a political instructor in a Viet Minh camp, and went so far as to correct the number of the camp: it had been camp 113, not 122. The accuser barrelled on, charging the professor with having “blood on his hands”⁵ given the high rates of mortality in the camp. The accusations sparked what one politician dubbed a “media lynching”⁶ that lasted several months, and more importantly led to a trial for crimes against humanity, a charge that was ultimately dismissed.

The “Boudarel Affair,” as it came to be known, reveals a great deal about the memory of the Indochina War as well as the relationship of the French with their colonial past. The affair was both indicative of a slowly re-emerging interest in the colonial period as well as the wars of decolonization, and the source of a renewed debate over the underlying

³ This claim is frequently made by veterans, and there is no consistent indication of exactly what type of Nazi camp is being referred to. Estimations of mortality rates in the Viet Minh camps have ranged from 50% (Jacques Dalloz, *Dictionnaire de la guerre d'Indochine*) to close to 70% (Robert Bonnafous's *Les Prisonniers de guerre du corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient dans les camps Viet-minh (1945-1954)*). The substantial difference in statistics can be explained in part by which groups are included in the calculation. For example, Bonnafous' statistics for prisoners of war on the French side that were missing and presumed dead list total losses for the combination of French troops, Legionnaires, North African and African troops averaging 55.87%. The inclusion of indigenous troops of the *Forces terrestres d'Extrême-Orient* and *Forces armées vietnamiennes* forces the average to climb to 69.04%. The claims made in the press and elsewhere by veterans like Beucler comparing Viet Minh and Nazi camps do not cite any sources for their claims, but it seems likely that the original source for the comparison is Bonnafous' study, in which he draws a comparison between the above statistics and those issued by the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs of French soldiers taken prisoner by the German army by 15 July 1940. Of the 1 850 000 prisoners of war, 37 054 or 2% died in captivity. He goes on to draw a number of comparisons between mortality rates in individual Viet Minh camps and individual German camps. It appears that some commentators seized this comparison and repeated it in much more general terms, comparing Viet Minh camps with Nazi “deportation” or “concentration” camps in the broadest sense, a comparison that is untenable given that mortality rates in Nazi camps reached nearly 100% in the extermination centres.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Beucler, “Un Français commissaire politique au service du Viêt-minh,” *Le Figaro*, 19 February 1991.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ François Léotard in an interview on the Grand-Jury RTL-*Le Monde*; cited in “‘M. Georges Boudarel relève exclusivement de ses pairs’ affirme M. Lionel Jospin,” *Le Monde*, 19 March 1991.

objectives of the Indochina War. Though it garnered considerable attention, the affair should be viewed as a ‘flashpoint’ of memory rather than a turning point, given that it did not contribute to a major shift in awareness or interpretations of the war comparable to the ‘breaking of the mirror’ of the so-called Vichy syndrome.⁷ The affair’s presence in the public eye did, however, provoke considerable debate about broader issues of collaboration, treason, and the collective memory of war and decolonization. Analysis of the affair, then, must address a number of elements: first and foremost, it must address the ensuing debates over the nature of the Indochina War as well as the debates over the merits of the colonial project. As I will demonstrate, pro- and anti-Boudarel groups frequently understood the war in different terms, which inhibited any productive dialogue from taking place. Disagreements over whether the war was primarily a war of colonial reconquest or a struggle against communism were also inherently tied to varied interpretations of the French colonial system in Indochina. Second, the affair must be examined within the context of the renewed commitment in the late eighties and early nineties to the ‘duty to remember.’ This memorial emphasis meant that the affair acted as a catalyst for discussions of France’s ‘forgotten’ colonial wars, and became yet another example for commentators of a French inability to face the national past. Furthermore, the timing of the affair, which coincided roughly with the arrest and trials of several Vichy collaborators accused of having committed crimes against humanity ensured that Boudarel’s actions would be compared to, and even conflated with, the actions of the collaborators. The collapse of the Soviet bloc encouraged a desire for some to stage a thorough assessment of the communist system through a ‘Nuremberg trial of communism,’ and Boudarel provided a timely target. Marxism had remained a fairly

⁷ Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy (1944-198...)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

powerful force from the 1950s through the 1990s, one that was much maligned by the extreme right in particular. The affair, then, was not simply a matter of one man's actions towards his compatriots during an unpopular and far-off war, but represented far greater divisions in French society.

The discourse of collaboration and resistance, which has dominated discussions of the Vichy period, provides a fascinating framework for discussion of the Boudarel affair. Boudarel was alternately identified as a *collabo* (collaborator) and *kapo*, or as a resister who opposed an oppressive colonial system. This discourse of collaboration and resistance is certainly not new in the context of the Indochina War: following so closely on the heels of the Second World War, the colonial conflict was frequently described in similar terms.⁸ The mantle of the "Resistance" was variously attributed to the French soldiers who were ostensibly fighting to liberate the colonies (in this case, from the Japanese and then the communist Viet Minh), or to anticolonial forces. In the latter case, the Viet Minh was frequently compared to the Resistance, and the French military and colonial authorities to the Nazi occupier. The spectrum between collaboration and resistance, with its inherent shades of grey, was thus further complicated by the colonial context. The debates over the legitimacy of the colonial system, which led wartime commentators to view one side or the other as the heirs to the Resistance, had an obvious impact on reactions to the Boudarel affair. For some, Boudarel's decision to join the Viet Minh was clearly a case of collaboration with the enemy; for others (including Boudarel himself), he had acted out of resistance to an unjust colonial system. Although not widespread during the Indochina War, this kind of resistance would gain in popularity during the Algerian War; those who fought

⁸ Hee Ko, "French Indochina War as World War II," in Alec G. Hargreaves, ed., *Memory, Empire, and Postcolonialism: Legacies of French Colonialism* (Lexington Books, 2005), 98-111.

on the side of the Algerian *Front de libération nationale* (FLN; National Liberation Front) were known as “suitcase carriers” (*porteurs de valise*).⁹

This chapter will consider numerous facets of the Boudarel affair, beginning with an examination of the immediate reaction of the press, politicians and the public. Not only was there a stark division between Boudarel’s supporters and opponents, but there was a fundamental disjuncture in their arguments which reflected the complexity of the war as both a colonial war and a hot spot of the Cold War. His supporters argued from an anti-colonialist point of view, claiming that he had not only been justified in his opposition to colonialism, but that the war had inherently been a ‘dirty’ one. His critics, on the other hand, took an anticommunist stance, arguing that the war had been legitimate in its opposition to the communist Viet Minh, who had perpetrated unspeakable horrors during the war and since. They also placed Boudarel’s actions within a broad narrative of collaboration and treason. In addition to analyzing the ramifications of the Boudarel affair within the memory of the Indochina War, I will expand the scope of the discussion to include its impact on provoking debates over French ‘memory troubles’ in general.

Georges Boudarel, 1948-1991

Eager to experience life in the colonies, and following an unsuccessful bid to find a position in Madagascar, a young Georges Boudarel boarded the *Pasteur* in April 1948, bound for Saigon. A member of the French Communist Party, he had been advised by the party to leave his membership card in France, though he was given contact information for members

⁹ For more on the *porteurs de valises*, see Marie-Pierre Ulloa’s work on the Jeanson network: *Francis Jeanson: Un intellectuel en dissidence. De la Résistance à la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: Berg, 2001).

of the *Groupe culturel marxiste* (GCM; Marxist Cultural Group) in Saigon.¹⁰ He took up teaching positions, first in Laos and later in Saigon, but quickly became disenchanted with colonial society. His autobiography describes the colonial society that he encountered in Dalat in 1948 as “living off the backs of the natives without making any attempt to listen to them.”¹¹ The settlers he describes are snobbish and arrogant, and either misunderstand the Vietnamese language and culture completely, or are overtly hostile to elements of the so-called civilizing mission, such as the education of the indigenous population. Emphasizing the exploitative nature of the colonial system, Boudarel argues that it was based on “pillaging, contempt and annexation under the pretext of the civilizing mission.”¹² His fundamental opposition to a society based on such inequalities was so strong that he made contact with representatives of the Viet Minh and arranged to cross into their territory. In mid-November 1949, he was summoned to a meeting with Nguyen Tho Chan, the secretary of the Communist Party in Saigon; shortly thereafter, the date of his passage was fixed. On 17 December 1950, a taxi driven by a man sympathetic to the Viet Minh drove him out of central Saigon to the Lai Thieu district just north of the city. After switching vehicles in a small village, Boudarel was driven to a house outside of the community; the last leg of the journey was accomplished on foot through the paddy to the unoccupied zone, only a short distance from a French border post. A group of Viet Minh members were waiting for him, and escorted him to the command post of the local company of the Lai Thieu sub-district. Boudarel was initially assigned to work for the French-language radio broadcast *La Voix de Saigon-Cholon libre*. In early 1953, he received orders to travel north to the Viet Bac region

¹⁰ For more on the GCM, see Alain Ruscio, “Le Groupe Culturel Marxiste de Saigon (1945-1950),” *Cahier d’Histoire de l’Institut Maurice Thorez*, no. 31 (1979), 187-208.

¹¹ Georges Boudarel, *Autobiographie* (Éditions Jacques Bertoin, 1991), 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

to take up the position of propaganda instruction in prisoner of war camp 113, where he remained until 1954. Boudarel's responsibilities, as he recounts, consisted of leading political education sessions with the camp inmates, which were designed to convince them of the importance of peace and the withdrawal of the expeditionary corps from Vietnamese territory. According to former prisoners, Boudarel also played a role in deciding who was eligible for release and supporting a food reward system according to which those who performed best in the education sessions would be given larger rations. All parties agree that the death rate in Camp 113, as in most of the camps, was exceptionally high and was due in large part to malnutrition and a plethora of tropical diseases for which there was little to no medical treatment; the medical reports on the state of liberated prisoners certainly confirm the appalling condition of survivors.¹³ However, Boudarel contested the statistics claimed by veterans of between 270 and 280 deaths out of 340 prisoners in the year 1953, contending that these figures were exaggerated. He further argued that there had been a lack of proper medication and food, for the prisoners as for the soldiers in the Vietnamese military.

Boudarel left Camp 113 before the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and following the French defeat he moved to Hanoi. By his own account, Boudarel grew increasingly disillusioned with the Vietnamese communist system, to the point where he was viewed with considerable suspicion by the regime. Though he only makes a few allusions in his autobiography to the "bloody mistakes"¹⁴ of the Vietnamese Communist party, his *Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam* (published in the same year) is far more revealing of his criticisms of the regime. *Cents fleurs* chronicles the evolution of the party through the 1954-1956 period, and although

¹³ Medical and surgical reports on liberated prisoners of war, *Service historique de l'armée de terre*, carton 10 H 317. Bernard Fall takes a particularly critical view of these camps in *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, PA: The Telegraph Press, 1961).

¹⁴ Boudarel, *Autobiographie*, 409.

the focus is on the work of several literary dissidents and their treatment by the regime, his critique extends to the violent implementation of agrarian reform and the party purges. His autobiography makes it clear that his questioning of state policy led him to be viewed with increasing suspicion by the regime.¹⁵

Boudarel ultimately left Hanoi for Prague in 1964, where he stayed until a French amnesty law was passed on 18 June 1966. Initially intended to cover crimes committed during the Algerian War, the text was expanded, upon the proposal of Communist deputies Robert Ballanger and Guy Ducoloné to include “all crimes or offences committed in relation to the events following the Vietnamese insurrection and prior to the 1st of October 1957.”¹⁶ Boudarel’s decision to wait for amnesty before returning to France could be read as an admission of wrong-doing, and certainly has been by the *Association nationale des anciens prisonniers et internés d’Indochine* (ANAPI; National Association of Former Prisoners and Internees of Indochina);¹⁷ however, Boudarel’s status was complicated by a conviction for failing to present himself for his compulsory military service (*insoumission*) in March 1950. He also would likely have been found guilty of treason had he returned to France without amnesty, as had been the case for the 42 deserters (*ralliés*) who had returned in 1962, although he was a civilian and not a member of the French forces. He returned to France in January 1967 along with Cassius and Ribera, the only other two *ralliés* who benefited from the amnesty.¹⁸ While the amnesty in effect covered treason and his conviction for

¹⁵ Vietnamese academics and intellectuals who criticized the regime during the same period faced imprisonment and worse. See Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), especially chapter 4, “Intellectual Dissent: The Nhan Van Giai Pham Period,” 121-163.

¹⁶ Law no. 66-409 of 18 June 1966 conferring amnesty, *Journal officiel de la République française*, 23 June 1966, 5147.

¹⁷ Yves de Sesmaisons, “L’affaire Boudarel: L’union fait la force,” *Maolen Info* no. 31 (April 1994), 11.

¹⁸ Albert Clavier published his memoirs, *De l’Indochine coloniale au Vietnam Libre. Je ne regrette rien* (Paris:

insoumission, there remained the question of his fulfilment of mandatory military service. It was quietly decided that he would not be forced to complete the latter. Boudarel earned his PhD at the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS; National Centre of Scientific Research) under the supervision of Jean Chesneaux, and in 1971, was offered a position at the newly-created Université Paris VII (Jussieu). By the time the controversy erupted in 1991, he had gained a solid academic reputation as an authority on Vietnam, whose work frequently focussed on Vietnamese dissidents and critiques of the communist regime.

The public uproar surrounding the case took on a legal dimension on 3 April 1991 when lawyer Jean-Marc Varaut filed a charge of crimes against humanity against Boudarel on behalf of Wladislaw Sobanski, with the ANAPI taking civil action (*constituer partie civile*). Although the *parquet* opposed pursuing the case on 23 May, the presence of a party taking civil action meant that judge Lucie LeHoux was within her rights to override this opposition and recommend moving ahead with the case, which she did on 13 September. The case was brought to a close on 20 December, when the court decided not to pursue Boudarel for crimes against humanity on the basis of the 1966 amnesty. The very possibility for pursuing the charge of crimes against humanity had considerable implications for the legal system, which will be discussed in greater detail shortly. Finally, while Boudarel faced no legal consequences for his past, he was forced into early retirement. Contrary to standard practice, according to which a university professor could expect to work the full academic session the year he or she turned 65, Boudarel was informed on 27 November 1991 that his term of employment would be terminated as of his 65th birthday (December 1991).¹⁹

Les Indes savantes) in 2008, recounting his experiences as a *rallié* with the Viet Minh. His story coincides with Jacques Doyon's description of "Cassius" in his *Les soldats blancs de Hô Chi Minh* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), though I have no confirmation that they are one and the same.

¹⁹ Decree of the Ministry of Education 91-1000, 27 November 1991, *Institut d'Asie Orientale*, Fonds Georges

Reactions and Controversy

While reactions to the revelation of Boudarel's past did reach a high level of intensity, there was very little in the way of immediate response in the press. The first article published in the press about the incident was Beucler's own account in the *Figaro* of February 19th, 6 days after his denunciation, but the media did not swing into high gear until early March. Close to 300 articles on the affair were published in the Paris-based press between February and May 1991, supplemented by numerous television news clips and interviews. Among them was a special episode of *Le Droit de savoir*, hosted by Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, which ostensibly sought to clarify the details of Camp 113 by pitting Boudarel against Beucler. The first special issue dedicated to the affair was published the week of March 6th -12th by *Minute-La France*, which latched onto the affair, publishing two subsequent issues on Boudarel the weeks of March 13th and 20th. By the end of March, both *Politis* and *L'Express* had also published special issues, and practically every major national newspaper had provided some degree of coverage for its readers.

The most extensive press coverage was that of the right and extreme right, particularly the *Figaro* and *Minute-La France*. Anti-Boudarel articles, interviews with veterans and former prisoners, and indignant letters to the editor were published on a frequent basis. *Paris-Match* ran a photo spread in early April depicting emaciated prisoners of war, entitled "Boudarel, Here Are Your Victims."²⁰ In addition to publishing the first article by anyone connected to the affair, that of Beucler on 19 February, the *Figaro* devoted considerable space to the affair throughout its peak. Véziane de Vézins was the most regular commentator, addressing Boudarel's past, the nature of Viet Minh camps, reflections on the

Boudarel.

²⁰ "Boudarel, voici vos victimes," *Paris-Match*, 4 April 1991, 72-77.

implications of the affair, as well as providing regular updates of its legal dimensions.

Readers were evidently also very engaged by the affair – the newspaper published letters to the editor on the subject on a near weekly basis through March and April, most of which supported Beucler’s denunciation and accused Boudarel of being a traitor and a torturer. While a number of these letters were from veterans, many were from ordinary citizens, suggesting that at least part of the general public placed great significance on the affair.

The extreme right was predictably more aggressive in its denunciation of the “butcher” (*bourreau*) of Camp 113. *Minute-La France*, *National-Hebdo* and *Présent* used the affair not only to launch vicious attacks on Boudarel, but also to attack Communists in France and abroad. *Minute* presented a series of testimonies from former prisoners, with sensationalist headlines like “Boudarel Inflicted a Slow Death On Us”²¹ and “How I Almost Died.”²² Communism and the French Communist Party were also repeatedly indicted: an article by Serge de Beketch in the issue of March 20th-26th read “These Communists, Professionals of All Forms of Treason.”²³ *Présent* columnist Alain Sanders sought to go one step further than Beucler and “unmask” the network that helped the “torturer” re-enter France, citing Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Jean Chesneaux and Jean-Marie Domenach.²⁴ While the attacks from the extreme right can be certainly be explained by the radical nature of the publications and their unabashed anti-communism, a number of commentators maintained that this was a tactic to divert attention away from Le Pen’s controversial support of Saddam Hussein during the recent Gulf war, which had prompted considerable internal divisions for

²¹ Arnaud Folch, “Gaston Klein: ‘Boudarel nous a tués à petit feu...’” *Minute-La France*, 27 March-2 April 1991, 14-16.

²² Arnaud Folch, “Wladislas Sobanski: ‘Comment j’ai failli mourir’,” *Minute-La France*, 13 March-19 April 1991, 6.

²³ Serge de Beketch, “Ces communistes, professionnels de toutes les trahisons,” *Minute-La France*, 20-26 March 1991, 4.

²⁴ Alain Sanders, “L’indécente arrogance de l’ex-tortionnaire,” *Présent*, 23-24 March 1991.

the National Front.²⁵

Newspapers from the centre and the left, from *Le Monde* and *L'Express* to *L'Humanité* and *Libération* covered the affair with somewhat less regularity. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, the left was divided over whether to support or condemn Boudarel. The majority of columnists and commentators supported Boudarel's anticolonialism, but condemned his role in Camp 113. *L'Humanité* gave the least coverage to the affair, publishing very little in the way of commentary on the affair save to denounce the "suspicious tenacity"²⁶ of the extreme right. Editorialists also seized the opportunity to remind readers that the Indochina War had been a 'dirty' one, and that the French Communist Party had a strong history of anticolonialism and antiwar protest. The closest the publication came to taking a position on the affair was in an editorial of 18 March, which applauded Boudarel's anticolonialism without explicitly supporting him:

At the time, true patriotism and courage consisted of taking a stand against colonialism. The French Communist Party is proud not to have failed in this respect. Mr. Boudarel's political path is far from our own, but his refusal of the Indochina War was inspired by such courage.²⁷

Libération was far more supportive, and gave more coverage to the affair as it unfolded, including several exposé pieces on Boudarel and the greater implications of the affair for the French 'memory' of the colonial wars. *Politis* and *L'Express* both featured special issues devoted to the affair, though their positions varied: *Politis* was the most supportive of Boudarel, while *L'Express* featured a mix of support and criticism. The *Nouvel Observateur* was the most critical of the publications of the center-left, including a singularly unforgiving

²⁵ Guy Birenbaum, *Le Front national en politique* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 1992), 232. See also Olivier Buffaud, "Le Front national tente de reprendre en main son électorat," *Le Monde* of 27 March 1991.

²⁶ "Un acharnement suspect," *L'Humanité*, 18 March 1991.

²⁷ Yves Moreau, "L'Indochine de grand-papa," *L'Humanité*, 18 March 1991.

article by Marie-France Etchegoin, though it only published a handful of articles on the topic.

Much of the first-hand testimony describing the camp conditions was provided by interviews with veterans who had spent time in Camp 113. In addition, two relevant memoirs were published in the spring and fall of 1991: Claude Baylé's *Prisonnier au Camp 113: Le camp de Boudarel* (published in May; *Prisoner of Camp 113: Boudarel's Camp*) and Thomas Capitaine's *Captifs du Viet minh: Les victimes de Boudarel parlent* (published in November; *Captives of the Viet Minh: Boudarel's Victims Speak Out*). Both had been penned in the early seventies, but neither had found a publisher prior to the affair breaking. Each also featured a preface by Jean-Jacques Beucler, the 'hero of the hour.' The memoirs echo the bleak pictures of the abysmal living conditions of the camp painted by the veterans interviewed by the press, and neither is at all forgiving of Boudarel, who is identified as the cause of their suffering. Not all former prisoners of 113 were critical of Boudarel's role, however. Jean Robert, who contacted Boudarel to offer his support after seeing a televised news clip on the affair, appeared with him on *Le Droit de savoir* and attempted to counter the images of the camp propagated by Baylé, Sobanski and others. Marcel Croenne, though not a supporter of Boudarel, claimed in an interview that he had no reason to complain about Boudarel, and that he had never witnessed or heard of Boudarel striking or torturing prisoners.²⁸ The only other book published in the wake of the affair, aside from Boudarel's autobiography, was Marc Charuel's *L'Affaire Boudarel*, another highly critical piece of journalism.

While the affair certainly divided the French into two camps, they were clearly not defined along strict political lines. The right and extreme right were almost exclusively in the

²⁸ Gabriel-Xavier Culioli, "Au camp 113," *Politis*, 21-27 March 1991, 18.

anti-Boudarel camp, but it was a right-wing minister, François Léotard, who denounced the ‘lynch-mob’ attitudes of many critics. Likewise, it was the socialist Minister of Education Lionel Jospin who accused Boudarel of having acted as a ‘kapo.’ Despite the lack of clear divisions along political lines, the press of both ends of the political spectrum engaged in vicious attacks against the other. The press of the left accused that of the right, and particularly the extreme right, of being “nostalgic for French empire”²⁹ and of engaging in both a “fantasmatic reconquest of Indochina”³⁰ and a revision of colonial history. Conversely, the press of the right and extreme right frequently charged those who supported Boudarel of ignoring the horrors perpetrated by the communist system, or worse, of supporting them.

The arguments put forward by Boudarel’s supporters were overwhelmingly characterized by two predominant beliefs: that the colonial dimension of the Indochina War could not be overlooked, and that the war itself had been a “dirty war.” References to the conflict as a “colonialist war”³¹ or a “war of reconquest”³² were common in the press of the centre and the left. Many, like Dominique Le Guilledoux of *Le Monde*, argued that while the crimes committed during the conflict should undoubtedly be investigated, both sides deserved equal scrutiny.³³ A secret report by General de Beaufort dated 11 March 1955 was among the pieces of evidence marshalled by Boudarel and his supporters to demonstrate that French treatment of Vietnamese prisoners was also problematic. The report essentially advises the cessation of attempts to determine the fate of missing French prisoners of war, as

²⁹ Bernard Langlois, “Refoulé,” *Politix*, March 21-27 1991, 11.

³⁰ Olivier Todd, “Derrière Boudarel: le Vietnam,” *Le Monde*, May 25 1991.

³¹ See, for example, Dominique Le Guilledoux, “Les défenseurs de M. Georges Boudarel soulignent son engagement contre le régime de Hanoi,” *Le Monde*, 20 March 1991.

³² Jean Chesneau, “L’Affaire Boudarel. Un autre révisionisme,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 1991.

³³ Le Guilledoux, *Le Monde*, 20 March 1991.

they were bound to provoke similar demands from the Vietnamese side. This was problematic, he stated, given that an estimated 9000 Vietnamese prisoners who had been captives of the French had died or been executed in captivity.³⁴ There were also outright references to the use of torture by the French military: Gabriel-Xavier Culioli, while unsympathetic to Boudarel's role in Camp 113, argues in *Politis* that if Boudarel were to be judged for war crimes, then innumerable soldiers would have to be judged for "the combing of villages, the rape and murder of civilians, the use of napalm by the French air force."³⁵ Likewise, a flyer attributed to a committee in support of Boudarel about the affair and the Indochina War included excerpts from wartime accounts published in *Témoignage chrétien* of torture and summary executions committed by French troops.³⁶ Finally, Pierre Vidal-Naquet emphasized the importance of putting the "horror" of the Viet Minh camps within the context of the violence associated with the colonial state, directing readers to Andrée Viollis' exposé *Indochine SOS* (1935). "After all," he argued, "this horror is part of a context that was itself horrible. One cannot separate this horror from all those surrounding it."³⁷

Boudarel himself emphasized his actions as having been rooted in anticolonialism. His adamantness that he had no regrets about joining the Viet Minh did not evoke much sympathy, but he insisted that he "was right to join the Vietnamese for their independence."³⁸ He did, however, admit that his memories of his time at Camp 113 were "tragic" and "painful,"³⁹ and that he did regret his communist commitment "100%."⁴⁰ He countered

³⁴ This report is reproduced in Robert Bonnafous, *Les Prisonniers de guerre du corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient dans les camps Viet-minh (1945-1954)* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 1985), 292-93.

³⁵ Gabriel-Xavier Culioli, "Les choix de Georges Boudarel," *Politis*, 21 March 1991.

³⁶ Malika Rebbani, *L'Affaire Boudarel*, Masters' thesis, Université Paris VII Jussieu, 1992, 108.

³⁷ Michel Soudais, "Le droit à la paix d'un homme," *Politis*, 21-27 March 1991.

³⁸ Interview with Georges Boudarel, *Journal télévisé 20H*, A2, 20 November 1991.

³⁹ Interview with Georges Boudarel, *Journal télévisé 20H*, TF1, 15 March 1991.

⁴⁰ France-Inter interview with Georges Boudarel, cited in "Un acharnement suspect," *L'Humanité*, 18 March

charges that he was a traitor to the nation by arguing that if anything, he had been a ‘traitor to colonialism’ – the original title, in fact, of his autobiography.⁴¹ His primary defence was that he was both a prisoner of ideology and of a hierarchical system, and that it was impossible for him to do more than he did for the prisoners given the nature of the system and the lack of food and medicine.⁴² In a letter to the *Nouvel Observateur*, responding to Etchegoin’s highly critical article, Boudarel actually shifts the blame for the lack of available supplies to the CEFEQ and French political authorities, who had given orders for a variety of blockades to be established.⁴³

While Boudarel’s supporters focussed on the colonial dimension of the war and called for an evaluation of the war in its entirety, his critics (veterans in particular) either refused to engage with the colonial dimension of the war, or argued that military objectives had nothing to do with colonialism. An article by Colonel Déodat Puy-Montbrun in the *Figaro* of April 10th is representative of this position. In response to the statement of support for Boudarel, Déodat wrote that “we did not conduct, gentlemen, a colonial campaign in Indochina. The ‘colony’ was long gone.”⁴⁴ Déodat goes on to argue that the Viet Minh were not fighting a national war for Vietnam, but rather a communist war against the “three states of Indochina.”⁴⁵ Jean-Jacques Beucler maintains a similar position in his autobiography, citing the agreements signed in Halong Bay with Bao Dai in 1948 as proof that France was fighting alongside an independent Vietnam rather than pursuing a war of reconquest. There was much

1991.

⁴¹ The original title, *Traître au colonialisme; mais... ni à la République, ni à la France*, was rejected in favour of the simpler *Autobiographie*.

⁴² TF1, Boudarel interview.

⁴³ Georges Boudarel, letter, “La parole aux lecteurs,” *Le Nouvel-Observateur*, 18-24 April 1991, 58. The original article by Etchegoin, entitled “Le revenant du camp 113,” appeared in the issue of 7-13 March 1991.

⁴⁴ Colonel Déodat, “Sur un manifeste d’intellectuels,” *Le Figaro*, 10 April 1991.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

support for this position, which identified the primary objective of the war as the defeat of the communist Viet Minh in order for the newly-independent Vietnam to flourish. The suffering of prisoners in Viet Minh camps is thus inscribed in a larger context of anticommunism. In this way, the crimes committed in these camps became the crimes of communism, and a trial of these crimes provided a stage for a trial of the communist system writ large. Commentators on the extreme right certainly saw it as such; columnists writing in *Aspects de la France*, *Minute-La France*, and even the far less radical *Figaro-Magazine* called for a trial of communism through the prosecution of Boudarel. Yves Daoudal, of *Présent* and *National-Hebdo*, reflected a decade after the affair first broke that it was nothing short of “impossible trial of communism.”⁴⁶

Though most of Boudarel’s critics avoided addressing the colonial dimension, there were a few who maintained that the colonial project had had certain merits. Jean-Jacques Beucler, who took advantage of the public’s attention to publish his memoirs (October 1991, with the subtitle “The Man Who Unmasked Boudarel”), was among those who defended the idea that “the balance sheet is eminently positive” and that “France could and should be proud of its work in Indochina,”⁴⁷ though he did not make such statements publicly with reference to the Boudarel affair. When he was interviewed about the affair by *Présent*, veteran Pierre Guillaume, however, implied the ‘positive’ merits of colonialism when he stated that “during the French colonial period, there were never any boat people who fled,” and this despite the availability of unsupervised fishing boats.⁴⁸

Reactions to the affair were naturally not limited to the press. In the anti-Boudarel

⁴⁶ Yves Daoudal, *Le dossier Boudarel, ou le procès impossible du communisme* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques Beucler, *Mémoires* (Paris: France-Empire, 1991), 173.

⁴⁸ Alain Sanders, “ ‘Qui a protégé Boudarel? Comment se fait-il qu’on ne l’ait pas démasqué quand il est entré à l’Éducation nationale?’” *Présent*, 22 March 1991.

camp, extreme-rightist organizations were particularly active: *Action Française* and the *Cercle national des combattants* (CNC; National Combatants' Association) staged a march from the Odéon intersection to Jussieu on 27 March, where they were met with CRS officers. This was not the first such demonstration; the press reported several earlier (and somewhat smaller) demonstrations. Flyers had been distributed by the student branch of the *Action Française* depicting an emaciated prisoner of war and calling for Boudarel's resignation. The *Front National de la Jeunesse* (the youth component of the National Front) held a protest at the Arc de Triomphe on 18 March, unfurling a banner reading "Boudarel traitor, Jospin accomplice" from the monument. The extreme right-wing publication *Présent* also bragged about the activities of *Action Française*, in language eerily reminiscent of that used to describe military operations in Indochina and Algeria. It reported that "cleanup commandos" (*commandos de nettoyage*) had made several incursions into the Jussieu campus to erase all of the "graffiti, tags, spray-painted slogans or posters in support of the traitor Boudarel."⁴⁹ The CNC also laid a wreath to the 'combatants of Indochina and the dead of the Viet Minh camps' in front of the statue of Marshal Lyautey, a conqueror of Tonkin in the late 19th century, and created a *Comité pour la révocation de Georges Boudarel* (Committee for the Dismissal of Georges Boudarel). Given the CNC's ties with the National Front, it is not surprising that a number of high-placed party members, including leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, were members of the committee. Boudarel also received threatening messages on his answering machine,⁵⁰ and his apartment building was the target of graffiti and even gunshots.

⁴⁹ Alain Sanders, "L'état se resserre autour du traître," *Présent*, 20 March 1991.

⁵⁰ One such message, played during an interview for A2's *Journal télévisé de 20H* of 20 November 1991: "Dirty traitor. I'm a former noncommissioned officer who fought in Indochina and who was a prisoner of the Viets. I was never in your camp, but you'll pay. We'll never, ever forget you. There's nothing left for you to do but kill yourself. Goodbye." ("Sale traître. Je suis un ancien sous-officier d'Indochine, prisonnier des Viets. Je n'ai pas été dans ton camp, mais tu paiera. On t'oubliera jamais, jamais. Tu n'as plus qu'à te suicider. Salut.")

Boudarel's supporters reacted to the attacks by creating a support committee and publishing a number of statements and petitions. The university council released a statement on 20 March 1991 maintaining that Boudarel "must be protected, like any other academic, from arbitrary media attention" and strongly condemned "the violence perpetrated on campus by outside elements."⁵¹ A petition signed by forty well-known intellectuals including Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Félix Guattari and Laurent Schwartz, was released in early March expressing solidarity with Boudarel and lauding his "courageous choice [and] his refusal of the 'dirty war,' of the colonial situation, of racist contempt."⁵² The petition also accuses Boudarel's attackers of being those "for whom the victories of decolonization amounted to personal defeats"⁵³ This petition was matched by a second one signed by seventeen scholars specializing in Asian studies, who urged the public to recognize Boudarel's contributions to a better understanding of Vietnam in France and abroad, despite his activities during the Indochina War. In addition, a number of Jussieu students posted pro-Boudarel posters and flyers intended not only to defend his actions, but also to inform passers-by of the 'real' nature of the Indochina War.⁵⁴ Among the posters and slogans was one notice signed by the *Collectif Anti-Autoritaire* (Anti-Authoritarian Collective) that at once emphasized the colonial nature of the war, justified Boudarel's choice to join the Viet Minh, and attacked his critics for wanting to rewrite colonial history:

What was the Indochina War? A colonial war against an entire people. Populations were terrorized, villages destroyed, civilians tortured...by the "glorious French army." [...] A hundred French people – "traitors to the nation" (much to their credit!) – were condemned to death – and amnestied – for having chosen to side with the oppressed, in this case the

⁵¹ Rebbani, *L’Affaire Boudarel*, 112.

⁵² "Deux manifestes d'intellectuels," *Le Monde*, 16 March 1991.

⁵³ "Pétitions pour Georges Boudarel," *Libération*, 13 March 1991.

⁵⁴ There is little information on the content of these posters, with the exception of the one outlined cited at the bottom of the page, but Alain Sanders' discussion of the 'cleanup commandos' mentions that all posters and graffiti in support of Boudarel was targeted by these groups. "L'Étau se resserre autour du traître," *Présent*, 20 March 1991.

Vietnamese people. We stand in solidarity with all of the deserters of the period – and thus with Georges Boudarel – without ignoring a system that generated “political re-educators.” Boudarel is the victim of a slanderous campaign [...] led by nationalist and militarist groups who want to rewrite the history of the colonial wars [...].⁵⁵

The connections between the Boudarel affair and the nature of colonialism were drawn most explicitly by Jean-Luc Einaudi, well-known for his work on controversial periods of French history, a decade after the affair first broke. The project that became *Viêt-Nam! La guerre d'Indochine, 1945-54* started with a phone call from Boudarel, who he claims was seeking to pull himself out of “the historical garbage can”⁵⁶ Though the first chapter opens with this *mise-en-scène*, the subsequent chapters that constitute the first half of the book are devoted not to the affair, but rather to the abuses inherent in the colonial system and the ubiquity of illness and malnutrition in prisoner of war camps on *both* sides of the conflict. Though the connections are not explicit, the reader is led to believe that any judgment of Boudarel’s actions must take into account the impact of rampant tropical disease and the chronic lack of supplies in the peninsula on the one hand, and the violence of the colonial system.

With the dismissal of the charges of crimes against humanity against Boudarel, former prisoner of Camp 113 Wladislaw Sobanski lost his opportunity to confront Boudarel in a court of law.⁵⁷ He did, however, have the opportunity to confront him on an episode of TF1’s *Le Droit de savoir*, which can best be described as a televised ‘trial’. This event echoed the earlier ‘TV trial’ of Henri de Turenne in 1984 – the two confrontations even shared a prosecutor in the person of Jean-Jacques Beucler.⁵⁸ Hosted by Patrick Poivre d’Arvor, the one-hour show opened with a brief documentary entitled “The Death Camps: The Boudarel Affair,” and was followed by a discussion pitting Boudarel against Sobanski.

⁵⁵ Christophe Agnus, “Jeunes: ‘L’Indo, connais pas’,” *L’Express*, 21-27 March 1991, 77.

⁵⁶ Jean-Luc Einaudi, *Viêt-nam! La guerre d’Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Cherche-midi, 2001), 7.

⁵⁷ As was stated earlier, the charges against Boudarel had been filed in Sobanski’s name with the ANAPI taking civil action.

⁵⁸ For more on Henri de Turenne’s ‘TV trial’, see Chapter 5, 197-199.

Each was allowed to bring a guest for support: Boudarel was accompanied by Jean Robert, another former prisoner of Camp 113, while Sobanski appeared on set with Beucler. The two parties sat facing each other on either side of the set, with Poivre d'Arvor positioned as judge/moderator in the centre. The goal of the show was ostensibly to establish 'the facts' about Camp 113 and Boudarel's role within it, but it quickly turned to outright accusations on the part of Sobanski and Beucler, with very little in the way of effective mediation from Poivre d'Arvor.

The charged atmosphere was dominated by an emotional Sobanski, who could hardly contain his rage: "I have lived through thirty-seven nightmarish years, and I'm not the only one. [...Boudarel] killed us, [...] invaded our consciences."⁵⁹ While Poivre d'Arvor attempted to establish a question and answer format, the discussion was in fact dominated by Sobanski and Beucler's attacks on Boudarel and Robert's attempts to "state the real facts"⁶⁰ It was a full eight minutes before Boudarel finally intervened to defend himself. He commanded little sympathy, however, with his statements that had "a clear conscience"⁶¹ and correcting what he deemed to be 'factual' errors such as his position within the camp (adjunct of the camp chief in charge of political education, and not political commissar), the camp number, and the death rates. Beucler raised the issue of Mitjaville's letter, which Boudarel challenged him to produce—this letter, which had ostensibly been the motivating factor in Beucler's denunciation, had in fact never been reproduced in the press, nor shown to Boudarel. Moreover, he maintained that he had no idea what the conditions in the camp would be:

⁵⁹ TF1, *Le Droit de savoir*, 27 March 1991.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

No one told me—and they knew at the time—“you’re going to a prisoner-of-war camp and in two months they are all going to get sick and you won’t have anything.” If I had known, I never would have gone.⁶²

Boudarel further emphasized the need to place his actions within the “context of the period,” and that he had broken with the past by renouncing his communist ideals. Implying that his own actions had been guided by his communist beliefs, he accused Beucler of having “defended colonization and colonialism.”⁶³

Boudarel felt that he had been grossly mistreated by the show’s producers and host. He later claimed that show representatives had assured him that he would be part of a historical debate with equal speaking time for each participant, but that instead it “was quickly revealed to be a premeditated attack.”⁶⁴ Despite Beucler’s assertions that he and others were not seeking a witch hunt, his accusations that Boudarel was a “vile character,” a “real criminal” who “knew all too well [...] how to kill people without laying a hand on them.”⁶⁵ The opening documentary and Poivre d’Arvor’s approach to the interview were visibly biased in favour of Beucler, Sobanski and the other veterans they represented. Boudarel did very little to counteract this bias; his interruptions of the host, his refusal to formally apologize and his focus on correcting details cast him in an unsympathetic light, and marred even his attempts to demonstrate regret for having witnessed the deaths of so many. Insofar as it was an ‘informal trial,’ Boudarel certainly did not emerge with any new supporters.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rebbani, 37.

⁶⁵ TF1, *Le Droit de savoir*.

Legal Implications of the Affair

Leaving aside the court of public opinion, the affair carried with it significant legal implications. Theoretically, the charges of crimes against humanity against Boudarel represented an opportunity for an expansion of the Nuremberg statute, already modified within the scope of French law by the *Cour de cassation* on 20 December 1985 to include

inhumane acts and persecutions that are committed in a systematic manner, in the name of a state practicing a hegemonic political ideology, not only on the basis of membership in a particular racial or religious group, but also against those who oppose this policy, regardless of the nature of their opposition.⁶⁶

Had Boudarel been convicted of crimes against humanity, a precedent would have been established for the recognition of a communist group or state as pursuing “ideological hegemony” along the same lines as National Socialism, and would also have been the first successful application in France of the definition of crimes against humanity to a context unrelated to the Second World War and the Axis powers.

Jacques Vergès, who was not directly involved in the prosecution of the case but is well-known for his controversial attempts to force a trial of colonialism through a number of other cases, addressed the colonial dimensions of the war in terms of the definition of crimes against humanity in an article in the controversial left-wing weekly *L’Idiot international*.⁶⁷

The additions to the Nuremberg statute served a critical role in the charges laid by Sobanski

⁶⁶ “Pourvoi no. 85-95166 de la Chambre criminelle de la Cour de cassation du 20 décembre 1985,” *Bulletin criminel*, no. 407 (1985). The definition of crimes against humanity has undergone a series of modifications in French law since its imprescriptibility was established in 1964. This particular decree served two purposes: to include members of the resistance as civilian victims, which meant that Barbie’s persecution of them amounted to crimes against humanity (rather than war crimes, as would have been the case if they were categorized as combatants), and to avoid any legal standing for a comparison between Barbie’s actions in France and French actions during the Algerian War. For more on the evolution of crimes against humanity in French law, please see Vivian Grosswald Curran, “Politicizing the Crime Against Humanity: the French Example,” *Notre Dame Law Review*, 78 (2003), 677-710 and Leila Sadat Wexler, “The Interpretation of the Nuremberg Principles by the French Court of Cassation: From Touvier to Barbie and Back Again,” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, 32 (1994-1995), 292-389.

⁶⁷ Jacques Vergès, “L’affaire Boudarel ou le crime contre l’humanité dans tous ses états,” *L’Idiot international*, 20 March 1991.

and the ANAPI, who argued that this definition could also be applied to French prisoners of war subjected to persecution and political indoctrination in Viet Minh camps. A successful application of the statute to their case would have been based on the recognition of an independent Vietnamese state that maintained a hegemonic ideology. This was problematic because while Ho Chi Minh had declared independence for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in August 1945, the French never fully recognized the nascent state. The agreements signed between Ho Chi Minh and Jean Sainteny in March 1946 recognized an independent Vietnam within the context of the French Union. This was complicated by the Halong Bay accords signed in June 1948, which granted nominal independence to a unified (non-communist) State of Vietnam under the leadership of Bao Dai. In effect, to apply the modification of the Nuremberg code implied the recognition of North Vietnam as an independent state when its status during the war was far from definitive. Moreover, Vergès argued that to apply the statute to the case of the former prisoners was in effect to accept that those who had fought to maintain Indochina “under the colonial heel”⁶⁸ were resisters, and that the Vietnamese ‘patriots’ fighting for their nation’s independence were the tenants of a hegemonic ideology. In reality, he argued, it was colonial ideology that was hegemonic, and so not only did the actions of the Viet Minh not qualify as crimes against humanity, but crimes committed under the auspices of colonialism did qualify as such.

After the Boudarel affair, though not as a direct result of it, French law regarding crimes against humanity was changed. In 1994, a new penal code was introduced, in which the definition of crimes against humanity was extended to include periods and contexts not related to the Second World War. With respect to crimes committed during colonial wars, a

⁶⁸ Ibid.

law was passed on 17 June 2003 that stipulated that French soldiers who had fought during the Algerian War could not be tried for crimes against humanity for actions taken against civilians. While this decision does not have a direct correlation with the Boudarel affair in that it addresses military actions against civilians, it does nonetheless have significant implications for the prosecution of crimes committed during the wars of decolonization.

The question arises as to why, given that Boudarel returned to France in 1967, the scandal only broke in 1991. Although Boudarel had not publicized his role in the Viet Minh, he had not hidden his past completely. He had not used a pseudonym, and he was relatively well-known within the field of Vietnamese studies. It was known that he had spent time in Indochina during the war, and he had been identified by name in a 1954 *Paris-Match* article on the prisoners liberated from the Viet Minh camps.⁶⁹ In 1973, journalist Jacques Doyon published *Les soldats blancs de Hô Chi Minh*, which recounted the experiences of a number of *ralliés*, among them Boudarel (under the pseudonym Boris). Boudarel had also been a member of several groups like the *Front Solidarité Indochine* (Indochina Solidarity Front) that opposed the American war in Vietnam, and he had even allegedly signed texts written during the turmoil of May '68 with the title "former French cadre of the Viet Minh."⁷⁰ He had ostensibly been the target of similar accusations in 1986,⁷¹ and he had been receiving anonymous letters since 1988. Why then did it take so long for Boudarel to be 'unmasked'? Scholars and commentators have offered a variety of theories. Among them is the fact that Vietnam underwent a series of economic reforms beginning in 1986 known as *doi moi*, which encouraged a general opening of society to the west; 1990 was declared the year of

⁶⁹ Joël Le Tac, "100 libérés des camps viets racontent leur captivité," *Paris-Match*, 24-31 July 1954, 38.

⁷⁰ Philippe Rochette, "La route amère de Georges Boudarel," *Libération*, March 25 1991.

⁷¹ Culioli, "Les choix de Georges Boudarel."

tourism. Renewed connections with France followed, and negotiations had begun almost immediately to repatriate the bodies of French war dead that had not been returned following the reunification of Vietnam in 1975. The fall of the Soviet bloc provided an opportunity for its critics to engage in a thorough assessment of the communist system, which for many would ideally have resembled the denazification process following the Second World War.

Both Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Annie Kriegel, writing in support of and in opposition to Boudarel, respectively, cite the end of the Gulf war as another key factor. For Kriegel, the conclusion of the war brought an end to the “climate of patriotic union”⁷² and a return to petty politics. Vidal-Naquet speculated that while the Gulf war could not be considered a colonial conflict, “we can ask ourselves whether the fact that several tens of thousands of Arabs were killed doesn’t lend support to new colonial ideologies,”⁷³ implying that such a context would encourage a revisiting of France’s colonial past.

The broader memorial context is also crucial to understanding the intensity of the affair; both the Algerian War and the Vichy period were the objects of new or renewed memorial projects, though the latter appears to have played a greater role in the Boudarel affair. Former head of the *Milice* Paul Touvier had been arrested in 1989 and was on trial for crimes against humanity during the course of the Boudarel affair, and Vichy functionary René Bousquet faced similar charges in 1991. The press unanimously made frequent allusions to these cases, as well as that of Klaus Barbie, former head of the Gestapo in Lyons found guilty of crimes against humanity in 1988 for his role in the deportation of Jews and members of the Resistance from the Lyons area during the Second World War. Headlines

⁷² Annie Kriegel, “L’après-Golfe: retour aux affaires,” *Le Figaro*, March 26 1991.

⁷³ Soudais, “Le droit à la paix d’un homme,” 17.

like “Boudarel-Bousquet: The Same Struggle?”⁷⁴ and “Boudarel Like Touvier”⁷⁵ were common, as were comparisons between the cases. Boudarel himself bitterly acknowledged that according to the press, “I walk in step, sometimes with Touvier, sometimes with Bousquet.”⁷⁶ He was, however, deeply offended by such comparisons: “I have absolutely nothing in common with those men, who were racist, antisemites, Nazis. I said some stupid things that Stalinists were known to say in the fifties. I never behaved like a brute or a bastard with anyone.”⁷⁷ Many commentators from the left argued that such comparisons were the product of a desire to match the ‘criminals of the right’ with comparable ‘criminals of the left.’ Annie Kriegel’s call in *Figaro* to use the affair as an opportunity to try not a single man, but a system, was echoed by other commentators from the right and the extreme right.⁷⁸ Jean-Marc Varaut, legal counsel representing Sobanski, saw the potential for the ‘first trial of communism’ if the Boudarel case were to be prosecuted.⁷⁹ The trials also contributed to a remembrance imperative, which naturally influenced the presentation of the affair in the press. The Algerian War, too, was used as a point of reference, albeit less frequently. Boudarel was compared to former members of the OAS (*Organisation armée secrète*, or Secret Army Organization) because of his amnesty and subsequent professional success, as well as to the *porteurs de valises*, because of his decision to fight on the side of the colonized.⁸⁰

The parallels drawn between the Boudarel and the Vichy collaborators were also

⁷⁴ François Raoux, “Bousquet-Boudarel même combat?” *Le Quotidien de Paris*, April 5 1991.

⁷⁵ “Boudarel comme Touvier,” *Minute-La France*, March 6-12 1991.

⁷⁶ Rebbani, 17.

⁷⁷ A2, Boudarel interview.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Jean-Christophe Buisson, “Les alliés de Boudarel,” *Aspects de la France*, 28 March 1991 and Arnaud Folch, “Boudarel: Les documents qui accusent,” *Minute-La France*, 10-16 April 1991.

⁷⁹ A2, interview with Jean-Marc Varaut, “Boudarel,” *Journal A2 20H*, 14 September 1991.

⁸⁰ These so-called “suitcase carriers” were those who transported documents and money for the Algerian nationalist National Liberation Front.

extended to the ‘victims’ of each. Discussion of the Viet Minh camps was often prefaced, as Beucler had done in the Senate, with the claim that the death rate was proportionally higher than in Nazi camps. Witnesses and commentators alike compared the emaciated prisoners of war with their counterparts in the Nazi camps. Claude Baylé writes of his first impression of the inmates of camp 113 in the following terms: “Yes, yes, these are the photos and newsreels that were shown in France when the striped pyjama-clad deportees returned from the Nazi camps. [...] In an instant, I understand that we are on the road to extermination.”⁸¹ A number of commentators, particularly former prisoners, referred to the “Vietnamese Dachau”⁸² or the “yellow gulag.”⁸³ Éric Weinberger, a former prisoner of both the Nazis⁸⁴ and the Viet Minh, is frequently cited to support the argument that the Viet Minh camps were actually *worse* than the Nazi camps. Then-director of the National Front’s *National-Hebdo* Yves Daoudal illustrates this position well, describing camp 113 as “a Marxist extermination camp, where the process of slow death was aggravated by communist propaganda, which made it worse in some ways than the Nazi camps since in the German concentration camps no one forced the prisoners to suffer through constant brainwashing or sing Hitler’s praises.”⁸⁵ Faced with the failure of the crimes against humanity charges, critics frequently argued that the lack of prosecution implied a hierarchy of victims – in which victims of the Nazis were more worthy of justice than those of the Viet Minh – and a system of “double standards.”⁸⁶ While this line of argument was generally employed in support of prosecuting Boudarel just

⁸¹ Claude Baylé, *Prisonnier au camp 113. Le camp de Boudarel* (Paris: Perrin, 1991), 25.

⁸² Alain Sanders, “Georges Boudarel, universitaire, ex-commissaire politique des camps vietminh...,” *Présent*, 13 March 1991.

⁸³ Jean-Pierre Bernier, “Les camps de la mort du Vietminh,” *Historama* 88 (June 1991), 47.

⁸⁴ A Hungarian Jew, Weinberger was deported to Buchenwald and later, Dachau; after the Second World War, he joined the French foreign legion and had two tours of duty in Indochina. After the fall of Dien Bien Phu, he was sent to a Viet Minh camp.

⁸⁵ Daoudal, *Le dossier Boudarel*, 44.

⁸⁶ Sanders, “‘Qui a protégé Boudarel?’” 4.

as Touvier and others were being prosecuted, it was used by Jean-Christophe Buisson in *Aspects de la France* to argue the contrary: if Boudarel was to be exonerated, then Touvier should be treated likewise.

Undoubtedly encouraged by the spirit of national introspection prompted by the Touvier and Bousquet affairs, the press of both the left and right addressed the affair in terms of the “forgotten” Indochina War. Both *L’Express* and *Figaro-Magazine* addressed the “collective repression” of the Indochina War, though what exactly was being concealed differs. For much of the press of the left, what had been forgotten was the motivation for the war and the tactics used by the French forces; for the right, it was the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought for France that had been overlooked. Alain Griotteray, writing in *Figaro-Magazine*, gives voice to the grievances of many veterans by arguing that the war dead died twice—physically in Indochina, and a second time “in the consciousness of their contemporaries”⁸⁷ This lack of awareness applied equally to the soldiers who survived and returned home.

While the impact of the memorial project associated with Vichy, the fall of communism and the opening of Vietnam to the west all influenced the course of the affair, Pierre Brocheux has rightly emphasized that it was also a product of the evolution of the memory of the war maintained by veterans.⁸⁸ Henri de Turenne’s series *Vietnam* had prompted considerable debate when it aired in 1984, particularly from veterans, and this was followed by the first major study, academic or otherwise, to be undertaken on the experience of French soldiers in Viet Minh camps. Robert Bonnafous’ doctoral dissertation, published in

⁸⁷ Alain Griotteray, “Le véritable enjeu de l’affaire Boudarel,” *Le Figaro-Magazine*, 23 March 1991, 84.

⁸⁸ Pierre Brocheux, “La mémoire contre l’histoire: l’affaire Boudarel 1991-1997,” conference paper, *Decolonisations, Loyalties and Nations. Perspectives on the Wars of Independence in Vietnam, Indonesia, France and the Netherlands*, Amsterdam, 2001.

1985 under the title *Prisoners of War from the French Far East Expeditionary Corps in the Viet Minh Camps (1945-1954)*, was born of his “disappointment with the French government’s voluntary concealment of the story of the prisoners of war in Indochina.”⁸⁹ The project was based on extensive use of the French military archives as well as a series of interviews with veterans, many of whom also completed questionnaires on their experiences. The necropolis located on the site of what was to become the monument to the dead of the Indochina War was inaugurated in 1988, which provided an institutional framework for the memory of the war. This heightened awareness of the Indochina War and the experiences of former soldiers was further reinforced with the passing of a law in December 1989 that created the status of ‘prisoner of the Viet Minh,’ which granted certain benefits (medical and otherwise) to those who had been detained for three months or more. These shows of support for veterans undoubtedly encourage them to speak more openly about their experiences, making a public denunciation possible. Following on the heels of this succession of events, the Boudarel affair can be understood as being a partial product of a particular reawakening of interest in the Indochina War, and in fact, of colonial Indochina more broadly speaking, particularly in the arts. Three films on the subject were in production at the time the affair broke – *Indochine*, *Diên Biên Phu* and *L’Amant* – and a little-known film about the Marseilles dockers’ opposition to the war in, shot in 1953 by Paul Carpita and almost immediately banned by censors, had been screened publicly for the first time after being ‘found’ in 1988 in the film archives. The war, and the *ralliés* in particular, were also the subject of an award-winning comic book (*bande dessinée*) published in 1990-91 entitled *Les Oubliés d’Annam*. Unbeknownst to the author, Frank Giroud, one of the characters was

⁸⁹ Robert Bonnafous, *Les Prisonniers de guerre du corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient dans les camps Viet-minh (1945-1954)* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 1985).

actually loosely based on Boudarel – he had based the character on Doyon’s Boris.

Despite the discussions centered on the “memory” of the war and the reevaluation of the colonial project, some felt that there had been a failure to capitalize on the opportunity for a true evaluation of the past. Alain Léger spoke of the absence of a “collective trial of colonialism;”⁹⁰ Gilles Bataillon and Jean-Philippe Béja called for greater access to colonial archives for historians.⁹¹ Directing attention specifically to the Indochina War rather than colonial wars more broadly speaking, Jean Chesneaux argued that the focus on Camp 113 and Viet Minh tactics overshadowed the greater context of the war and the questionable tactics applied by the French.⁹²

The impact of the confluence of circumstances surrounding Beucler’s denunciation of Boudarel is perhaps most obvious when one compares the case to that of Robert Vignon⁹³ in the early 1960s. In 1962, agreements between the French and North Vietnamese governments facilitated the return of 39 *ralliés* to France;⁹⁴ many of these men were eager to return, having faced declining conditions since the end of the war. The DRV viewed their continued presence as problematic, and were all too happy to see them go. The group was flown to the Marignane airstrip, just outside of Marseilles, in the night of November 23rd to 24th. There were approximately 120 people in total, since the majority of the men had brought their families with them. Of the 39, 27 were amnestied by the army for their “sentimental desertion.” The other 12, who had committed far more serious acts determined to constitute “a violation of common law, treason, demoralization of the army: in sum, anything that

⁹⁰ Alain Léger, “L’Affaire Boudarel: rancoeurs contre restalinisation,” *Les Temps modernes* (1992), 63.

⁹¹ Gilles Bataillon and Jean-Philippe Beja, “L’affaire Boudarel: Une mémoire sélective,” *Esprit* (1991), 147.

⁹² Jean Chesneaux, “L’Affaire Boudarel,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 1991.

⁹³ This is a pseudonym used by Jacques Doyon in *Les soldats blancs d’Hô Chi Minh* (Paris: Fayard, 1973).

⁹⁴ There is some inconsistency in the press regarding the numbers: the most common numbers given are 40 *ralliés*, 27 of whom were amnestied immediately and 13 of whom were put on trial. However, reports identify only 12 trials, suggesting that only 39 arrived in Marseille.

threatens state security,”⁹⁵ faced a variety of charges. Among them was Vignon, a soldier who had deserted the French army in 1950 to join the Viet Minh, and who, like Boudarel, had eventually become a political instructor in a prisoner of war camp. Vignon was ultimately sentenced to five years in prison. There was a small campaign of support headed by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and ultimately Pierre Messmer, himself a former member of the Free French and veteran of the Indochina War, suspended his sentence and Vignon was released early.

While the return of the *ralliés* caused a bit of a stir in the Marseilles press, there was very little coverage on a national level. Despite the similarities in the two cases, the Vignon affair did not garner nearly as much attention as the Boudarel affair. This is undoubtedly due in part to Boudarel’s position as an intellectual and an academic. The connections between his past as a ‘political re-educator’ and his present as a university teacher formed the basis for his opponents to question the substance of his courses and challenge what they saw as the heavy leftist influences on the universities.⁹⁶ However, given the similarities of the two cases – from the common role as political instructor in a prisoner of war camp to the formation of committees of support by certain intellectuals,⁹⁷ the difference in the reaction of the public serves to highlight the gradual development of awareness of the war and the veterans who survived it, as well as the evolution of the perceived importance of collective memorial projects.

⁹⁵ Jacques Doyon, *Les soldats blancs de Hô Chi Minh* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), 432.

⁹⁶ For example, one of the flyers distributed by the *Front National de Jeunesse* read “From unpatriotic re-education to [The] National [Ministry of] Education...No to Viet Minh universities!” Cited in Alain Sanders, “L’étau se reserre autour du traître,” *Présent*, 20 March 1991.

⁹⁷ The involvement of intellectuals in antiwar militancy in the context of the Franco-Algerian and American Vietnam wars is examined in detail in David Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Conclusion

The Boudarel affair, then, was both indicative of, and contributed to, a changing awareness of the Indochina War in French national consciousness. Unlike the memory of the Vichy period, which underwent significant transformations over time, the narrative of the Indochina War promoted by veterans has been virtually static and unchanging. Furthermore, there has been little in the way of public discussion or awareness of the war and its repercussions. The Boudarel affair was one of very few ‘flashpoints’ that provoked heated public debate over the meaning and impact of the conflict. It revealed old political divisions as well as new attempts to come to terms with dark periods of the past. For anticolonialists and others, it represented an opportunity to publicly reevaluate the nation’s colonial past. For the anticommunist right, it provided an opportunity to demand a trial of the so-called criminals of the left. And for the veterans, finally, the affair was an opportunity to remind the public of their sacrifices and horrific experiences as prisoners of war, which they felt had long been ignored. Despite the intense controversy it engendered, the affair died down relatively quickly, which is perhaps ultimately indicative of the limited place of the Indochina War in public consciousness.

Chapter 2

Positively Colonial: The National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina

Veterans' organizations have long played a critical role in the commemoration of the wars in which their members fought, and in many cases, in the maintenance and transmission of a particular memory, or narrative, of those conflicts to the public. The First World War led to a new style and scope of war monuments and commemorations, and French veterans' organizations played a central role in these developments, as well as in creating support networks and lobbying for benefits for themselves and their families.¹ The ranks of these organizations, like the *Union nationale des combattants* (UNC; National Union of Combatants) were later open to veterans of the Second World War, and there was an increasingly diverse spectrum of groups representing former members of the Resistance, deportees, Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and others. The largest associations of veterans of the Algerian War is the *Fédération nationale des anciens combattants d'Algérie, Maroc et Tunisie* (FNACA; National Federation of Veterans of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), which has been exceptionally active in the realm of memory and commemoration.²

Veterans of the Indochina War, however, have no formal organization that is dedicated solely to them. They are eligible for membership in the general veterans'

¹ See Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*, 3 vols. (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques, 1977).

² The FNACA was originally created to compensate for the fact that veterans of the Algerian War were not eligible for membership in the formal veterans' organizations because of the status of the conflict as a police action rather than a war. Membership was later extended to veterans of the campaigns in Morocco and Tunisia. For more on the FNACA and the memory of the Algerian War, see Martin Evans, "Rehabilitating the Traumatized War Veteran: The Case of French Conscripts From the Algerian War, 1954-1962," in Evans and Ken Lunn, eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, NY: Berg, 1997), 73-85; Claude Liauzu, "Le contingent entre silence et discours ancien combattant," in Jean-Pierre Rioux, ed., *La guerre d'Algérie et les Français* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), 509-516; and Frédéric Rouyard, "La bataille du 19 mars" in the same volume, 545-552.

organizations like the UNC, as well as groups that are slightly more specific, such as the *Union nationale des anciens combattants d'Indochine, des TOE, et d'Afrique du Nord* (National Union of Veterans of Indochina, the Exterior Theatres of Operations and North Africa). There are, however, a number of associations that exist alongside formal veterans' organizations, which provide a forum for veterans to connect, to discuss their shared experiences, and to commemorate their fallen comrades. Among them are the *Amicale des anciens de Dien Bien Phu* (Association of Veterans of Dien Bien Phu) for those who participated in the final siege, and the *Association nationale des anciens prisonniers et internés d'Indochine* (ANAPI; National Association of Former Prisoners and Internees of Indochina) for those who were prisoners of either the Japanese or of the Viet Minh. Many of these associations are also members of an umbrella organization known as the *Comité national d'entente des anciens d'Indochine* (National Committee of Veterans of Indochina). In addition to these military organizations, there are a number of civilian groups, such as the *Amicale des planteurs d'hévéas* (Association of Rubber Planters).

The *Association nationale des anciens et amis de l'Indochine* (ANAI; National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina) is one of the largest of the associations with a connection to the former Indochina, and features a unique membership composed of veterans and former settlers, as well as a number of members of Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian origins. The group also has the distinction of being one of the main carriers of maintaining a 'veterans' memory' of the war.³ The group has maintained a central role in state-led commemoration in pursuit of its dual memorial mandate to "honour the memory of

³ This distinction is shared with a second group, the *Association nationale des anciens prisonniers et internés d'Indochine* (ANAPI), founded in 1985 with the objective of gaining greater recognition of the experiences of former prisoners. Pierre Brocheux, "La mémoire contre l'histoire: l'affaire Boudarel 1991-1997," conference paper, *Decolonisations, Loyalties and Nations. Perspectives on the Wars of Independence in Vietnam, Indonesia, France and the Netherlands*, Amsterdam, 2001.

those who died in order to defend the freedom of [the Indochinese] people” and to “demonstrate France’s accomplishments there over the course of three centuries.”⁴ Through its internal commemorative activities and its involvement in state-sponsored commemorative projects, the group has promoted a particular narrative of the war characterized by a vigorous anticommunism. The war is presented as a struggle against communist forces and ideology, and almost entirely ignores its colonial aspects.⁵ This is in stark contrast to the narrative of the war as one of colonial reconquest. Historians, however, generally agree that the Indochina War was both a means of re-establishing French dominance of the peninsula and a front of the Cold War.⁶ The initial goal of reasserting French authority was largely abandoned by 1949 (or even earlier, as some have argued⁷), when the communist victory in China pushed events in Indochina to the forefront of the Cold War.

Despite the emphasis of the academic community on the dual nature of the conflict, the ANAI has maintained its anticommunist focus. The association’s narrative of the war casts French soldiers (and others fighting for France) as the partners and protectors of the nationalist Vietnamese, as well as other anticommunist forces in the peninsula. This theme of partnership extends to the group’s commitment to promoting a positive view of colonialism,

⁴ “Statuts de 1988,” Insert in *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1988 no. 1, 1.

⁵ The complexity of the conflict is further illustrated by Ho Chi Minh’s own combination of nationalist, communist and anticolonial rhetoric. A nationalist who opposed the injustices of the colonial state, Ho’s demands for reform in Indochina went unheeded by members of the French government, including Minister of Colonies Albert Sarraut. As a result, he turned first to the French Socialist Party (SFIO) in 1919, and then to the French Communist Party (PCF) after its creation in 1920, drawn by the prominence of anticolonialism in party ideology. He went on to found the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930, and the Communist-led *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh* (Vietnam Independence League, abbreviated Viet Minh) in 1941, which also (initially) included nationalists and which eventually defeated the French forces at Dien Bien Phu.

⁶ See, for example, Pierre Brocheux, “Le déclin et la fin de l’empire française en Extrême-Orient,” in Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémy, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995); Jacques Dalloz, *La guerre d’Indochine 1945-1954* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987); Alain Ruscio, *La guerre française d’Indochine* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1992).

⁷ Martin Thomas, “People’s War and the Collapse of French Indochina, 1945-1954,” in Martin Thomas et al, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe’s Imperial States, 1918-1975* (London: Hodder Education, 2008), 203.

emphasizing three centuries of Franco-Indochinese⁸ relations in addition to the ostensible progress instituted by the French. Anticommunism shapes the ANAI's perceptions of colonialism as well, insofar as the living conditions imposed by communist governments in the peninsula are compared with those under the French administration of the region.

The following is a case study of the processes by which interest and advocacy groups inflect official discourse and action as well as broader public discourse and action with respect to the various iterations of the colonial past. Analysis will focus on the ANAI's two central mandates, as well as on how the ANAI presents (and represents) itself and its aims, primarily through the pages of its quarterly bulletin.⁹ The objective is to shed light on the ANAI's construction of particular interpretations of the Indochina War and the colonial project, as well as to examine the parallels between these interpretations and the narratives promoted by the French government, which will be explored in greater deal in Chapter 3.

ANAI History and Objectives

The ANAI was founded on 21 November 1964 following the merger of two civilian organizations, the *Association métropolitaine des anciens combattants et victimes de guerre d'Indochine* (Metropolitan Association of Veterans and Victims of War of Indochina) and the *Association amicale de prévoyance des Français d'Indochine* (Association of Support for the French of Indochina), both founded in 1947. On 14 March 1981, the association absorbed

⁸ The terms 'Indochina' and 'Indochinese' will be used throughout this chapter, without quotation marks, to reflect the ANAI's own usage of the terms.

⁹ Although the current group was formed in 1964, neither the ANAI headquarters nor the National Library of France have the full run of the bulletin; since this publication forms much of the source base for this piece, I will be focused primarily on the period from 1977 to 2006. Moreover, commemorative activity centred on the Indochina War (and veterans' involvement in it) increased steadily after 1975 and the consolidation of communist control over Vietnam.

the *Souvenir Indochinois*,¹⁰ founded in 1917 to oversee the proper burial and maintenance of cemeteries for Indochinese troops who died in Europe during the First World War. This additional commemorative duty underlines the ANAI's own sense of representing the interests of all Indochinese in France, which is further exemplified by their various humanitarian and philanthropic efforts. It was closely linked to the *Comité national d'entraide franco-vietnamien, franco-cambodgien et franco-laotien* (National Franco-Vietnamese, Franco-Cambodian and Franco-Lao Aid Committee), created in 1975 to aid those fleeing newly-established communist regimes. Current ANAI president General Guy Simon presided over the committee from 1988 until 1992, at which point it was simply incorporated into the ANAI. It has also undertaken fundraising efforts to build churches and schools, primarily in Vietnam, and oversees a sponsorship program for children.

Simon, a graduate of Saint-Cyr and a veteran of both the Indochina and Algerian wars,¹¹ was the first veteran to serve as president of the association. His predecessors were lawyer Claude Thomas-Degouy, who presided from the 1964 merger until 1967, and H el ene Bastid, who occupied the post until 1986. Bastid had lived in various parts of Southeast Asia with her husband and family in the period from 1924 to 1934; her son was born in Indochina, and was killed there in combat in 1947. Simon took over in 1986, and was still president of the association at the time of writing. Never an extremely large group, the ANAI reached a peak membership of approximately 10 000 in 1990,¹² after experiencing a small influx of members. The objective of reaching a wider audience brought them to open membership in

¹⁰ Though still approximate, the best translation of the group's name is "Indochinese Remembrance."

¹¹ His six years in Indochina were spent as a lieutenant with the 22nd *R egiment d'infanterie coloniale*, and in Algeria he headed the *Commando parachutiste d'Extr eme-Orient*.

¹² Membership reached 10 000 in 1990; Guy Simon, "Le dix milli eme adh erent de l'ANAI," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, no. 4 (1990), back cover. It experienced a decline from the mid-nineties: there were 9000 members in 1995 and 6700 in 2006. Statistics cited in the association's *Rapport d'activit e 2006*.

the late 1980s to “friends” of Indochina: “travellers, those performing civil service, investors, researchers, professors, historians [and] linguists interested in contemporary Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.”¹³ This expansion of membership was reflected in the modification of the association’s name, which became the National Association of Veterans **and Friends** of Indochina. The increase in membership (specifically of veteran members) is also attributable to the renewed interest of the 1980s in the war and the colonial era described in the Introduction.

The association’s constitution specifically prohibits “all political, religious and union-related debate,”¹⁴ yet the ANAI has repeatedly been involved in a number of public debates that reveal very particular political beliefs. As president Simon stated in an editorial as recently as 2004, “communism is still the enemy.”¹⁵ This anticommunist sentiment dominates the narratives of the war, which is presented as a war against the communist Viet Minh rather than a war of colonial reconquest; in reality, it was both. In a 2001 editorial, Simon argued that the French defeat led to much worse: the defeat of freedom. After communist control was consolidated in the peninsula, he maintains, “two million Cambodians and 80 000 Vietnamese were assassinated; a million and a half Vietnamese were deported to concentration camps. Three million Indochinese fled using all available means; 500 000 died as a result.”¹⁶ The organization’s staunch anticommunism targets domestic

¹³ “Historique et actualité de l’ANAI,” information sheet distributed by the ANAI, undated.

¹⁴ This is not uncommon for veterans’ organizations; all of the First World War veterans’ groups surveyed by Antoine Prost have similar articles in their constitutions, though this does not exclude the groups having particular political leanings. Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*.

¹⁵ Guy Simon, “Éditorial,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2004 no. 4, 3.

¹⁶ Guy Simon, “Éditorial. Un devoir des mémoires,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2001 no.1, 3. The numbers presented by Simon are difficult to confirm, as is often the case with statistics on refugees and state-directed executions and internment. However, the numbers of victims of the Khmer Rouge and refugees from the peninsula are comparable to other sources; see Marek Sliwinski, *Le génocide Khmer Rouge. Une analyse démographique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995) and W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (New York: Zed Books, 1998). The statistics of Vietnamese killed or imprisoned by the

groups (such as the French Communist Party) and communist governments abroad equally. While such a position might seem untenable since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the very fact that there continue to be communist regimes in power in Vietnam, Laos, China and elsewhere ensures that the ANAI will continue its anticommunist struggle.

Since the late 1970s, the group has used a variety of methods to transmit awareness of the Indochina War and a particular vision of the colonial period. First and foremost is its quarterly bulletin, which has been transformed from a photocopied and stapled booklet to a glossy colour magazine. This publication is intended to be a “remarkable vehicle for the transmission of memory,”¹⁷ but also serves as means by which veterans and regional branches can stay in touch with one another and stay informed about current events in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, as well as campaigns undertaken by the association on their behalf. Since the bulletin is limited to the ANAI membership, the group has sought to reach a broader public by organizing exhibits, attempting to pursue pedagogical projects in schools, and by engaging in public debates over the colonial legacy. Since the mid-eighties, the ANAI has curated exhibits with the support of the *Service d’information et de relations publiques de l’armée* (SIRPA; Army Information and Public Relations Service) and the *Établissement de communication et de production audiovisuelle de la Défense* (ECPAD; Institute of Communication and Audiovisual Production of the Ministry of Defence). Composed of mounted photos matched with explanatory panels, the exhibits address the colonial period as well as the various stages of the war. The section on the colonial period frequently extends back to the first contact between French missionaries and the inhabitants of the peninsula in

Communist regime are more difficult to ascertain; the least conservative estimates are those of Jean-Louis Margolin and Stéphane Courtoide in the controversial *Livre noir du communisme: crimes, terreur, répression* (Paris: Laffont, 1997), which range from 500 000 to 1 million prisoners and an additional 1 million dead.

¹⁷ “Rapport d’activité 2005,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2006 no. 3, 5.

the 17th century. In 2001 alone, the ANAI exhibits were open for a total of 52 days across the country.¹⁸

The ANAI has also been committed to gaining a greater foothold in schools, a practice common in France with veterans of the First World War, Holocaust survivors and former members of the Resistance. Their attempt to reach out to the younger generation is clear from the expansion of their membership, and there is a frequent emphasis in the bulletin on including schoolchildren in commemorative events. Accounts of the activities of regional branches refer occasionally to members, usually veterans, visiting their local schools to relate their experiences to the students. Given the perceived lack of interest on the part of youth, there is even an article from a 1990 issue that gives advice on how to make the Indochinese past interesting, which includes “using contemporary language.”¹⁹ The pedagogical goal, according to the bulletin, is to “break the silence, provoke reflection, and above all create awareness in schoolchildren, conscious as we are of the vacuity of the history curriculum.”²⁰ The allusions to the dire situation created by the “leftist tendencies” of the national education system are summarized in one editorial: “the rot has been setting in since 1945.”²¹

¹⁸ “Rapport d’activité 2001,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2002 no. 2, 21.

¹⁹ “Annexe au rapport d’activité,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1990 no. 2, 18.

²⁰ Guy Simon, “Lettre aux anciens d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1986 no. 2, 2.

²¹ Guy Simon, “Éditorial. La place d’un homme,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2006 no. 1, 3. In an informal interview with the author, Simon argued that the French Communists had been given an undue amount of influence over national education during the period of the provisional government following the Second World War, and that this had only encouraged leftist tendencies among teachers and educators.

The Politics of Commemoration

The ANAI has long fought against what it perceives to be a general indifference on the part of the French public and government to those who fought the Indochina War.²² The association has maintained a strong memorial emphasis, observing a series of commemorative dates of civilian and military importance in addition to lobbying for state-sponsored ceremonies and monuments. The commemorative dates honoured within the organization reflect both the complexities of the process of decolonization from the Second World War through to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, and the narrative of the war that the ANAI seeks to entrench. The association's involvement in the three ceremonies and monuments organized by the state – the burial of the unknown soldier, the Memorial to the Indochina Wars and the national day of homage – indicate not only the importance accorded to the group by the state, but also the degree to which the ANAI's narrative of the war and interpretation of colonialism have been reflected in official discourse.

The ANAI's origins as a primarily civilian organization mean that the seminal commemorative date is March 9th, to mark the Japanese takeover of the peninsula in 1945.²³ As a result of this seizure of power, French civilians were attacked, tortured and killed or interned in camps. March 9th thus represents an obvious collective trauma, one that affected many ANAI members²⁴ (in 1985 at any rate; by 2001, General Simon's editorial recognized that most members had not been in Indochina at the time of the attack²⁵). Beyond the obvious

²² This is a goal common to associations of veterans of the Algerian War; see Evans, "Rehabilitating the Traumatized War Veteran," 76.

²³ Following the French defeat in 1940, the Vichy authorities signed agreements with Japan that resulted in a power-sharing arrangement in Indochina; this arrangement was maintained until just prior to the end of the war. In March 1945, the Japanese staged a coup through which they consolidated their control of the French colony.

²⁴ H el ene Bastid, "Allocution de la Pr esidente," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 1985 no. 2, 1.

²⁵ Guy Simon, " ditorial," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 2001 no.1, 3.

impact on civilians, the association identifies March 9th as setting the stage for the Indochina War,²⁶ since the strength of the Indochinese Communist Party grew noticeably after the Japanese were overthrown.²⁷ Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence on September 2nd in the wake of the Japanese defeat of August 1945. Given the violence of the Japanese overthrow of the French, it is not surprising that the ANAI discourse surrounding this date emphasizes the “glorious band of ‘martyrs’”²⁸ that resisted the takeover to the best of its abilities, only to be forced into the “obscurity to which these days were relegated.”²⁹ Speeches made at commemorative ceremonies, as well as articles published in the ANAI bulletin, have tended to evoke the heroic resistance of the French. The speech made by the president of the Basque section to commemorate the 40th anniversary of March 9th is a good example of this rhetoric:

The French resisted heroically, but were outnumbered and were forced to yield. Our prisoners were chained, often tortured, and massacred with machine guns, bayonets, or knives. They demonstrated astounding courage; the Marseillaise was on their lips as they died...³⁰

The narrative of martyrdom and victimhood, though not unwarranted given the circumstances, provides an interesting point of comparison with the ANAI’s discourse of glorification of the soldiers killed during the course of the war. French (and colonial) troops, particularly those who fought at Dien Bien Phu, are presented as stoic heroes, whose sacrifice for the nation and the freedom of Indochina should be fully recognized.

The parallels between the two sets of ‘victims’ carry over into a discourse of ‘forgotten martyrs’: both the survivors of the Japanese coup and the survivors of Dien Bien

²⁶ Bastid, “Allocution de la Présidente,” 1.

²⁷ For more on the Japanese takeover and its significance, see Brocheux and Hémy, *Indochine. La colonisation ambiguë*.

²⁸ “Indochine d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1980 no.1, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ “Cérémonies commémoratives du 9 mars 1945,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1985 no. 1, 4.

Phu, in particular those who survived the camps, are referred to in this language of neglected heroes. There is a common language of a collective trauma that has been ignored by the metropolitan public, and an emphasis on courage and resistance. This discourse was reinforced by the Boudarel affair and the resulting media coverage of the Viet Minh prisoner of war camps, in which mortality rates were exceptionally high due to extreme malnutrition and disease. No matter how public opinion viewed the objectives and tactics of the military, the emaciated prisoners could hardly be seen as anything but victims. The discourse surrounding the camps identified the prisoners of war as being the victims of communism, just as the victims of March 9th were the victims of the Japanese. In both cases, the emphasis on victimhood serves to elide previous activities; in the case of the prisoners of war, it allows their collective actions against civilians and enemy soldiers alike to be overlooked. This is of particular relevance given the French Expeditionary Corps' use of torture on Viet Minh prisoners and policy of targeting civilian populations under particular circumstances. With respect to the narrative of French civilians as victims, one wonders whether the emphasis on the victims of the Japanese does not also serve to divert attention from, or compensate for, the allegiance to Vichy of French Indochina. An article addressing the events of the Japanese takeover argues that not only were these 'martyrs' not given the recognition they deserved, but they frequently faced postwar purges and saw their careers compromised due to suspicions of their activities under Vichy.³¹ René Poujade, a member of the French resistance in Indochina, argues that there has been a persistent failure to recognize the victims of Vichy in Indochina. In fact, he argues, they are the only French victims of the Second World War to

³¹ "Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 1980 no.1, 7.

go unacknowledged.³² The ANAI's own discourse arguably contributes to this ignorance of the victims of Vichy (and therefore the perpetrators) by focusing attention on the victims of the Japanese after March 1945.

The amalgamation of the experiences of French settlers and soldiers into a common narrative of victimhood can also be seen as displacing the position of the colonized as victims, a process identified by the editors of *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, who suggest that “the privileging of veteran memory defines the ‘survivor’ in a way which threatens to displace other kinds of war experience [...]. In addition, the effect of veteran narratives [...] is to leave the impact of violence on the colonized, not just during the ‘wars’, but across the centuries of [...] colonial rule, outside the frame of understanding.”³³ In the case of March 9th, this process can arguably be extended to include civilian narratives of victimhood, which leave little room for the narratives of those who seen themselves, or are seen as, victims of French colonialism. The diversity of the ANAI membership adds yet another dimension: how can the experiences of the Indochinese members be reconciled with these narratives of victimhood? While the bulletin offers little in the way of a solution to this problem, I would argue that those members who have their roots in the colonized population find their place in the ANAI community primarily because of its anticommunist stance. Though information on such members is sparse, it would be perfectly understandable that Indochinese, and particularly Vietnamese, members of the ANAI sympathized with nationalist (anticommunist) forces. They are thus positioned in solidarity with the soldiers and others who fought the Viet Minh, simultaneously placing them in a

³² René Poujade, *L'Indochine dans la sphère de coprosperité japonaise de 1940 à 1945* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 177.

³³ T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, eds., *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 51. The focus here is on Portugal, but the concept is equally applicable to the politics of memory of the Indochina War.

community of victims of communism and reinforcing the image of age-old Franco-Indochinese partnership.

While March 9th continues to be a central date for the ANAI, there has been a slow shift, beginning in the mid-1980s, to a greater focus on the anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu (May 7th), and later to the official day of homage to the war dead (June 8th). The same period was also marked by the transition from the civilian presidency of H el ene Bastid to that of Simon. May 7th was typically marked by articles in the bulletin as well as commemorative ceremonies sponsored by the national branch in Paris and regional branches. There was, however, a recognition that commemorating the battle of Dien Bien Phu overshadowed the contributions of those who had fought in other battles; in 2003, Simon supported the government’s plans for commemorative events to mark the 50th anniversary the following year, but noted that because May 7th was not an inclusive date, “next year we will choose a date that brings them all together.”³⁴ Ultimately, June 8th was chosen as the official national day of homage to the dead of the Indochina War, which was celebrated for the first time in 2005.

In addition to March 9th and May 7th, the ANAI maintains a number of other core commemorative dates. These include December 19th, the date of the Viet Minh attacks on French forces in Hanoi in 1946, which they identify as the beginning of the Indochina War.³⁵ September 2nd is commemorated as the date of the Japanese surrender in 1945. November 2nd represents the legacy of the *Souvenir Indochinois*: it is a day to commemorate the sacrifice of ‘Indochinese’ troops who fought for France during one of the major conflicts of the twentieth century. Each of these dates involves a ceremony in Paris, and often smaller ceremonies in

³⁴ Guy Simon, “ ditorial. Di n Bi n Phu,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2003 no. 4, 3.

³⁵ Others identify the French bombing of the port city of Haiphong on November 23rd to be the starting point of the conflict.

the cities and towns that are home to the departmental sections. There is little variation in the format; members gather at a particular site, wreaths are laid, and speeches made. Based on the accounts of such events in the bulletin, they are generally attended primarily by veterans, and thus do not have the same pedagogical role as other commemorative ceremonies in which the ANAI has been involved.

The ANAI views commemorative ceremonies as public acts that create not only an awareness of the sacrifice of French troops to defending ‘freedom’ in Indochina, but also provide a forum to communicate the perceived merits of the colonial system.³⁶ In fact, the “pedagogical value of commemorative ceremonies” is proposed as one of the ways to educate the public about the “realities of French colonialism in Indochina.”³⁷ Since their own events are attended primarily by members, they have lobbied for state-sponsored events intended for a broad public audience. The first ‘official’ commemorative event to honour the contributions of the veterans of the Indochina War was the burial of an unknown soldier in June 1980 at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, the traditional resting place of the unknown soldiers of France’s twentieth century conflicts. While the degree of ANAI influence on the government is difficult to ascertain, the group was certainly active: a 1977 issue of the bulletin makes reference to a second letter from H el ene Bastid to Jean-Jacques Beucler, then Minister of Veterans’ Affairs, requesting that an unknown soldier be honoured.³⁸ There is a further reference in a 1979 issue to a meeting of Bastid with the *Conseiller technique au Cabinet du Chef de l’Etat* (Technical Advisor to the Head of State’s Cabinet) the previous July, in which

³⁶ The emphasis on the pedagogical value of commemoration is obviously not unique to the ANAI; for more on the pedagogical value of military commemoration in France, see Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la soci et  fran aise* vol III.

³⁷ Simon, “Lettre aux anciens d’Indochine,” 2.

³⁸ “Inhumation d’un soldat inconnu d’Indochine au cimetiere Notre Dame de Lorette,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1977 no. 20, 7.

she plead for the repatriation of the ashes of an unknown soldier, to be formally honoured. This was followed by a second meeting in October. The bulletin claimed, in 1980, that “without boasting, we can say that the decision [to repatriate and honour an unknown soldier] was due to our President’s appeals to the government.”³⁹ Bastid herself referenced the “reiterated efforts and endless procedures” undertaken by the ANAI’s executive.⁴⁰ While it is difficult to evaluate the impact of the ANAI’s lobbying efforts on decisions made by the government in this respect, it is significant that Bastid received a personal telephone call from Beucler’s successor Maurice Plantier, to notify her of the arrival of the casket at the Roissy airport two days later.⁴¹ Furthermore, Bastid was one of a small group of public figures to welcome Anne-Aymone Giscard d’Estaing, representing the head of state, to the Invalides; others in attendance included Thérèse Leclerc de Hauteclouque (wife of Marshal Leclerc) and the governor of the Invalides.⁴²

When the three day ceremony finally took place in June 1980, ANAI members were present at every step. Thirty of them acted as guards of honour of the casket throughout the evening vigil on the 6th. Among the 2000 participants of the ceremony at the Invalides on the 7th, which was presided by Giscard d’Estaing, were Bastid and the members of the executive council of the ANAI. At least 190 ANAI members travelled to attend the actual burial at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.⁴³ Much of the issue of the bulletin published after these events was devoted to an account of them. Overall, the group was pleased that the ceremony had finally

³⁹ “Rapport moral,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980 no. 2, 8.

⁴⁰ Hélène Bastid, “Le mot de la Présidente,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980 no. 3, 1.

⁴¹ “Retour en France du corps du soldat inconnu d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980 no. 2, 15.

⁴² The degree of significance accorded to the association by the government is further indicated by a 1981 letter from then-president Valéry Giscard-d’Estaing to Hélène Bastid agreeing to preside over a ceremony organized by the ANAI to honour the soldiers who died in Indochina between 1858 and 1955, and promising to work to repatriate bodies from eight cemeteries in ‘Indochina.’ Letter dated 22 January 1981, reprinted in the *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1981 no. 1, 3.

⁴³ “Les cérémonies en l’honneur du soldat inconnu d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980 no. 3, 12.

be staged; however, the author of the account does complain about the lack of overall media coverage, especially on television:

One could ask – and we will – if it is a case of negligence on the part of the services in question, or whether it was a deliberate decision not to give national recognition to our sacrifices in Indochina. But we will continue our activities so that one day the French people will have knowledge of the Indochinese drama.⁴⁴

The ANAI's efforts regarding the repatriation of war dead from Vietnam did not end with the return of the unknown soldier; rather, they followed the status of French military cemeteries that the Vietnamese government threatened to dismantle, and continued to lobby the French government to repatriate as many of these bodies as possible. The bulletin frequently published correspondence between the president of the association and the Ministry for Veterans' Affairs as a means of keeping members informed of the campaign and the progress achieved. Ultimately, a protocol between France and Vietnam was signed in 1986 to arrange for the repatriation of the majority of the remaining bodies, which prompted the need for a dedicated space to house them.

Shortly after the burial of the unknown soldier, the ANAI became involved in the creation of a monument in the southern town of Fréjus to honour military and civilian victims in Indochina from 1939 to 1956. The monument, completed and inaugurated in 1983, was the first stage in the complex that is now known as the Memorial of the Indochina Wars, which includes a necropolis, a wall inscribed with the names of the dead, and a small museum. The project was spearheaded by two associations dedicated solely to the project, with the support of the municipality of Fréjus, the deputy of the Var, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs.⁴⁵ Once the plans were approved, a national committee was created to

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ For more on the construction of the various stages of the memorial, as well as the numerous associations

oversee the construction of the monument; the presidents of the most important associations dedicated to the memory of combatants in Indochina were all invited to participate.⁴⁶

Interestingly, and despite the association's commitment to commemorating the war, the archives reveal that the ANAI was initially unwilling to lend its support to the project. The source of this unwillingness is unclear, particularly since the association is silent on the subject in the pages of the bulletin. One source of displeasure was apparently the design of the bas-relief by Jean Souchon; regional artist Paul Fraipont claimed that he had been approached by the vice-president of the ANAI, to create a new design "that might satisfy the members of the association."⁴⁷ While he does not identify the specific issues the ANAI had with the design, he does state that "I admit that this drawing is hardly a happy one. Given the position of the two characters, there is no doubt that the soldier and the Indochinese are going to break their backs against this dragon. Cruel memory!"⁴⁸ The bas-relief in question, which remained true to the original drawings, features a pair of soldiers, one French and one Vietnamese, struggling to hold up a map of Indochina with a dragon wrapped around it. The image reflects an emphasis, common to the ANAI and most veterans of the war, on the collaboration between French forces and the national Vietnamese army against the Viet Minh forces.

Correspondence between H el ene Bastid and Fr ejus mayor Fran ois L eotard gives further indications of the ANAI's reticence to rally to the project. In a letter dated 16 November 1981, L eotard offered to meet with Bastid in order to "clear up any

involved in its creation, please see Chapter 3 on official commemoration.

⁴⁶ Letter from Fran ois L eotard and Jean Pascal to Andr e Biard, 15 March 1982, *Archives municipales de Fr ejus*, carton 87 W 3.

⁴⁷ Letter from Paul Fraipont to Fran ois L eotard, 21 November 1981, *Archives municipales de Fr ejus*, carton 87 W 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

misunderstanding” given the “hesitation that [she had] indicated with respect to the project.”⁴⁹ Nor did Bastid’s belated decision to lend the support of the ANAI to the project in February 1982 appear to mollify Léotard, whose notes reveal his true feelings:

The ANAI, after having opposed the AEMNAI’s project to build a monument in Fréjus, half-heartedly joining in on 19 February 1982 and making a very modest financial contribution, now wants to make it a national affair involving the President of the Republic under its own aegis, and even wants to indirectly claim ownership.⁵⁰

Once the ANAI was involved, the inauguration plans did in fact expand to a “national” level. The schedule of events included a wide range of political representatives from all levels of government, and an inaugural speech by Jacques Chirac, then Prime Minister. Interestingly, there is nothing in the ANAI’s own documentation to suggest that there was ever any kind of disagreement with the other parties involved in the planning. The bulletin presents the association as one of several that had lobbied for a memorial to be built, and highlights their role as consultant and fundraiser. The municipality and the ANAI appear to have settled their differences by the time of the inauguration of the monument in March 1983, since Bastid was part of one of four groups to lay a wreath during the ceremony. Furthermore, the ANAI continued to be involved in the subsequent stages of the building of the memorial, maintaining a presence at the groundbreaking ceremony in 1988 and at the inauguration of the necropolis in 1993.

The ANAI was also involved in lobbying for the most recent commemorative project undertaken by the state: the institution in 2005 of a national day of homage to the war dead. The choice of date, June 8th, reflects the ANAI’s own preoccupation with finding an anniversary that was both worth celebrating and representative of all combatants. June 8th,

⁴⁹ Letter from François Léotard to H  l  ne Bastid, 21 November 1981, *Archives municipales de Fr  jus*, carton 87 W 3.

⁵⁰ Fran  ois L  otard?, R  flexions sur la lettre de Mme Bastid, handwritten notes attached to letter FL.RH/CE/83/03/93/Cab. of 3 March 1983 from L  otard to H  l  ne Bastid, *Archives municipales de Fr  jus* carton 87 W 3.

the date of the inhumation of the unknown soldier in 1980, appears to have been an acceptably neutral date for a number of organizations. For example, among the proposals for the inauguration date of the first stage of the Fréjus memorial was June 8th.⁵¹ The ANAI bulletin makes a number of references over the years to finding a date that represents *all* combatants of the Indochina War, without symbolizing defeat. In 2003, the ANAI requested that President Chirac participate in a ceremony at the tomb of the unknown soldier as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations the following year; “June 8th will thereafter be the day of memory for the Indochina wars.”⁵² The association also claims responsibility for having secured the President’s agreement for the establishment of the day of homage.⁵³ Despite the lack of time to prepare (the decree was published on May 27th), the first commemoration of June 8th took place at the Invalides in the presence of a number of representatives of the government and 1700 veterans, 950 of which were members of the ANAI. Again, the ANAI took credit for the majority of the organization of the event.⁵⁴

The ANAI’s commitment to lobbying for specific commemorative events is matched by its commitment to opposing those events it deems to be inappropriate. In 1988-89, the group successfully led a campaign against UNESCO’s proposal for a celebration of the centenary of Ho Chi Minh’s birth planned for 1990; though the group recognized Ho’s virtues as an “honest man” and a “patriot,” they also viewed him as a perpetrator of crimes against humanity, both against his own people and against foreign troops.⁵⁵ The issue was taken up at the National Assembly by right-wing representative Eric Raoult (of the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, or UMP, party), who presented it in virtually the same terms

⁵¹ *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3.

⁵² Guy Simon, “Éditorial,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2003 no. 3, 3.

⁵³ *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 2006 no. 1, 33.

⁵⁴ “Rapport d’activité 2005,” 5.

⁵⁵ Simon, “Éditorial,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1989 no. 3, 3.

as the ANAI.⁵⁶ He further argued that since the Assembly was in the midst of debating whether to establish the status of ‘prisoner of the Viet Minh’, it seemed absurd to contemplate honouring the man responsible for the treatment of those same prisoners. Ultimately, the French government decided against state organized celebrations of the centenary. Reflecting on this victory, General Simon stated that “the ANAI has once again demonstrated the effectiveness of a national organization that is both strong in numbers and unity.”⁵⁷ Opposition to the centenary celebrations on the part of regional branches of the ANAI had similar results in Lyons and Marseilles.⁵⁸ Likewise, the association spoke out against smaller-scale commemorations of the Geneva accords, such as those sponsored by the *mairie* of the 10th *arrondissement* in Paris in 1989. Simon justified this opposition in the following terms:

If the war had ended honourably, July 20th could have been suitable. However, on the one hand the ceasefire was not respected; many soldiers of the French Union fell after that date. On the other hand, and most importantly, it would be odious to celebrate the abandonment of the friends we fought to defend. Do we celebrate the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871, or the partition of France into three zones in 1940?⁵⁹

Beyond the judgment of the date as undeserving of commemorative consideration, Simon’s comparison of Indochina’s separation from France with the loss of Alsace-Lorraine and the German occupation goes beyond a common experience of territorial amputations to imply that Indochina was more than just a colony. One could even read into his statement a belief that Indochina had been an integral part of France, which disregards the fact that even at its

⁵⁶ “He was admittedly a Vietnamese patriot, but he was also responsible for a dictatorial regime that perpetrated crimes against humanity and for the horrors experienced by these prisoners of the Viet Minh whom we are talking about today.” *Journal officiel de la République française*, 18 Decembre 1989, 6762.

⁵⁷ Guy Simon, “A propos du centenaire de H,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1990 no. 1, 10.

⁵⁸ “Rapport d’activité 1990,” *Bulletin de L’ANAI*, 1991 no. 2, 7.

⁵⁹ Simon, “Éditorial. 20 juillet, une date pour qui?”, 3.

colonial apogee Indochina had been a series of kingdoms, colonies, and protectorates where metropolitan law and rights never fully penetrated.

The commitment to promoting particular interpretations of the war while opposing events that were thought to undermine these interpretations is also evident in more subtle ways. A bibliography of recommended reading had been included in the bulletin since at least 1988, and it was assumed that works on the list were in line with the association's vision. In 1996, however, a further step was taken: in the first edition of the year, a special note was included at the end of the bibliography asking whether members wanted to have a space dedicated to publications "deemed to be hostile to the memory that we want to maintain."⁶⁰ Several letters published in subsequent issues opposed the proposal, arguing that such censorship was too close to the totalitarian regimes that they had fought against, and the project was never pursued. It should be noted that this opposition was not extended to challenging the narrative of the war promoted by the association; rather, it was limited to critiquing the practice of censorship. Nonetheless, from its reading list through to its coverage of the key commemorative dates, the association has used its bulletin to promote an interpretation of the war in which the French Expeditionary Corps and local troops worked together to protect the Indochinese people from the threat of communism.

The Boudarel affair of 1991 was one of several galvanizing events for the ANAI, one, which members felt highlighted the degree to which French society had ignored veterans of Indochina. While it was the ANAPI that took the lead, as the representative of prisoners of the Viet Minh and as a party bringing civil action against the professor, the ANAI was nonetheless very vocal. The group was also closely connected to the affair through its

⁶⁰ "Bibliographie," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 1996 no. 1, 24.

members. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, the ANAI was responsible for printing the invitations that Jean-Jacques Beucler and other veterans used to access the conference in the Senate, where they interrupted Boudarel's paper and accused him of having caused the suffering of detained French soldiers. Many of those with prominent roles in the affair were also members of the ANAI; Beucler was an honorary president. General Yves de Sesmaisons was both a member of the ANAI and the acting president of the ANAPI; he published a number of updates in the ANAI bulletin in order to keep members up to date on the legal proceedings. The association also promoted the sale of anti-Boudarel books, such as Claude Baylé's memoirs and Marc Charuel's *L'Affaire Boudarel*.

The 'Positive' Aspects of Colonialism

The ANAI's second major mandate is to combat so-called 'disinformation' about France's colonial past. This disinformation is generally understood as being attacks on the merits of colonialism, primarily from the political left and extreme-left. Charges that the French presence had no lasting benefits for its colonies, and worse, that it perpetrated abuse and exploitation, are vehemently denied. There are rare instances in which some errors are acknowledged, but overall the focus is on the 'progress' initiated by the French. The bulletin is an obvious choice for promoting this view, and it often features excerpts from works highlighting French contributions to progress in Indochina. However, these excerpts are frequently taken from colonial-era works, though the dates are usually in small type at the end of the piece. One such excerpt is taken from *Colonies Françaises* (1932), and outlines French contributions to progress in the areas of agriculture, public health, economic reform and education, and ultimately concludes that "in Indochina, France did not fail in its role as

mother and propagator of civilization.”⁶¹ There is no analysis of these documents; they are simply presented as evidence of the positive impact of the French presence. The bulletin also prints accounts of trips to contemporary Vietnam, as well as “Contemporary Indochina” sections, both of which tend to emphasize a plethora of problems, from infrastructure to political issues. While this appears to be merely a means of informing the readership of contemporary issues, it also functions as a means of convincing readers that the region was better off under French tutelage.

The bulletin is naturally not the sole means of communicating the ANAI’s perception of the value of colonialism, and the association has engaged in a number of public debates. These reached particularly volatile levels in 1984 as the result of Henri de Turenne’s six-part documentary series *Vietnam*, which was co-produced and aired on Antenne 2. The first three episodes covered the French colonial period and the French war; the second three addressed the US-Vietnam war. The coverage of the colonial period was quite critical of both colonial authorities and policies, and Turenne presented the war as a valiant struggle for independence, though he acknowledged the courage and sacrifice of French troops as well. The ANAI’s immediate reaction was published in *Le Monde*, and reprinted in the bulletin under the heading “Falsified History.” The author of the letter wrote: “on behalf of all *anciens* of Indochina, I cannot accept that France’s work in Indochina, nor the sacrifices she made, be so grossly distorted: it is an insult to both history and the nation.”⁶² Protest was not limited to letters to the editor, however; the ANAI was involved in demonstrations in front of the offending TV network, a letter-writing campaign and a televised confrontation between

⁶¹ Antoine Cabaton, “La France en Indochine,” *Colonies Françaises* (1932). In *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 2000 no. 4, 23.

⁶² J.F., “L’histoire falsifiée,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1984 no. 1, 2. The term “anciens” refers both to veterans and to former settlers.

four representatives of various groups, including Jean-Jacques Beucler (a member and honorary president of the ANAI) and the producer of the documentary. The goal of the latter was ostensibly to “publicly unmask the parody of a trial [of colonialism] instituted by Henri de Turenne.”⁶³ The four critics emphasized the positive contributions to Indochinese society which they felt had been ignored in the series; that is, education, public health, the preservation of cultural heritage and the elimination of famine, amongst others. Furthermore, they took issue with what they felt was the presentation of the war as one of national liberation from colonial domination, arguing that it was in fact a war between nationalists and communists. Turenne himself was given little time by the four critics to defend himself or his documentary.⁶⁴

Not satisfied with the televised corrective to Turenne’s documentary, the ANAI undertook the publication of a book entitled *Indochina: A Warning for History*, advertised as “a warning against historical ‘disinformation’ hatched by a simplistic anticolonialism that is still predominant in France.”⁶⁵ The foreword by former colonial administrator and Prime Minister Pierre Messmer states the objectives of the book quite simply:

It is not a complete overview of the history of Indochina in the second half of the 19th century; neither is it a complete analysis of a century of French policies in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. [...] We chose to recall and describe a number of facts, of situations that the director of the film neglected to present, undoubtedly because they contradict the image that he sought to convey.⁶⁶

The introduction, to which then-president H el ene Bastid contributed, stresses the importance of recognizing the benefits of the Franco-Indochinese partnership. The book itself is divided

⁶³ “Activit es de l’ANAI,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1984 no. 2, 2.

⁶⁴ Further discussion of the reaction of the ANAI and others to Turenne’s series can be found in Chapter 5.

⁶⁵ Advertisement for *Indochine: Alerte   l’histoire* in the *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1985 no. 2, 13.

⁶⁶ Acad mie des Sciences d’Outre-Mer, Institut de l’Asie du sud-est, Association nationale des anciens d’Indochine, *Indochine: Alerte   l’histoire. Ni opprobre, ni oubli* (Paris, 1985), 9.

into sections on the history of the region, the structure of colonial administration, economic, cultural and social development, and finally the Indochina War and peace process. The volume concludes with a study of the “historical and cultural convergences between France and Vietnam,”⁶⁷ which brings the theme of an ancient partnership full circle. Echoing the statements of Turenne’s critics during the debate on Antenne 2, the sections addressing the French colonial project focus on the ‘progress’ in terms of protecting Indochinese cultural heritage (particularly through the French Institute of the Far East), promoting modern sanitary measures and developing the education system. As a whole, the volume interprets the colonial era as one of progress, protection, and propagation of the civilizing mission. An article by Alfred Sibert, a former journalist who spent considerable time in Indochina, makes the dubious claim that the interest and engagement of French settlers in Indochinese monuments and traditions prompted indigenous elites to take a greater interest in their heritage. Furthermore, this interest was made possible by the *pax gallica* that was part and parcel of the French presence.⁶⁸ In an attempt to redress perceptions of a colonial system based on inequality, René Charbonneau’s article maintains that although the Indochinese were subordinate to the French, particularly in terms of salaries, the difference in salaries corresponded to a difference in cost of living for the two groups: “comparing the salaries of the Indochinese with those of French expatriates was to assume that all of Indochina had reached France’s economic position in one fell swoop.”⁶⁹ The sections addressing the war tend to focus on the role of Vietnamese members of the French forces and the territory that was to become South Vietnam; there is also a whole section devoted to the postwar situations

⁶⁷ Ibid., 373.

⁶⁸ Alfred Sibert, “L’évolution de l’encadrement politique et administratif de l’Indochine française,” in *Indochine: Alerte à l’histoire.*, 78.

⁶⁹ René Charbonneau, “Le temps de méprises, mais non du mépris,” in *ACOM Indochine: Alerte à l’histoire*, 84.

of Cambodia and Laos. The range of contributing authors reflects the ANAI membership: there are former settlers, veterans, and ‘Indochinese’ (though they are exclusively Vietnamese).

The emphasis on the positive aspects of colonialism has naturally led the ANAI to be particularly critical of those who maintain an anticolonial position, including academics, journalists and others. In a 1986 article outlining the history of France in Indochina, General Tessot counters an argument from “certain people” that the Indochinese could have ‘evolved’ along a Japanese model, without Western intervention.⁷⁰ He justifies the French presence by arguing that the Japanese elite had recognized as early as 1853 that following a Western model was essential to success, whereas the Indochinese elite refused to recognize the necessity of change. The implication is, therefore, that French intervention was needed to prompt this ‘modernization.’ Claims of the negative impact of colonialism are frequently countered with the ‘evidence’ of the boat people and other refugees and immigrants, and not only within the ANAI. If not for a longstanding attachment between the inhabitants of the Indochinese peninsula and the French, it is argued, there would not be so many of them seeking refuge in France. This argument is further reinforced with the claim that there *were* no boat people until after the French presence had ended, suggesting that the French colonial system was better than the communist system that followed.⁷¹ Rather than concentrate on “past blunders,” or “exalt French failures while ignoring the successes,” the association maintains that a more productive approach is to emphasize the shared Franco-Indochinese past.⁷²

⁷⁰ André Tessot, “La France en Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1986 no. 3, 8.

⁷¹ “Nécropole d’Indochine: le programme de la journée,” *Nice-Matin*, 19 January 1988.

⁷² “Indochine d’hier,” special insert, *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1984 no. 1, I.

This commitment to promoting a positive view of the colonial legacy carries a particular resonance since 2005, when a controversial law was passed affirming the ‘positive’ role of colonialism. Officially known as the law on the “Nation’s recognition of the contributions made by repatriated French citizens,” it was intended to acknowledge the contributions of French citizens to the colonial project, as well as to acknowledge the difficulties faced by those repatriated to France (*rapatriés*, or repatriates), the sacrifices of those who fought alongside French forces, and the military and civilian victims of the “events associated with the process of independence.”⁷³ The text also included a highly contentious article stating that school and university curricula were to acknowledge the positive aspects of colonialism. The law in general, and this article in particular, prompted heated debates amongst academics, special interest groups and the general public. Supporters of the law emphasized the need to recognize those who had fought for France and been treated badly upon their ‘repatriation’; this argument was formulated in implicit acknowledgement of the *harkis*, who had fought alongside the French during the Algerian War, in mind. Others took a more extreme position, arguing that it was time for the French to stop repenting for the ‘errors’ of colonialism and focus on the ‘progress’ initiated by the French presence in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. Opponents argued that while recognition of the repatriates was long overdue, the law in effect represented a whitewashing of the history of the colonial period.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, the ANAI viewed the law favourably.

⁷³ “Loi n°2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés,”

[http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898&dateTexte=.](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898&dateTexte=)

⁷⁴For more on the controversies surrounding this law, see Romain Bertrand, *Mémoires d’empire. La controverse autour du ‘fait colonial’* (Paris: Éditions du Croquant, 2006).

The ANAI and State Discourse

As has been demonstrated, the ANAI has played a significant role in state-sponsored commemoration of the Indochina War, and in several instances, has worked closely with government representatives. In light of this position of importance, the association's interpretations of both the war and the colonial period are all the more relevant. While the official narrative does not reflect the ANAI's position exactly, there is considerable continuity between the two. Moreover, the ANAI's tendency to use the pedagogical aspect of commemorative ceremonies to promote a positive view of colonialism is also reflected, though to a lesser degree, in official discourse. President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's speech at the burial of the unknown soldier in 1980 emphasized "the contribution that France made to the progress of the people of this other half of the world."⁷⁵ This sentiment was echoed in a 1981 speech by the Minister of Veterans' Affairs for the inauguration of a plaque to French dead in Indochina from 1858-1955, in which he reminded the audience that "the French presence was, for all those years, synonymous with peace and development."⁷⁶ The 1983 inauguration of the first phase of the Indochina War memorial site included speeches by the mayor of Fréjus, François Léotard, and Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. Both emphasized the 'forgotten' Indochina War, fought in the 'indifference' of the French public. Both also, however, made reference to the colonial period as exemplifying a positive relationship between metropole and colony. Léotard did so less overtly than Chirac, who openly extended recognition to "all those – soldiers, missionaries and administrators – who put their heart and soul in the service of French glory, the expansion of its civilization and of peace."⁷⁷ A few

⁷⁵ "Les cérémonies en l'honneur du Soldat Inconnu d'Indochine," 6.

⁷⁶ "Commémoration du 9 mars 1945," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 1981 no. 2, 11.

⁷⁷ "Discours de M. Jacques Chirac, Premier Ministre," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 1988 no. 1, 13.

years later, speaking at the inauguration of the Square of the Soldiers of Indochina (*Square des combattants d'Indochine*), Chirac stated that he believed the colonial relationship to have been “mutually beneficial for France and for those states of the Far East.”⁷⁸ Although the ANAI was certainly more extreme than state representatives in its affirmation of colonialism as a positive force, the parallels between the discourses of the two in combination with the evidence of the government’s attention to the association, suggest that there is more than mere overlap.

Conclusion

The ANAI’s narrative of the Indochina War, with its emphasis on the partnership between nationalist groups (primarily Vietnamese) and the French Expeditionary Corps in the struggle against communist forces threatening all three states of the Indochinese peninsula, undermines the colonial dimension of the conflict. Although the ANAI recognizes that the defeat at Dien Bien Phu marked the beginning of the end of French colonialism, it nonetheless views the primary outcome of the French defeat not as the independence of the three states that emerged from the former Indochina, but rather as the abandonment of colonial ‘partners’ to the communist threat. In this regard, the ANAI is not alone; many groups on the political right and extreme right view the war in a similar light. Furthermore, the group’s emphasis on the positive role of colonialism ignores the grievances of those who were victimized by the colonial system and sought to overthrow it, whether they were communist or not. That one of the main ‘carriers’ of the memory of the Indochina War maintains such an ambiguous relationship with the process of decolonization is indicative of

⁷⁸ “Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1987 no. 1, 5.

the difficulties inherent in coming to terms with the multifaceted legacy of colonialism, a legacy which the 2005 law sought to address. The case of the ANAI also reveals the complexities inherent in the process of constructing and promoting particular narratives of events. ANAI members, feeling that their contributions to both the Indochinese development and the struggle against communist forces have been actively ignored, have sought to have these contributions legitimized through advocacy in political, educational, and public arenas. It is significant that this relatively small group has had such an impact, primarily on commemorative practices surrounding the Indochina War, but also on official discourse of the war and the colonial project.

Chapter 3

“France Does not Forget”: State Commemoration and the Construction of an ‘Official’ Narrative

“In the presence of our troops gathered in the courtyard of the Invalides and our flag, the nation welcomes the Unknown Soldier from the Indochina War. He died for France!”¹

On 7 June 1980, twenty-six years after the Geneva accords, president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing honoured the unknown soldier in the main courtyard of the Invalides in the presence of some 2000 attendees. The ceremony, months in the making, began with the exhumation of an unidentified soldier from the Dong Hoi cemetery in Quang Binh province, just north of the 17th parallel, in December 1979. After being held at the Ba Huyen cemetery just outside of Hanoi, the remains were repatriated to France by air, arriving at Roissy on 28 March 1980. The casket was transferred from the airport to the crypt at St Louis des Invalides in Paris, where it would remain until the ceremonies began on the evening of June 6th. That evening, a military vigil was held in the St Louis chapel by representatives of various veterans associations, to honour not only the unknown soldier but through him, all those who fought for France. Next to the flag-covered casket lay ledgers containing the names of the missing and dead. Teams of body guards, including thirty members of the ANAI, stood watch over the casket, rotating every quarter hour. The following morning, a special mass was held in the chapel in the presence of the president, the Minister of Defence and other dignitaries. A small cortege bearing the casket and following the president made its way from the chapel to the centre of the courtyard, where Giscard d’Estaing spoke to the

¹ “Les cérémonies en l’honneur du Soldat Inconnu d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1980 no. 3, 6.

veterans and dignitaries assembled there. Later that afternoon, the casket was airlifted to Arras, to be transported and buried at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette the following day. Upwards of 10 000 people attended the burial itself,² which was overseen by Veterans' Affairs Minister Maurice Plantier and the head of the Army General Staff, General Lagarde. The ANAI's assessment of the significance of the events echoed the sentiments of many veterans:

“these words [...] can only fill our hearts with joy, and erase the bitterness of having long been forgotten.”³ The ceremony was thus construed as righting a memorial wrong, filling a commemorative void, and healing an open wound.

The significance of the ceremony honouring the unknown soldier lies not only with the fact that it represented the state's recognition of the sacrifices made by those who fought the Indochina War, but with the fact that this was the first major national, state-sponsored, commemoration of the conflict. It was followed in 1988 by the construction of the Memorial to the Indochina Wars, the last stage of which was completed in 1996. Pierre Brocheux has argued that it was this construction that truly formed the basis for the state's rehabilitation of the veterans of the Indochina War, and which provided the institutional framework for an 'official' memory of the war.⁴ This institutional framework was confirmed in 2005 with the creation of a national day of homage to the dead of the war. Beyond these national events and sites, municipalities and veterans' groups have raised funds to install plaques, monuments and stelae in many French departments.⁵ In addition, there are a number of memorial references to Indochina in Paris, including a plaque in the St Louis chapel at the Invalides

² Ibid., 11.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Pierre Brocheux, “La mémoire contre l'histoire: l'affaire Boudarel 1991-1997,” conference paper, *Decolonisations, Loyalties and Nations. Perspectives on the Wars of Independence in Vietnam, Indonesia, France and the Netherlands*, Amsterdam, 2001.

⁵ A complete list of these sites can be found on the ANAI website: http://www.anai-asso.org/NET/document/lieux_de_memoire/autres_monuments_1/index.htm.

and the Square of the Soldiers of Indochina in the 12th *arrondissement*, next to the Museum of Immigration (formerly the permanent pavilion for the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, and later the Museum of African and Oceanic Art).⁶

State-sponsored commemorative sites and ceremonies are critical to shaping the public memory of an event or period. While the latter may exist without the former, state commemoration serves to reinforce its presence in the public sphere, as well as to reinforce a specific narrative of the events and their significance.⁷ The Indochina War, like the Algerian and American Vietnam wars, raises the question of how to assimilate events into the national narrative that are “less than glorious and whose memory induces controversy instead of consensus.”⁸ The solution is frequently to emphasize the elements that are common to the more “glorious” wars: the honour, courage and sacrifice of soldiers and the noble objectives of the army. In addition, the major state-sponsored commemorative sites and events have promoted the idea of fraternity between the French soldiers and the ‘Indochinese’ people, both civilians and military, and have frequently emphasized the positive contributions made by the French colonial state. The objective of the expeditionary corps is often defined in this narrative as defeating the communist Viet Minh in order to secure the freedom of the Vietnamese people. An excerpt from Jacques Chirac’s speech at the 1988 groundbreaking ceremony for the memorial illustrates this narrative quite well:

⁶ Herman Lebovics examines French museums and the colonial connection in chapter 5 (“The Dance of the Museums”) of *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷ See Daniel Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Although his focus is on the commemoration of World War I, the theoretical underpinnings of his study are equally relevant here.

⁸ Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 97, no. 2 (1991), 377.

[...] they fought, and many of them suffered to a degree that is difficult to imagine, so that the essential values of honour and liberty could survive. Very quickly, they made this faraway land that they were defending their own, and sympathized with the Vietnamese people who were threatened with losing their souls under the harsh yoke of a totalitarian ideology.⁹

This chapter will be divided into two sections, the first of which will provide a detailed discussion of the genesis of each of these major state-sponsored initiatives. This section will also include an overview of veterans' commemorative activities, which took place outside of the parameters of these 'official' events. The second section will examine the narratives promoted by the monuments and ceremonies, in particular the themes of heroism, colonial partnership, evaluations of the colonial project, and the vilification of the communist regime(s). Additionally, this section will consider the ways in which these memorial initiatives have been shaped by those undertaken for other wars, specifically the Algerian and Vietnam wars. All three conflicts were the source of national trauma characterized by political and social divisions, and all ultimately ended in defeat for the Western powers. Finally, this section will address the connections that are so frequently drawn between the Second World War and the Indochina War and that have resulted in a narrative of resistance that transcends the parameters of the two wars and draws upon the powerful Gaullist myth for legitimacy.

Commemorative Monuments and Ceremonies

Long before the ceremony for the unknown soldier, a veterans' association gained the parliamentary approval to have a plaque honouring the combatants of the Indochina War

⁹ "Discours du Premier ministre. Pose de la première pierre de la nécropole aux morts pour la France de la guerre d'Indochine," 19 January 1988, 1. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 21, folder "Première pierre 19/01/88. Discours François Léotard et Premier Ministre."

installed under the Arc de Triomphe. Though not a truly state-sponsored project, the plaque is nonetheless significant because of its location underneath Paris's war memorial *par excellence*. Commissioned by Napoleon following the French victory at Austerlitz and engraved with the name of the important people and battles from the period of the Revolution and Empire, the Arc is also the site of the tomb of the unknown soldier of the First World War and the eternal flame. Multiple commemorative plaques have been installed over the years, including a reproduction of de Gaulle's call to resistance of June 18th and a plaque to the combatants in North Africa. The 1955 plaque, bearing the simple inscription "To the soldiers of Indochina from a grateful nation," was unveiled in early April 1955 by the *Association des Anciens du Corps Expéditionnaire d'Extrême-Orient et des Forces Françaises d'Indochine et du Corée* (Association of Veterans of the Far East Expeditionary Corps and the French Forces of Indochina and Korea).¹⁰ No dates are listed, no war mentioned. The choice of dates is a complex issue fraught with tension, and the absence thereof can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid controversy, or merely to allow the reader to interpret the inscription as they wish. The plaque, however, is the only national monument to the war without dates; from the tomb of the unknown soldier to the various stages of the memorial, the choice of dates is a hotly contested issue that will be examined in greater detail in the second section of the chapter.

The plaque is representative of the commitment of veterans' organizations to commemorating the Indochina War in the absence of any official honours. Veterans gathered each year at the Arc de Triomphe, or for a special service at the St Louis chapel at the

¹⁰ Serge Tignères and Alain Ruscio, *Dien Bien Phu: Mythes et réalités, 1954-2004. Cinquante ans de passions françaises* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005), 160. News footage of the ceremony can be viewed at the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (*Journal télévisé de 20h*, 4 April 1955). This association would later accept veterans of the Algerian War and North African campaigns into its ranks, and change its name to the *Association des Combattants de l'Union Française* (ACUF; Association of Combatants of the French Union).

Invalides, to honour of the dead of the war, usually on May 7th in order to mark the fall of Dien Bien Phu.¹¹ In May 1969, the *Association nationale des combattants de Diên Biên Phu* (National Association of the Combatants of Dien Bien Phu) held its first commemorative ceremony in Pau, thereby initiating a tradition that would continue until the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, after which point the organization disbanded.¹² Veteran fundraisers also contributed to Rolf Rodel's project to build a monument to the dead of Dien Bien Phu on location. After years of struggle, the monument was completed in 1996, and inaugurated in 1999 in the presence of the Minister of Veterans' Affairs and some 300 veterans [figure 1].¹³ The cooperation between state and veterans evident in this undertaking reflects a relatively recent state of affairs, and is indicative of a growing validation of the soldiers that fought the Indochina War.

The honouring of an unknown soldier represents a first step toward this sense of validation, or rehabilitation. The state's decision to acknowledge the contributions of those who had fought in Indochina – metropolitan French, but also 'Indochinese' and colonial troops from North Africa – was met with approval and gratitude from veterans. The practice of honouring an unknown soldier was established in the wake of the First World War, though the concept was developed during the war itself, ostensibly in France in 1916.¹⁴ In a speech at a commemorative ceremony in Rennes in November of that year, François Simon,

¹¹ See, for example, brief accounts in "La messe à l'intention des soldats tués à Dien-Bien-Phu," *Le Figaro*, 8 May 1957; "Deux anniversaires," *Le Monde*, 7 May 1958; "La cinquième anniversaire de Dien-Bien-Phu a été marqué par des cérémonies du souvenir," *Le Monde*, 9 May 1959.

¹² The ceremonies were held every fifth year in Pau, and in various locations around the country every other year.

¹³ Pierre Journoud and Hugues Tertrais, *Paroles de Dien Bien Phu: Les survivants témoignent* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004), 352.

¹⁴ The idea of honouring an unknown soldier has also been credited to at least two British men: Dean Ryle of Westminster Abbey and the Reverend D. Railton. See Thomas Laqueur, "Memory and Naming in the Great War," in John Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 150-167.

president of *Souvenir français*, queried: “Why would France not open the doors of the Pantheon to one of these ignored soldiers, who died so bravely for his country?”¹⁵ He intended that the unknown soldier would not only be a symbol for those who had remained missing or unidentified, but for would be a means to celebrate the entire French army. The idea gradually gained more popularity, and in November 1918 Maurice Maunoury put forward the first bill. A second bill put forward in 1919 was successful, and on 28 January 1921, a ceremony honouring the unknown soldier was held at the Arc de Triomphe. Similar ceremonies were held in Britain and elsewhere, and the practice of honouring an unknown soldier became standard following the other major French wars of the twentieth century. The traditional resting place for these soldiers is Notre-Dame-de-Lorette (Pas-de-Calais), a national necropolis established in 1920 to house the remains of those who died on the battlefields of the Artois. A small basilica is located in the centre of a 13-hectare cemetery, which holds the remains of the unknown soldiers in its crypt. A soldier from the Second World War was buried there in 1950, and in 1955 was joined by the ashes of an unknown deportee, an umbrella term encompassing all those who were sent to camps in Germany and Eastern Europe, be they Jewish or resisters, whether they survived or not. In October 1977, an unknown soldier from North Africa was entombed to honour those who were killed in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia from 1952 to 1962. Finally, after the longest delay between the end of a conflict and the honouring a combatant, the unknown soldier of the Indochina War was buried in 1980. The decision to bury the unknown soldier from the Indochina War with the other unknowns at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette was significant not only as the first state recognition of the combatants of the war, but also because it acknowledged the soldiers of the

¹⁵ Quoted in Jean-François Jagielski, *Le soldat inconnu. Invention et postérité d'un symbole*. (Paris: Imago, 2005), 54.

Indochina War on as the equals of those who had fought in France's other major conflicts of the twentieth century. The burial of the unknown soldier of the Algerian War was important for much the same reasons; its soldiers had finally been recognized as the third *génération du feu*.¹⁶

The fact that both the Algerian and Indochina wars were divisive and unpopular wars of decolonization that resulted in French defeat certainly contributed to difficulty in commemorating them, and thus the delay in honouring an unknown soldier. In fact, the burial of the unknown soldier of the Algerian War in 1977 undoubtedly fuelled veterans' demands for similar honour for a soldier of the Indochina War. The ANAI, for one, contacted the Minister of Veterans' Affairs a number of times between 1977 and 1979 requesting that such an honour be granted. There are two explanations for the significant delay in honouring an unknown soldier in a manner similar to those of the other major French conflicts of the twentieth century. The first is that of logistics. The French traditionally grouped the dead together in the area of combat, which meant that the remains of those who were unidentifiable or whose families had specifically not requested repatriation were maintained in a variety of cemeteries across Vietnamese territory. The French were occasionally forced to abandon certain cemeteries and consolidate the remains in other locations. The transfer of bodies out of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam prior to 1975, and out of unified Vietnam after that date, was a complicated process characterized by frequent interruptions of negotiations and refusals to cooperate.¹⁷ France and the DRV signed protocol no. 24¹⁸ on 1

¹⁶ Translated literally, this phrase is "generation of fire." The term was first applied to the soldiers of World War I, which made the soldiers of World War II the second generation. The state's acknowledgment of those who fought in Algeria was a validation of their position as the third generation. The soldiers of the Indochina War are not technically part of a generation, likely because they were professionals rather than conscripts.

¹⁷ The pressure from veterans to locate and repatriate the bodies of their fallen comrades, as well as the obstacles to doing so, is comparable to the much more politicized and contentious American campaigns to

February 1955 providing for the regrouping of bodies, creation of necropolises and transfer of remains, but the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) refused to allow search teams from the DRV access to its territory on the grounds that they had not been signatories to the protocol. The DRV then denied access to French search teams, as of July 1955, in retaliation.¹⁹

The situation improved little, as is evidenced by smaller scale negotiations undertaken in 1959. On 14 December, an agreement was signed by French representatives and the DRV agreeing to the repatriation of 213 bodies and the abandonment by France of three cemeteries in Bac Ninh province (in the North), the contents of which were to be transferred to a new necropolis at French expense.²⁰ Given that there were some 30 000 bodies to be grouped together, and 2600 to be repatriated, the agreement was not well received, particularly by veterans.²¹ This tension was exacerbated by the fact that the agreement did not require any commitment from the DRV for the eventual repatriation of all French dead. Moreover, the head of the French war graves commission in Vietnam, Major Perros, had signed the

locate MIAs. See Thomas Hawley, *The Remains of War: Bodies, Politics, and the Search for American Soldiers Unaccounted for in Southeast Asia* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ This protocol was drawn up with reference to article 23 of the Geneva accords, which states that “when the site of a burial ground is known, and the presence of graves has been established, the Commanders of the Forces of each Party will allow personnel from the war graves commission of the other Party to enter the region of Vietnamese territory under their military control to locate and remove the bodies of deceased soldiers of the other Party, including the bodies of deceased prisoners of war, within a time frame to be determined once the armistice Agreement has come into force,” 67-68.

<http://www.doc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/BASIS/pacte/webext/bilat/DDD/19540059.pdf>.

¹⁹ This issue is addressed in a memo from the Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Direction Asie-Océanie, Cambodge-Laos-Vietnam, “Note au sujet des sépultures françaises au Nord Vietnam,” 27 June 1960, Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Série Asie-Océanie, sous-série Vietnam-Nord, dossier 49, ff 40-43.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Direction des Affaires Politiques, Asie-Océanie, “Note au sujet de l’accord franco-vietminh concernant les sépultures françaises au Nord-Vietnam,” 2 February 1960, Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Série Asie-Océanie, sous-série Vietnam-Nord, dossier 49, ff 17-20, 2. The bodies in question were not just metropolitan French, but included many non-French soldiers who had fought for France, some of whom (primarily African) were eventually ‘repatriated’ to France rather than to their home countries.

agreement without specific instructions from the French government to do so.²² This agreement, one of several between France and the DRV, highlights the difficulties that plagued negotiations over the repatriation of bodies well past 1975 and the reunification of Vietnam. Between 1954 and 1975, just under 12 000 bodies had been repatriated to France, leaving well over 30 000 more on Vietnamese territory.²³ By 1980, the French government was finding it increasingly difficult to tend to the cemeteries from a distance, prompting it to begin negotiating in earnest for the repatriation of remains; this resulted in a signed agreement by 1986.²⁴

Above and beyond the logistics of repatriating remains, which would naturally have delayed the process of selecting an unknown soldier, there is the critical issue of the actual interest in commemorating the Indochina War. A major contributing factor is the difference in status between the combatants of the Indochina War and these other conflicts. The two World Wars were fought with conscripts in addition to the professional army (though in the case of WWII, a motley assortment of resisters also claimed veteran rights after 1944), as was the Algerian War. The Indochina War, on the other hand, was fought exclusively by the expeditionary corps, which included members of the foreign legion and colonial troops (particularly Vietnamese). The long delay in honouring an unknown soldier from Indochina is also undoubtedly due to the relatively low level of public interest in the war; that veterans

²² Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Direction Asie-Océanie, Cambodge-Laos-Vietnam, “Note au sujet des sépultures militaires françaises au Nord-Vietnam,” *Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères*, Série Asie-Océanie, sous-série Vietnam-Nord, dossier 49, ff 178-183, 2.

²³ Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 125. The actual number cited by Aldrich and the information pamphlet from the Memorial is 11 747.

²⁴ This is identified as the motivating factor, along with “new Vietnamese demands,” in the Memorial pamphlet. It should be noted that the *Bulletin de l’ANAI* published a number of columns expressing concern over the apparent threats of the Vietnamese regime to bulldoze the French cemeteries, which may not be an accurate reflection of the situation, but certainly contributed to pressure on the French government from veterans.

self-identify as ‘those forgotten by history’ (*les oubliés de l’histoire*) is perhaps not unwarranted.

In his collaborative work with Alain Ruscio on the history and memory of Dien Bien Phu, Serge Tignères argues that the years 1979 to 1981 were marked by a commemorative *élan*, influenced by the American process of introspection regarding its own war.²⁵ This new memorial focus was expressed in part in the burial of the unknown soldier. While the event was extremely important in terms of the state’s recognition of the equality of the soldiers of the Indochina War with those who fought in the other major wars, it was nonetheless limited in its public presence. Media coverage in particular was sorely lacking. Leftist publications essentially ignored the event, and *Le Monde*’s sole article on the subject was limited to reprinting excerpts from Giscard d’Estaing’s speech and providing basic information on the events. Major dailies on the right, in particular *Le Figaro* and *France-Soir*, did publish coverage of the events on June 7th, 8th and 9th, applauding the decision to honour the soldier, who through his presence at Lorette “finally gives [...] his comrades (who have been excluded for too long), dead and alive, their rightful place at the heart of the army and the nation.”²⁶ The radio was hardly more forthcoming; there was a single interview on France Inter with the General Secretary of the *Association des Combattants de l’Union Française* (ACUF; Association of the Combatants of the French Union).²⁷ Television archives reveal nothing in the way of news footage of the events, an oversight that was bitterly resented by members of the ANAI and, presumably, other veterans.

Media coverage of, and public interest in, the Indochina War increased over the course of the 1980s. The plight of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia, the American

²⁵ Tignères and Ruscio, *Dien Bien Phu: Mythes et réalités*, 316.

²⁶ Pierre Darcourt, “L’hommage aux combattants d’Indochine,” *Le Figaro*, 9 June 1980.

²⁷ Portions of the interview are reproduced in the *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1980 no.3, 12-13, as well as in *Le Quotidien* of 9 June 1980.

process of reconciling itself with and commemorating its Vietnam War, the politicization of immigration and the rise of the extreme right, itself fascinated with the wars of decolonization, and the publication of Marguerite Duras' Goncourt award-winning *L'Amant*,²⁸ all contributed to a heightened awareness of Southeast Asia and France's colonial connection. Following on the heels of the inauguration of the American Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the *Monument aux morts d'Indochine* (Monument to the Dead of Indochina) was inaugurated in 1983, becoming the first element to what would eventually be a memorial complex known as the Memorial to the Indochina Wars. A protocol signed in 1986²⁹ between France and Vietnam providing for the repatriation of some 25 000 bodies necessitated the construction of a necropolis in France to hold them, and Fréjus mayor François Léotard offered the site adjacent to the existing monument. Construction began in 1988, and was completed in early 1993; it was followed soon after by the addition of a wall bearing the names of those with the status of *morts pour la France* (those who died for France) whose bodies had not been repatriated, which was completed in 1996.³⁰ The finished memorial complex is unquestionably, as Robert Aldrich has argued, a colonial site of memory, and as such must be examined in its form and content as well as in its planning and execution.³¹

The initial monument, built in 1983, is a simple stone wall with a bas-relief in the centre and a plaque on the ground at its base dedicated "To the Dead of Indochina 1939-1956." The bas-relief, designed by Jean Souchon and sculpted by local artist Jean-Marie

²⁸ Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984).

²⁹ This protocol coincided with the Vietnamese period of economic reforms known as *doi moi*, which resulted in the opening up of Vietnam to the West and Japan.

³⁰ The status of *mort pour la France* was not automatically attributed to those who died in combat; rather, it had to be requested by the family of the dead soldier.

³¹ Aldrich, 133.

Luccerini, features two soldiers³² – one French, one Vietnamese – struggling to hold a map of Indochina encircled by a dragon [figure 2]. The choice of dates and the bas-relief were both the source of great debate, the significance of which will be explored in the second section, along with an examination of the inaugural speeches. Indeed, the construction of the initial 1983 monument is a prime example of the difficulty in building consensus, even when the parties involved have the same interests and objectives. The monument was the result of a long campaign on the part of several, frequently competing, associations. Two groups were created to campaign for the construction of a monument: the *Association pour l'érection d'un monument national des anciens d'Indochine, combattants et victimes de guerre* (AEMNAI; Association for the Construction of a National Monument to the *Anciens* of Indochina, Combatants and Victims of War),³³ founded in September 1980 under the direction of Félix Aumiphin, and the *Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial aux soldats d'Indochine et victimes de guerre* (AEMSI; Association for the Construction of a Memorial to the Soldiers of Indochina and the Victims of War), founded in July 1979 and presided by Jean Le Bras. Although the two organizations had the same goal – the construction of a memorial to military and civilian dead in Indochina – there was little cooperation between them. The AEMNAI was ultimately given control of the project in collaboration with the municipality of Fréjus, although there was a board created to oversee the construction, which included the presidents of all of the most important associations connected with Indochina. The often bitter disagreements between the two groups are evident in their respective correspondence with Fréjus mayor François Léotard. A 1982 AEMNAI memo with news of the advances in

³² They are indeed both soldiers, and not a French soldier and Vietnamese peasant, as is suggested by Robert Aldrich in *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France*. The Vietnamese figure, though wearing the *nón* that is common to many peasants, is also wearing combat gear and boots that are very similar to those of the French soldier.

³³ As was noted in Chapter 2, *ancien* is a term that in this context can refer to veterans, former settlers, or both.

the construction of the monument states that “the AEMNAI has no legal or moral connections with the AEMSI,” further specifying that this decision was voted “unanimously” by the administrative council.³⁴ In a letter to François Léotard, Jean Le Bras complained that Jean Pascal (then AEMNAI president) refused to collaborate with the AEMSI, and this despite the fact that Le Bras had “seniority over the Memorial project.”³⁵ He further contended that the AEMNAI “may well put a wrench in the works” with respect to his ongoing negotiations with the government to secure funding for the monument.³⁶ The AEMSI and the AEMNAI both ran subscription campaigns, and a number of veterans’ associations (such as the ANAI) also sought donations from their members. Donors received a card acknowledging their contribution. In addition to the subscriptions, postcards were sold, and Jean Le Bras of the AEMSI generated further revenue from the sale of a special-issue record entitled *Marche des Anciens d’Indochine* (March of the Veterans of Indochina).³⁷ After considerable lobbying, first from Le Bras and later from the AEMNAI, the Ministry of Defence agreed to contribute a subsidy.

The rivalry between the two groups was further exacerbated by other veterans’ groups; for example, Colonel André Rottier of *Citadelles et Maquis d’Indochine* (Citadels and *Maquis* of Indochina) wrote to Pascal in January 1982, expressing the support of his organization for the memorial, but making a firm request that Le Bras’ efforts not be ignored.

³⁴ “Nouvelles du Mémorial national aux morts d’Indochine,” attached to a letter from Général H. Lapierre to François Léotard dated 17 May 1982. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’érection d’un mémorial national aux anciens d’Indochine.”

³⁵ Letter to François Léotard from Jean Le Bras, 12 January 1982. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’érection d’un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d’Indochine.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Interestingly, the record sleeve features the ANAI logo in large format, though there is no mention of the ANAI anywhere. This was likely an arrangement with the ANAI, as correspondence between François Léotard and Jean Le Bras, and Léotard and ANAI president Hélène Bastid, indicates that the ANAI fully supported Le Bras and the AEMSI.

He further suggested that the AEMNAI and AEMSI collaborate to complete the project by pooling their resources and sharing the administrative duties.³⁸ The ANAI were also supporters of Le Bras, and their reticence to get involved in the project at the outset may well be connected to his isolation by the AEMNAI. True to form, even the story of the monument has been edited to exclude this lack of consensus: the booklet from the 1988 groundbreaking ceremony for the necropolis wrote Le Bras and the AEMSI out of the story altogether, acknowledging the sole role of the AEMNAI.³⁹

Logistically speaking, the construction of the monument was relatively straightforward. The municipality of Fréjus granted the AEMNAI a small area on the side of National Route 7, bordering the area that had once been the Gallieni military training ground.⁴⁰ Colonial troops, particularly those who fought in the First World War, arrived in Fréjus and were trained there before moving to the front; they were also often sent there during their breaks, as it was thought that the climate most closely approximated that of their homeland.⁴¹ Metropolitan troops on their way to the colonies frequently passed through Fréjus as well. It thus seemed a natural choice for a memorial site with colonial ties. The town's colonial connections are features of the landscape: there is a Buddhist pagoda built by Vietnamese soldiers during the First World War, a 'Sudanese' mosque,⁴² and many of the

³⁸ Letter to General Jean Pascal from Colonel André Rottier, general secretary of the *Citadelles et Maquis d'Indochine*, 14 January 1982. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder "Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d'Indochine."

³⁹ "Aux combattants tombés pour la France en Indochine," Booklet published for the 1988 groundbreaking ceremony, Fréjus. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 21, folder "Pose 1ère pierre 19/01/88. Plaquettes et photos."

⁴⁰ Joseph Gallieni had a long military and administrative career in the colonies, including Réunion, French Sudan, Indochina and Madagascar.

⁴¹ For more on the use of Fréjus and nearby Saint-Raphaël for stationing colonial troops, see Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), especially pages 164-167.

⁴² 'Sudanese' refers here to French Sudan (which included parts of present-day Niger and Mali), and not contemporary Sudan.

roundabouts and major roadways have been given colonial military names. In addition to the Memorial to the Indochina Wars, there is a museum of the Marine corps (*Musée des Troupes de marine*). In recognition of his role in offering the site and his support of the project, François Léotard was made an honorary president of the AEMNAI.

The inauguration of the monument, presided by Minister of Veterans' Affairs Jean Laurain, was held on 4 June 1983. While the ceremony was well attended, with approximately 5000 participants,⁴³ and well received, the organizers did contend with a few disappointments. As was the case for the burial of the unknown soldier, media coverage was minimal. As the AEMNAI's final report states, it was "too limited at the local level" and "non-existent at the national level."⁴⁴ The fact that the *mairie*, as the office responsible for organizing media contacts, was at fault was only exacerbated by the fact that the inauguration plaque for which it was also responsible was not ready in time for the ceremony.

The initiative to build the Memorial to the Indochina Wars, located on the same site as the 1983 monument, was the result of an agreement concluded between France and Vietnam in September 1986 that provided for the repatriation of the remains of 24 632 French dead (military and civilian).⁴⁵ The scale of the repatriation operation necessitated the building of a necropolis in which to house the remains of those who were not claimed by their families for private burial. The process targeted three major cemeteries Tan Son Nhut

⁴³ "Procès verbal de l'assemblée générale de l'Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial national aux anciens d'Indochine, combattants et victimes de guerre," 27 July 1983. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder "Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial national aux anciens d'Indochine."

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ The agreement was not a protocol signed by the two parties, but rather an exchange of letters dated 10 and 23 September 1986. *Journal officiel de la République française*, 25 April 1987, 4667. The number of bodies repatriated cited here is that cited by the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs in an information dossier intended for a meeting in Fréjus regarding the memorial on 5 July 1989. Of the bodies repatriated, 17 830 were soldiers *morts pour la France*, 3407 were soldiers not *morts pour la France*, and 3395 were civilians. Slightly different statistics are cited in the information booklet on the memorial sponsored by the Ministry of Defence (a total of 27239, of which 3630 were civilians). Once again, the numbers reflect not only soldiers of metropolitan origin, but also colonial troops.

and Vung Tau in the south and Ba Huyen in the north. The exhumation and repatriation of bodies began on October 1st, with the first bodies arriving in France on the 10th, where they were met by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. A ceremony honouring the dead was presided over by François Mitterrand at the Invalides on the 11th. The entire repatriation process took just over a year.

On 19 January 1988, little over a year after the last bodies were repatriated, ground was broken on the site adjacent to the 1983 monument for the construction of the Memorial to the Indochina Wars. The ceremony was presided by Chirac, and was attended by a host of military dignitaries, including the wives of Marshals de Lattre and Leclerc, Marcel Bigeard, Geneviève de Galard, Jean-Jacques Beucler and approximately 20 000 others.⁴⁶ Contrary to the ceremonies for the unknown soldier and the inauguration of the 1983 monument, media coverage of the groundbreaking ceremony (*pose de la première pierre*) was fairly comprehensive.

No doubt this was due to a number of factors, not least of which was Chirac's recent announcement of his candidacy for the upcoming presidential elections. Public and government awareness of the Indochina War had been increasing in recent years, arguably since the 30th anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1984 and the release of Henri de Turenne's televised documentary *Vietnam* that same year. Robert Bonnafous' doctoral dissertation of the experiences of French prisoners of the Viet Minh was published in 1986, and the campaign for a special status for those prisoners was being waged in the National Assembly. The increasing memorial trend of the late eighties is apparent in the addresses of both politicians, and a particular vocabulary of 'memory' and 'amnesia' was pervasive.

⁴⁶ Such was the estimate given by Gabriel Jauffret in "Premier ministre le matin candidat l'après-midi!", *Var-Matin*, 20 January 1988.

Léotard opened his speech with a reflection on the arrival of the first bodies the previous October, describing its impact as “a memory wound.” It was not, he qualified, “resentment over thirty years of being forgotten” but rather “a sadness over the time it has taken our people to turn and face those who have expected so much of it.”⁴⁷ Chirac, for his part, spoke of the indifference of public opinion during the war. A *Nice-Matin* article of 20 January entitled “Indochina: Chirac Corrects an Injustice” echoed the sentiments of many veterans.⁴⁸

The memorial housing the necropolis was completed in April 1992 and inaugurated in February 1993. The structure is a nearly-complete circle (110 metre diameter) built on a slight hill oriented toward the Mediterranean, where troops had embarked on the *Pasteur* and other ships destined for Indochina. The military ossuaries are divided according to the provenance of the bodies: those originating in the north are separate from those from the south, and a small group that had been transferred from the national necropolis in Luynes was kept apart as well. A special dispensation was granted so that a civilian ossuary could be included in the necropolis. On the lower level of the complex is a place of worship (*lieu cultuel*) in which Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are all represented. At the entrance to the structure is a small information room containing mock-ups of the battle terrain and placards outlining the French colonial presence in Indochina. The guide to the interpretation centre (actually called a ‘memorial hall’) emphasizes its memorial aspects, describing it as a site “of memory, of unrecognized sacrifices, of ignored heroism, and of forgotten suffering.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ “Discours de M. François Léotard,” 19 January 1988. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 21, folder “Première pierre 19/01/88. Discours François Léotard et Premier Ministre.”

⁴⁸ “Chirac répare une injustice,” *Nice-Matin*, 20 January 1988.

⁴⁹ Site guide handout, Mémorial des guerres d’Indochine.

The commitment to maintaining the memory of an event is traditionally translated into the very architecture and design of memorial sites and monuments. These formal sites are intended to be durable so as to educate and inform future generations about their history.⁵⁰ There are exceptions to the rule, such as the sinking Memorial against Fascism in Hamburg,⁵¹ but generally monuments are intended to have a certain permanence. Architect Bernard Desmoulin, whose design was selected for the necropolis, conceptualized the project in a completely different manner. In a radio interview with France-Culture in 1996, he described his vision in the following manner:

I imagined that in 50 years no one would know what the Indochina War was, but the site would still exist. [...] In 50 years, when the site is completely overrun by nature, even the idea of death will have completely disappeared. It will be a different site, a little unusual, but that will maintain its mystery. And as for the Indochina War, it's true that it will be present through a few barely legible names on plaques.⁵²

This commitment to have nature overtake the memorial is shared with Maya Lin, the architect of the American Vietnam Veterans' memorial, who saw her monument as "an initial violence that in time would heal" as the grass grew up to the surface of the wall.⁵³ In the American case, the 'healing' of nature reflects the national healing that was intended to be represented by the memorial. In the French case, however, the motivation for the monument was not about national reconciliation as much as it was about recognizing the contributions of the soldiers to the nation. For this reason, the emphasis on the monument, and therefore

⁵⁰ Sarah Farmer has discussed the issues of the impact of natural decay altering commemorative landscapes in the case of Oradour-sur-Glane, a village destroyed by the Nazis in 1944, and the resulting shifts in attitudes toward the permanence of memorial sites. "Oradour-sur-Glane: Memory in a Preserved Landscape," *French Historical Studies* 19 no.1 (Spring 1995), 27-47, particularly pages 42-44.

⁵¹ See James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁵² "Les monuments aux morts," *Lieux de mémoire*, France-Culture, 14 November 1996. Archives de l'Institut national de l'audiovisuel.

⁵³ Maya Lin, quoted in Joel Swerdlow, "To Heal a Nation," *National Geographic*, May 1985, 557. Quoted in Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory. Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 97.

this recognition, fading into the natural landscape is fundamentally at odds with the intended role of the memorial.

The site was inaugurated in February 1993 by François Mitterrand, following his controversial trip to Vietnam and Cambodia, the first by a French head of state since the end of the war.⁵⁴ Though he was accompanied to Southeast Asia by high-profile veteran and filmmaker Pierre Schoendoerffer, not all veterans supported the President's trip. Geneviève de Galard spoke openly about her opposition to the visit, stating that Vietnam was still living under a "totalitarian" government and that she would only consider returning if there was a liberalization of the regime.⁵⁵ Many veterans held similar positions, and not only with respect to state visits; some also condemned their fellow veterans who returned to Vietnam as tourists. De Galard further expressed shock at Mitterrand's statements that the war had been a colonial one: "I was appalled to hear François Mitterrand speak of a colonial war. As Marshal de Lattre said, it wasn't a colonial war, but a war against communism to defend the free world."⁵⁶ She, along with Jean-Jacques Beucler, decried the timing of the state visit, arguing that veterans had been forced to wait far past the original projected completion date for the memorial to be inaugurated, and that the trip should have been postponed until after the ceremony. The Boudarel Affair, which had so recently rocked the French public, still loomed large for many veterans, who equated the Vietnamese Mitterrand was visiting with their "butchers" (*bourreaux*).

During his trip to Southeast Asia, Mitterrand met with General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu, and travelled to the site of the final French defeat to pay his respects

⁵⁴ To Vietnam, at any rate. De Gaulle did visit Phnom Penh in 1966.

⁵⁵ Interview with Geneviève de Galard, *Le Soir*, France 3, 10 February 1993. *Archives de l'Institut national de l'audiovisuel*.

⁵⁶ "Quatre anciens d'Indochine réagissent," *France-Soir*, 11 February 1993.

to those who had fought and died there. The trip to Dien Bien Phu was also intended, in Mitterrand's words, to "close a painful chapter."⁵⁷ The press covered the trip with enthusiasm, alternatively for the trip itself or the scandal it was provoking amongst veterans. Reporters travelled to cover the story, and interviews with General Giap were featured on several news programs. He spoke eloquently, in elegant French, of the "feelings of deep affection" felt by the Vietnamese toward the French, and asserted that "now is the time for reconciliation, [...] we have turned over a new leaf."⁵⁸ The impact of Mitterrand's statements regarding the nature of the Indochina War and his travel to Vietnam on the inauguration of the memorial mark a clear departure from earlier 'official' discourse of the conflict. It is facile to reduce this shift to the division between the political left and right, although it is certainly the case that the politicians of the right (Chirac, Léotard) promoted a different version of the official narrative than did Mitterrand.

The final addition to the memorial complex was the memorial wall (*mur du souvenir*), inscribed with the names of the roughly 34 000 *morts pour la France* whose bodies were not contained in the necropolis, either because they had not been repatriated or because they had been returned to their families [figure 3].⁵⁹ Inspired by Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial in Washington, it features the same glossy surface, although in the French case this is due to a clear plexiglass overlay on which the names are engraved. Furthermore, the wall is white marble, matching the tone of the necropolis structure surrounding it, unlike Lin's dark

⁵⁷ Quoted in multiple newspapers, including Paul Guilbert, "Le retour de la France sur la scène indochinoise," *Le Figaro*, 10 February 1993.

⁵⁸ Antenne 2, *Journal de 20H*, 8 February 1993.

⁵⁹ While the practice of naming war dead dates back to the French Revolution, it was really the First World War that established the practice on a wide scale, due in part to exponentially larger numbers. See Thomas Laqueur, "Memory and Naming in the Great War."

monument, dubbed the “black gash” by critics.⁶⁰ As was discussed earlier, despite the similarities in design, the objectives of each monument differ greatly. The interactive focus of the American monument, which encourages people to make rubbings of the names and to leave objects at the site, is absent from the French monument. Moreover, whereas those behind the Vietnam Veterans Memorial sought an end to the domestic divisions of the war period through national reconciliation, the French sought to reintegrate the Indochina veterans (and fallen soldiers) back into the national narrative. The Indochina War was divisive for the metropole, but this division is rarely mentioned with respect to commemorative events. It is alluded to with the occasional reference to the ‘hostility’ faced by some returning soldiers, but the official narrative rarely proceeds beyond that point. The Americans have also been much quicker to face the legacy of the Vietnam War than the French have theirs, though this is undoubtedly due to the additional factor of the loss of a colony. This is particularly interesting, given that the loss of the colony is rarely evoked in the official narrative, which is justified with reference to the Cold War. The Vietnam War is also arguably *the* American national trauma of the twentieth century, while the French have had to contend with several dark periods.

The most recent state-sponsored commemorative initiative is the national day of homage to the dead of the Indochina War, to be celebrated on June 8th. Created by decree in May 2005,⁶¹ it was celebrated for the first time a month later. Despite the short notice, veterans’ associations like the ANAI organized small-scale events. The decree states that a ceremony is to be held each year in Paris, as well as in each department, and in the overseas departments and territories (DOM-TOM). This was the ultimate step in the rehabilitation of

⁶⁰ Wolf Von Eckardt, “Design: Storm Over a Viet Nam Memorial,” *Time*, 9 November 1981.

⁶¹ Decree no. 2005-547 of 26 May 2005, published in the *Journal officiel de la République Française*, 27 May 2005, 9218.

the soldiers who had fought in Indochina, a process that was really begun in 1988 with the initiation of the necropolis. While the choice of date – the anniversary of the burial of the unknown soldier – may have been confusing to some, it was, as we have seen, a commonly suggested date for commemorative celebrations. The idea for a national day of homage was not a new one; Jean Le Bras wrote to Minister of Veterans' Affairs in 1982 suggesting that a national day be instituted to honour the memory of the “victims of the Indochina campaign.”⁶² He proposed the relatively obscure date of November 14th, which marked the beginning of Operation *Castor* and the establishment of the fortified camp at Dien Bien Phu. The ANAI and other veterans' organizations had also lobbied for a national day of recognition. The choice of June 8th reflected a desire to find a neutral date to commemorate what had been a divisive war, which continued to cause divisions decades later. As was discussed in Chapter 2 on the ANAI, May 7th was unacceptable because it symbolized defeat, and July 20th represented for many veterans the ultimate abandonment of the Indochinese whom they felt they had fought for and with. For the ANAI, which had long held commemorative events on May 7th, it was an unacceptable date for a national day because it favoured the combatants of Dien Bien Phu over those of other battles. It was necessary, ANAI president General Guy Simon argued, to find a date that would include everyone. The anniversary of the burial of the unknown soldier was not only an acceptably neutral date, but it also symbolized the beginning of the long process of state recognition and rehabilitation of those who had fought in the Indochina War.

⁶² Letter to Jean Le Bras from René Aubry, no. 22 BC/TL, 4 January 1982. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d'Indochine.”

The process was similar to that for the national day to commemorate the Algerian War, which was established in 2003.⁶³ The issue of a government-sanctioned national day had been debated in the National Assembly for several decades before it was formally created. The largest veterans' organization for those who had fought in Algeria, the *Fédération nationale des anciens combattants d'Algérie, Maroc et Tunisie* (FNACA; National Federation of Veterans of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), had been holding commemorative ceremonies on March 19th since the 1960s, to mark the promulgation of the Evian accords. Veterans not belonging to the FNACA, which early on had ties with the political left, were vehemently opposed to celebrating the date on which France had 'abandoned' her Algerian territory. They were also opposed to the date on the grounds that a large number of *harkis* were massacred following the signing of the accords; to set March 19th as the national day was to effectively remove them from the community of soldiers being honoured. For the *pieds-noirs* forced to return (or go for the first time) to France, March 19th was a black day. Given the prominence of the *pied-noir* community in France, the attention (eventually) paid to the *harkis*, and the overall place of the Algerian War in the French consciousness, the decision over the date of the national day was arguably even more divisive in the Algerian case than in that of the Indochina War. The result of the search for a neutral date to commemorate the Algerian War the anniversary of the inauguration of the memorial to the war on the Quai Branly in Paris on 5 December 2002.⁶⁴

⁶³ Decree no. 2003-925 of 26 September 2003, published in the *Journal officiel de la République française*, 28 September 2003, 16 584.

⁶⁴ The choice of commemorative date to remember slavery and its abolition (*Journée commémorative du souvenir de l'esclavage et de son abolition*) was made following similar principles. The date chosen was May 10th, the date on which the Taubira law, which recognizes slavery as a crime against humanity, was adopted in 2001.

The first celebration of June 8th was held in the courtyard of the Invalides in 2005. Minister of Defence Michèle Alliot-Marie presided, and was accompanied by Minister of Veterans' Affairs Hamlaoui Mékachéra. Though the planning was rushed, this first celebration of the national day did present a special feature. Days earlier, the bodies of twelve French soldiers had arrived in France after being discovered in Dien Bien Phu. Only one was unidentified, and was given special honours at the Invalides. Alliot-Marie's address emphasized the courage and heroism of the combatants, French and foreign, in their fight for the principles of "liberty, justice and democracy."⁶⁵ She referred to the prisoner of war camps, and the indifference and even hostility of public opinion, which the soldiers had had to face. According to the ANAI, which also takes credit for much of the organization of the event, there were 1700 veterans in attendance, of which 950 were their own members.⁶⁶ Outside of Paris, small ceremonies were organized by the presidents of the departmental sections of the ANAI, and a special ceremony was held at the memorial in Fréjus. The 2006 celebration, which had the advantage of advance planning, took place at the Arc de Triomphe. After a procession of 400 people down the Champs Élysées, there was a small military ceremony led by Mékachéra, and the flame at the tomb of the unknown soldier of the First World War was lit; this was to become a central element of future celebrations of the national day. The ANAI placed more emphasis on events organized by its regional sections, and the reports from each section attest to the fact that they were more widespread and better attended than the previous year.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "Discours de Madame Michèle Alliot-Marie, Ministre de la Défense, dans la cours d'honneur de l'hôtel national des Invalides le 8 juin 2005," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 2005 no. 2, back cover.

⁶⁶ "Rapport d'activité 2005," *Bulletin de l'ANAI* July 2006 no. 6, 5.

⁶⁷ "Vie des sections," *Bulletin de l'ANAI* July 2006 no. 6, 29-34.

Common Themes and Narratives

Each of these national, state-sponsored commemorative events and sites reveals the construction of a broader ‘official’ narrative of the Indochina War, its combatants, its objectives, and its context. From the burial of the unknown soldier in 1980 to the celebration of the first national day of homage in 2005, certain key themes have emerged through the speeches of state representatives and local dignitaries, as well as through the choice of inscriptions, images and dates. The most prominent themes are familiar to us: the courage and sacrifice of the French forces; the vilification of the communist enemy; the celebration of the partnership between the French forces and their Indochinese brothers-in-arms; and an appreciation of the positive aspects of the colonial presence. In many instances, the war was also characterized as being intimately connected with the events of the Second World War in Southeast Asia, a phenomenon that will be discussed in considerable detail at the end of the section

Giscard d’Estaing’s speech honouring the unknown soldier paid homage to the military achievements and valour of the French troops, and presented the unknown as belonging to a long line of soldiers and sailors who, from the era of conquest to the war, had sought to bring their “courage” and “faith” to the peninsula.⁶⁸ Minister of Veterans’ Affairs Maurice Plantier sought to rehabilitate the soldiers, reminding them that “should not be ashamed of the way [they] fought, nor of the reasons for combat.”⁶⁹ Three years later, Léotard’s speech at the inauguration of the Monument to the Dead of Indochina praised the courage and sacrifice, referring specifically to the battle of Dien Bien Phu. He framed the conflict in terms of a battle for the liberty of the Indochinese people, evoking the

⁶⁸ “Les cérémonies en l’honneur du Soldat Inconnu d’Indochine,” 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

contemporary plight of the boat people to justify the objectives of the French forces decades earlier. This was followed by barely-veiled criticism of those who had objected to the war, those whose “pacifist campaigns” were characterized by a “renunciation, an abandonment.” This abandonment, which he describes as “the spirit of Munich” and “the cowardly pursuit of peace at all costs,” guaranteed that those abandoned would be forced into servitude.⁷⁰ Léotard did not limit his speech to military affairs, however; he also addressed the legacy of the French presence abroad, which he describes as a “presence of civilization” of which France should be proud.

The response to Léotard’s words was overwhelmingly positive; even Jean Gardes (ACUF), who had initially been opposed to the Memorial project, wrote to express his gratitude on behalf of the veterans who “have so often felt forgotten by the metropole,” and who “particularly appreciated the words that you spoke in their honour [...]”⁷¹ Amidst all of the congratulations, there is also some space dedicated to disparaging what is described as the ‘hopeless’ situation faced by the soldiers in Indochina and the current Socialist government, as in the following letter from Jean Mathé:

Under this luminous *provençal* sky which has accompanied so many of us as we left for Overseas France, your words, high-minded and even mystical, have evoked the crusaders’ spirit that filled the troops fighting in the Far East against the communist totalitarianism that now subjugates the people of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, with whom we have such a special connection. Alas, our struggle was a lost cause, for we were rejected by part of the Nation that had already given up, and betrayed and besmirched by those who now govern us.⁷²

⁷⁰ “Mémorial de Fréjus,” *Debout les paras*, issue 89 (September-October 1983). *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’érection d’un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d’Indochine.”

⁷¹ Letter to François Léotard from General Jean Gardes, 7 June 1983. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’érection d’un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d’Indochine.”

⁷² Letter to François Léotard from Colonel Jean Mathé, 7 June 1983. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’érection d’un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d’Indochine.”

Similar themes were raised by Marcel Robert, secretary of the Isère chapter of the ACUF, who thanked Léotard for demonstrating his “love of the truth” which he had “bellowed with passion and courage before the representative of the current regime.” He went on to argue that there was an imperative to continue the struggle against the same enemy as they had during the war, in the East and in France proper, and he pledged his association’s support for this struggle.⁷³ As was demonstrated in Chapter 2 on the ANAI, this committed anti-communism was characteristic of many veterans, and it lasted long after the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989.

In 1988, the speeches delivered by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac and Fréjus mayor François Léotard, both of right-wing political parties, at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Memorial to the Indochina Wars reiterated many of the themes already discussed. However, both were also shaped by issues that had recently been thrust into the spotlight, such as the experiences of prisoners of the Viet Minh, as well as the exodus of the boat people in the mid to late seventies. Léotard reinforced the narrative of the war as a struggle for freedom, claiming that “it will have taken us nearly forty years to recognize, in the dazed look of the boat people, in the submerged silence of the 400 000 people who drowned in the China Sea, the extent of their commitment, the true significance of their combat.”⁷⁴ As was noted earlier, Chirac spoke of the battle against the “harsh yoke of a totalitarian ideology” as the motivating force of the war. He reinforced this criticism of the Communist Vietnamese regime through several references to the horrendous conditions of the Viet Minh prisoner of war camps. This was no doubt an effort to both recognize the suffering of the survivors publically, and to offer support to the ongoing campaign for a special status of “prisoner of the Viet Minh.”

⁷³ Letter to François Léotard from Marcel Robert, 5 June 1983. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’érection d’un mémorial à la mémoire des anciens combattants d’Indochine.”

⁷⁴ “Discours de M. François Léotard,” 19 January 1988. Excerpts of the speech are reproduced in François Léotard, *Place de la République* (Paris: Laffont, 1992), 208-211.

Members of the ANAPI were in attendance at the ceremony, holding a banner reading “the survivors of Indochina” as a means of drawing public (and political) attention to the campaign. Chirac’s recognition of the contributions and sacrifices of the French forces extended to its non-French members as well: he praised the “brotherhood of arms” between soldiers of all nationalities, Cambodians, Lao, Vietnamese, Africans and Malagasy, all fighting for France. The emphasis on the Franco-Indochinese partnership in particular was reminiscent of Giscard d’Estaing’s 1980 speech for the unknown soldier, during which he evoked the “heartbreak of having to fight alongside them, and against those among them who had refused France’s outstretched hand.”⁷⁵ This close relationship is presented as having been part of France’s “great adventure,” noting that with the burial of the unknown “a glorious page of our history is closed.”⁷⁶ He further reflects on this ‘glorious’ history, suggesting that “once calmer times prevail, History will be able to judge the work of those who accomplished a great task in Indochina, and measure the contribution that France made to the progress of these peoples of the other half of the world.”⁷⁷

The themes of colonial partnership and the positive legacy of the French presence in Indochina featured prominently in discussions and debates over the 1983 Monument to the Dead of Indochina. Although the various parties involved ultimately settled on the dates of 1939-1956 for the inscription, this was far from a simple process. *Citadels and Maquis of Indochina* had reservations about having any dates at all, arguing that despite France’s sacrifices in Indochina, the “extensive work that she accomplished” should also be honoured.⁷⁸ For this reason, he continued, “the inscription should evoke the broader

⁷⁵ “Les cérémonies en l’honneur du Soldat Inconnu d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁸ Letter to General Jean Pascal from Colonel André Rottier, general secretary of *Citadelles et Maquis d’Indochine*, 14 January 1982.

charitable work of France, as well as her dead.”⁷⁹ The Indochina War was thus conflated with a colonial influence that could be understood to go back to the French monarchy. The group also took issue with the image of the two soldiers, who Léotard described as “united in their struggle, their acts driven by solidarity and desperation.”⁸⁰ They argued that it was unconscionable to privilege one of the three states of Indochina over the others, even if it was only done symbolically. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the ANAI also opposed the design, although their reasons are less explicit. The disagreements between the various factions obviously took a toll on the mayor’s office, which was quite involved in the construction process. The previously-cited letter from a local artist regarding the ANAI’s opinions of the planned bas-relief⁸¹ has a handwritten note attached, presumably from the mayor, stating that “we can’t get caught up in this mess,” and advising that the letter be forwarded to the AEMNAI. While various parties took issue with the design, it seems that the root concern was the fair representation of all regions that had comprised Indochina. The spirit of the design – a partnership between France and its former colonies – was in tune with the narrative of the war promoted by a majority of veterans. As we have seen, it was also a theme invoked by both Giscard d’Estaing and Plantier at the burial of the unknown soldier three years earlier.

The emphasis here on solidarity between the French forces and the ‘Indochinese’ and the inclusion of the colonial ‘other’ in the design was also to be pursued when putting together the national committee that was to oversee the construction. The “desperate” nature of the fight highlighted the fact that the odds were stacked against success, with the French trying to roll back the

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “Mémorial de Fréjus,” *Debout les paras*.

⁸¹ See page 82.

clock after Vietnam declared independence in 1945. A letter from Colonel Félix (ANAI) to L  otard in February 1982 included a list of nominations for the committee; among them was the vague label of “members of the Indochinese community.”⁸²

The celebration of French achievements in the colonies carried through to the inauguration of the 1988 monument. Both L  otard and Chirac elaborated on the positive legacy of colonialism, to a greater degree than had been the practice at previous commemorative events. While Chirac spoke of the “great work of Overseas France,”⁸³ he did recognize that the colonial project was not without its “grey areas.”⁸⁴ Overall, however, he praised all those who had contributed to the development of Greater France, as well as those from the colonies who had fought to defend the metropole in the two World Wars. L  otard, for his part, focussed on the more tangible French accomplishments: “we left behind us roads and hospitals, schools and dispensaries, high schools and canals; we left urban and rural areas in which the French language maintains the hope of a freedom that is yet to be established.”⁸⁵ This emphasis on the positive legacy of colonialism was reinforced by a three-day exhibit on Indochina, co-sponsored by the Ministry of Veterans’ Affairs, veterans and former settlers, and the municipality of Fr  jus. The exhibit was divided into two sections: the first covered three centuries of the French presence in Indochina, and the second the period 1939-1954. As a testament to the suffering of the ‘Indochinese’ after the French departure from the peninsula, a fishing boat used by refugees fleeing communist

⁸² Letter to Fran  ois L  otard from Colonel F  lix, 20 February 1982. *Archives municipales de Fr  jus*, carton 87 W 3, folder “Association pour l’  rection d’un m  morial    la m  moire des anciens combattants d’Indochine.”

⁸³ “Discours du Premier ministre. Pose de la premi  re pierre de la n  cropole aux morts pour la France de la guerre d’Indochine,” 19 January 1988, 7.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Vietnam was included as part of the exhibit.⁸⁶ The visitor's center of the completed Memorial confirms the narrative of a "long common history" between the French and the Indochinese, the partnership between "brothers in arms" and even makes use of colonial (Orientalist) language to describe these "partners" in the first part of the display, entitled "The Land and its People."⁸⁷ As presented by the exhibit, the Vietnamese are "clever and active," while the Cambodians are "religious and refined" and the Lao "affable and hospitable."⁸⁸ Moreover, the French colonizers are depicted as having brought peace and prosperity to the peninsula, driving away the Chinese colonizer and roving bands of pirates.

While the textual content of memorial sites is central to the construction of historical narrative, the choice of dates (for inscriptions and events alike) is equally important. As we have seen, there were extensive debates over an appropriate date for the day of homage. It was, in fact, not the first time that June 8th was chosen as a significant, but neutral, date. The date ultimately chosen for the inauguration of the 1983 monument was June 4th, because it coincided with the "commemorative period" of the burial of the unknown soldier three years prior⁸⁹ (it was likely held on the 4th because it fell on a Saturday). The other option for the inaugural date was March 9th, in reference to the surprise Japanese attack of 1945. There was at least one opponent to this option, who argued that commemorating a French defeat was

⁸⁶ A brief description of the exhibit was included in the information booklet published for the groundbreaking ceremony (*Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 21, folder "Pose 1ère pierre 19/01/88. Plaquettes et photos"); a photo and description of the boat that was located at the entrance was published on the cover of *Nice-Matin* on 19 January 1988.

⁸⁷ Each of these themes is represented by a book of images and information, along with several other books, maps and information panels devoted to the combatants, the major battles, and the prisoner of war camps.

⁸⁸ Large portions of this text and other passages from the exhibit are reproduced in Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire*, pages 127-129.

⁸⁹ General Jean Pascal and Mr. Cermolacce, "Procès verbal de la réunion du 24 Novembre 1982 pour l'organisation de l'inauguration du Mémorial aux Morts d'Indochine," 1. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder "Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial national aux anciens d'Indochine."

undesirable,⁹⁰ but the proposal hints at the critical place occupied by March 9th in the French narrative.

The Japanese coup of March 9th stands out in veteran and settler narratives as a key date for the French experience in Indochina, first and foremost because it was a particularly violent and traumatic event that targeted the French military and civilians alike. The French colonial authorities (representatives of the Vichy regime) had been forced to establish a power-sharing agreement with the Japanese in 1940, but by 1945 the latter put into motion a plan to knock the French out of power altogether. Civilians and soldiers alike were attacked and imprisoned. Many veterans and other commentators understand the Indochina War as emerging directly from the circumstances created by the Japanese takeover, arguing that the Viet Minh gained support and popularity as a result. Moreover, once the Japanese were themselves defeated, there was a power vacuum that the Viet Minh took advantage of. As the veterans see it, this in turn paved the way for Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence and establishment of a Communist state in northern Vietnam, and it was this communist threat that prompted the French to commit themselves more fully to the peninsula in terms of military force.

March 9th is far less central to the state narrative of the war, but it has occasionally been featured in commemorative addresses. At the burial of the unknown soldier at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette on 8 June 1980, for example, Minister of Veterans' Affairs Maurice Plantier referred to the coup and drew strong links between The Second World War and the subsequent conflict:

⁹⁰ Letter to Félix Aumiphin from Michel Boursin, 26 January 1982. *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3, folder "Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial national aux anciens d'Indochine."

On March 9th, 1945, the Japanese attacked the French troops. Faced with their tenacious resistance, they did not treat their prisoners honourably, but delivered them to the executioner or imprisoned them in veritable death camps. It was to rescue them that the combatants of 1939-1945 came [...].⁹¹

The centrality of March 9th is further reinforced by the fact that it was suggested as an appropriate date for the inauguration of the Monument to the Dead of Indochina in 1983. According to available archival evidence, this met with widespread approval: the reason it was not selected was because of a conflict with the elections, and not because it was deemed to be inappropriate to hold the inauguration on the date of a French defeat. The choice of a date that was symbolic for both military and civilian groups indicates a desire to be inclusive of both communities, which is reflected in the lack of the term “war” in the inscription (“To the Dead of Indochina”). Then-president of the ANAI H  l  ne Bastid’s interpretation of this symbolic community included civilians, the military and the *maquis*: “whether they fought as legionnaires, colonial troops, cavalrymen, sailors, pilots, parachutists, whether they were part of the expeditionary corps or the former *maquis* of Indochina.”⁹² Not only are civilians and military grouped together, but the additional incorporation of the *maquis* reinforces the narrative of a common resistance from 1939 to 1956. The heterogeneous community identified by Bastid was reinforced in the later stages of the memorial complex, which houses the bodies of 3630 civilians⁹³ and features memorial plaques to civilian groups, such as the rubber plantation owners, as well as military platoons and battalions.

The memorial complex in Fr  jus (including the 1983 monument, the memorial and the necropolis) provides a more detailed case study of the issues surrounding choices of dates

⁹¹ “Les c  r  monies en l’honneur du Soldat Inconnu d’Indochine,” 10.

⁹² H  l  ne Bastid, “Le mot de la Pr  sidente. Inauguration du M  morial des morts d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1983 no. 3, 1.

⁹³ Information pamphlet from the Memorial to the Dead of the Indochina Wars, produced by the Ministry of D  fense.

and the perception of a continuum uniting the Second World War and the Indochina War.

The archives seem to suggest that most of those involved in the planning and execution of the 1983 monument felt it was natural to include the years of the Second World War on the engraving. After some discussion, it was decided that the dates on the monument would be 1939 to 1956. The original inscription was also to include the more politically-charged phrase “For a Common Ideal,” but this was ultimately dropped, leaving the plaque at the base of the sculpture to read simply “Aux morts d’Indochine 1939-1956” (“To the Dead of Indochina”). The dates 1939-1954 are inscribed on the crypt, and the end dates inscribed on the memorial wall of names unveiled in 1996 are the same as the monument. The choice of dates, which represents the period of the Second World War (in Europe) through to the withdrawal of the last French troops from Vietnam in 1956, is intriguing. While the latter date is understandable given that French soldiers continued to be killed after the formal end of the Indochina War, the choice of 1939 is somewhat perplexing. While it represents the beginning of the Second World War in Europe, it has little significance in the East Asian theatre, where the war was well underway by 1937. Nor does the date hold any significance in the Indochinese context, either; the Japanese occupation began in the north in 1940, and subsequently encompassed the southern regions. A possible explanation is that the engagement of France in the Second World War necessarily committed the Empire to the conflict, and thus while there was no fighting in Indochina in 1939, the region was nonetheless involved in the war effort.

What is to be made of this periodization, and the fact that it went virtually unchallenged? Does it represent a desire to submerge the Indochina War by placing it in a

continuum with the Second World War, as Panivong Norindr has argued?⁹⁴ Norindr posits that this periodization effectively erases “the not-so-heroic vision of France’s historical involvement in Southeast Asia from the collective memory.”⁹⁵ More than this, I would argue, the choice of dates effectively ignores the colonial dimension of the war by establishing a continuum of French resistance: first to the Japanese, and later to the Viet Minh. A number of soldiers who went to Indochina in 1945 understood their mission as liberating “Greater France,” just as the metropole had been liberated. Yet the Indochina War was also criticized, both at the time and subsequently, as being a war of colonial reconquest, particularly by the French Communist Party and others on the political left. For veterans and many on the right, the goal of the French forces was to ensure the liberation of the ‘Indochinese,’ first from the Japanese and later from the Communists. In this view any colonial motivations on the part of the French state and military can be conveniently elided. Furthermore, the narrative of resistance allows the Vichy years in Indochina to be ‘forgotten’ in favour of a resistancialist myth, echoing metropolitan memory-building where the Occupation was concerned.

Conclusion

Despite the apparent overlaps between the ‘official’ narrative of the war and that of veterans as illustrated in Chapter 2 and elsewhere, it wasn’t until 1994 that government

⁹⁴ Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 152. Here Norindr is actually addressing the dates on the crypt inside the necropolis, which are 1939-1954, but his general argument can be applied to the 1983 monument as well. Hee Ko has addressed the conflation of World War Two and the Indochina War from a different angle, focusing on the rhetoric of the political left during the war itself, which reduced the complexity of the Indochina conflict to a mirror image of the Nazi occupiers and French resistance, with the French in the role of the occupiers. “Trespass of Memory: The French-Indochina War as World War II,” in Alec Hargreaves, ed., *Memory, Empire and Postcolonialism: Legacies of French Colonialism* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 98-111.

⁹⁵ Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature*, 152.

representatives took part in the commemorative ceremonies in Pau organized by veterans themselves. In honour of the 40th anniversary of the end of the war, Minister of Defence François Léotard attended the events in Pau. By 2004, it was the president of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, who was the guest of honour. The state's active acknowledgment of the veterans, beginning in 1980 and culminating with the creation of the national day of homage in 2005, certainly contributed to facilitating this cooperation. On 4 June 2006, days before the celebration of the second ever national day of homage, at least one television station took advantage of the renewed attention to the combatants of the Indochina War to air a news segment on another "forgotten" group with a connection to the Indochina War: the residents of the *Camp d'accueil des Français d'Indochine* (CAFI; Welcome Centre for the French of Indochina) in Sainte-Livrade (Lot-et-Garonne), the oldest of whom had arrived in 1956 following the withdrawal of the last French troops from Vietnam. They, and their children and grandchildren, had in the previous decade sought to gain official recognition for the CAFI from the government as a site of memory. This 'unofficial' site of memory reveals a different narrative of war and colonialism, one that contrasts with the official version outlined here.

Chapter 4

“*Les oubliés de Vietnam-sur-Lot*”: Repatriate Camps as Sites of Colonial Memory

We know all too well that something is in the process of collapsing. The memory of what created us – colonial history – is being progressively erased. Those who were the witnesses and the actors will soon disappear. Our mothers and our fathers are dead, or very elderly, and it’s only a question of years before Indochina sinks back into oblivion. It will be nothing more than a word.

~ Dominique Rolland¹

In mid-April 1956, some 1200 French so-called repatriates² (*rapatriés*) from Indochina arrived at their new homes just outside of the small community of Sainte-Livrade-sur-Lot, in the southwestern department of the Lot-et-Garonne. Experiencing considerable disorientation, and exhausted after weeks of travel, first by boat to Marseilles, by train to Agen, and finally by bus to the camp, these repatriates began what was to be perhaps the most difficult part of their journey: adjusting to life in metropolitan France, and reconciling the promises of colonial officials in their homeland with the realities they faced. Their new homes, provided by the state, were military barracks (39 of them, all measuring 50 metres in length), converted to single-family housing, built around a small field. The largest apartments featured four small rooms, with toilets located in enclosed buildings in the laneways between the barracks. Each family was provided with basic furniture and household items. Among the

¹ Dominique Rolland, *Petits Viêts-Nams: Histoires des camps de rapatriés français d’Indochine* (Bordeaux: Elytis, 2009), 32. The chapter title (translated as “The Forgotten of Vietnam-on-Lot”) is taken from a radio documentary on the camps that aired on France Culture’s *La Fabrique de l’Histoire* on 26 March 2001.

² The term repatriates will be used throughout in the interest of clarity; the term *Français d’Indochine* is also frequently used in the literature, but this can lead to some confusion as European settlers were also referred to in this way. Finally, it should be noted that although repatriate is a problematic appellation for those of the second generation, it will be used nonetheless, in the absence of a more suitable term.

new arrivals was Joséphine Le Crenn, who remembers her four-year old son asking: “*This is France?*”³

The site that was to become home for Le Crenn and hundreds of other repatriates was called the *Centre d’Accueil des Rapatriés d’Indochine* (Welcome Centre for the Repatriates from Indochina), and later des *Français d’Indochine* (French of Indochina), or CAFI. It was one of several sites sought out and converted in the early 1950s to accommodate the influx of French citizens from the colonies who did not have the means or the support networks in France to establish themselves on their own. In addition to the CAFI in Sainte-Livrade, sites were established in Noyant (Allier), Le Vigeant (Vienne) and Saint Laurent d’Ars (Gironde); there were also housing and support facilities in Marseilles and Paris. Intended to serve as temporary residences, some of the camps developed into permanent communities; the CAFI outside of Sainte-Livrade was still in existence at the time of writing, though it is now facing demolition to make room for a new division of subsidized housing. While the process of transporting these French citizens from the colonies to the metropole was referred to as one of “repatriation,” and the citizens as repatriates, it should be noted that, as immigration specialist Le Huu Khoa has argued, most experienced it as a process of immigration rather than repatriation.⁴ Repatriates were treated much like refugees in terms of the housing, subsidies and support that they received. They were also subject to pressures similar to those exerted on immigrants and refugees to ‘assimilate’ into French society. It is thus perhaps more accurate to refer to their arrival in France as a ‘repatriation-immigration.’⁵

³ Interview of Joséphine Le Crenn on the evening news program *20 Heures*, TF1, 22 May 2004.

⁴ Le Huu Khoa, *Les Vietnamiens en France. Insertion et identité* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985), 115.

⁵ Although little work has been done on the arrival of European settlers from Indochina to France, there is a considerable body of work on the return of the *pieds-noirs* and *harkis* from Algeria. On the ‘return’ of the *pieds-noirs*, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Jean-Jacques Jordi, *1962: L’arrivée des pieds-noirs* (Paris:

This study of the repatriate camps makes key contributions in two areas: the history of immigration to France and the tangible legacies of colonialism in the metropole. Studies of immigration from the former Indochina to France, which are far from numerous, have tended to focus heavily on the wave of arrivals after 1975. Le Huu Khoa and Trinh Van Thao are among the only scholars to have examined the post-1954 wave of arrivals from the peninsula; I hope to build on their work, particularly since greater archival access has been granted since their publications. Beyond chronicling the process of repatriation and the structure of the camp systems, this chapter will engage with the discourse and policies of assimilation and integration within the camps, and the means by which they were implemented and evaluated. The discourse of assimilation is particularly interesting given that the repatriates were already French citizens, and some families had been for generations. Of further interest is the question of nationality, and the differences between the French authorities' perceptions of the repatriates' nationality and the repatriates' self-identification as being fully French. The repatriates had expectations of being treated as full French citizens (*Français à part entière*), but instead were treated much like refugees while in the camps, with access to medical attention, financial subsidies and primary education being mediated by the camp administration. The integration of the repatriates into the local population was described as 'failed' for at least a decade and a half after their arrival, but the perception of the process by the 1980s and 1990s is one of absolute success. Moreover, many locals remember the arrival of the repatriates with fondness; the archival record, on the other hand, shows a history of

Éditions Autrement, 2002). On the experience of the *harkis*, see Michel Roux, *Les Harkis: Les oubliés de l'histoire, 1954-1991* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), as well as the special issue of *Hommes et Migrations*, "Les harkis et leurs enfants," (September 1990), which includes an article on the Bias site after 1962. Mohand Hamoumou, who has worked extensively on the question of the *harkis*, engages with the labels of 'repatriate' and 'refugee' in "Les Français-Musulmans: rapatriés ou réfugiés?" *AWR Bulletin, Revue trimestrielle des problèmes des réfugiés* (1987), 185-201.

tension and conflict. This contradiction raises interesting questions about the perceptions of immigrants based on their place of origin; the *harkis*, who experience a similar process of repatriation following the Algerian War, have not been the subject of a softening of opinion in the same way.⁶ Asian immigration to France is often perceived as more successful in terms of integration, while immigrants from North Africa (and particularly Algeria) are viewed more negatively, and are frequently the targets of hostility. The positive view of Asian immigration extends to a celebration of cultural difference in this period, which itself raises interesting questions about changing models of integration in France.

The second section will examine the camps as sites of memory along the lines of those documented by Pierre Nora: that is, as sites that reflect and shape what it means to be French.⁷ Nora himself ignored colonial sites, an oversight that has since been remedied by Robert Aldrich.⁸ However, at least within the context of the memory of the Indochina War, the CAFI appears as a point of intersecting memories: first and foremost, it is a site of memory for the experiences of the repatriates, themselves a consequence of decolonization. While it does not have a direct connection to those who fought the Indochina War except through the presence of a few veteran residents, it is intimately connected with that conflict. In this sense, it constitutes a foil of sorts for the memorial complex in the southeast of France, which commemorates the dead of the Indochina War, as well as those who died in Indochina during the Second World War. The memorial represents the sacrifices of those who fought in the Indochina War, while the camps represent the unintended fallout of that

⁶ Although they had very similar experiences, the *rapatriés d'Indochine* and the *harkis* are not comparable on all levels – the *rapatriés* had French nationality prior to their arrival in France, while the *harkis* were given the option of acquiring French nationality shortly before their departure for France, or within six months of their arrival.

⁷ Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol 1-3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).

⁸ Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

war: the fate of those who had lived under colonial rule but who chose to maintain their French nationality. Promoting the memorial significance of the site has been undertaken by several associations of current and former residents, among them the *Coordination des Eurasiens de Paris* (Eurasian Committee of Paris) and the *Association des résidents et amis du CAFI* (Association of Residents and Friends of the CAFI). The 50th anniversary of the arrival of the first repatriates validated these memorial efforts: an exhibit on life at the CAFI was held at the Sainte-Livrade municipal library, a number of regional and national publications published special articles and issues, and screenings of documentaries on the repatriate experience were held. Although they have succeeded in drawing greater attention to the history of the repatriates, it remains to be seen whether the camps will actually retain a place in the broader public consciousness.

Migration and Repatriation

With the fall of the French position at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 came the southward evacuation of French soldiers and civilians, along with Vietnamese soldiers and functionaries who had worked with the colonial authorities. The families of soldiers who had fought with the *Force terrestre d'Extrême-Orient* (FTEO; Far East Ground Force), of civilian employees of the *Force terrestre du Nord Vietnam* (FTNV; North Vietnam Ground Force), and of personnel of civilian industries that had been requisitioned by the military were all to be transported to the south at the army's expense.⁹ Between July 21st, date of the ratification of the Geneva accords, and October 10th, French authorities transported just over 200 000

⁹ General René Cogny, "Note de service au sujet de l'évacuation de la population du Nord-Vietnam," Hanoi, 1954, *Service historique de l'armée de terre*, carton 10 H 3134, folder "Recensement des civils (Fr. + Etr. autre que les Chinois)."

people to the south.¹⁰ Overall, approximately 1 million people migrated south, of whom some 700 000 were Catholic.¹¹ The journey began with the flight from Viet Minh controlled areas to Hanoi or Haiphong, which was accomplished with great difficulty. Refugees faced unreliable transportation, separation from family members, pirates, and frequent obstacles and even attacks mounted by the Viet Minh. Complaints and testimonials filed with the joint general staff attest to the hardships of those seeking to reach the south. Among them was an account written by N.T.L., who was separated from her husband as they tried to get their family to Hanoi:

Because of the difficulties we face, our family must emigrate. We are leaving with our two children but, at Phat Diem, V[iet] M[inh] agents prohibited the use of boats to transport émigrés. We therefore had to rent a dinghy to go as far as Nam Dinh. Once we arrived at Nam Dinh, on 11.9.54, we spent the night at the parish of Nam Dinh. The next day we had to walk because the V.M. had forbidden the rickshaws [*cyclos*], trucks and boats to transport the émigrés.

I respectfully request that the Commission of Control intervene in this matter, so that our family can finally be reunited and so that we can know the fate of my husband, who may have been killed and robbed by pirates.

En route, at night, the émigrés were mistreated and insulted by the V.M. agents, who abducted their children, hit the elderly, and moreover blasphemed against our religion [...].”¹²

Refugees arriving in Hanoi and Haiphong were housed in hastily organized centers. For example, the Redemptorist order housed some 15 000 people in Hanoi, while others sought

¹⁰ Unsigned and undated report, Exposé sur l'évacuation des réfugiés (November 1954?), Service historique de l'armée de terre, carton 10 H 248.

¹¹ William Turley cites the figure of 928 152 civilian refugees total in *The Second Indochina War: A Concise Political and Military History*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 75. He maintains that this is an estimate rather than an exact figure, and cites Bui Van Luong, “The Role of Friendly Nations,” in Richard A. Landholm, ed. *Vietnam: The First Five Years, An International Symposium* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1959), 49. Both Jacques Dalloz and Michel Bodin cite 700 000 as the number of Catholic refugees; Dalloz, *La guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 256; Bodin, *Dictionnaire de la guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Economica, 2004), 54. It should also be noted that there was also some migration from the South to the North, though the numbers were much smaller.

¹² Appendix included with report by General René Cogne, Compte rendu hebdomadaire. Application des accords d'armistice au Nord Vietnam (Haiphong, 1954), Service historique de l'armée de terre, carton 10 H 3134, folder “B3 Sécurité.”

shelter in schools and theatres. In Haiphong, a further 10 000 were housed in tents along the coast in proximity to the harbour.¹³ Many were transported to the south by the French navy, while others travelled by air.

Following this mass exodus south, many of those eligible for ‘repatriation’ to France, whether they originated from the north or the south, were housed in temporary camps prior to departure. Approximately 35 000 French citizens were transported to France after 1954,¹⁴ not including the tens of thousands of French and colonial troops. It was by no means a homogeneous group: among them were a majority of Eurasians¹⁵ (primarily of mixed European and Vietnamese origins, although there were several with Lao, Cambodian, Indian and Maghrebi origins, amongst others), naturalized ‘Indochinese’ (primarily Cochinchinese), citizens from the so-called ‘old colonies’ (of European and indigenous extraction), and a small number of European men who were repatriated with their indigenous or Eurasian wives and children. There were also a significant number of single mothers with numerous children; some were widows, while others had been abandoned by the French men who had fathered their children. The majority already had French citizenship, and it was offered prior to departure or en route to those that did not (these were usually indigenous women with

¹³ Unsigned and undated report, *Exposé sur l'évacuation des réfugiés (1954?)*, *Service historique de l'armée de terre*.

¹⁴ Precise statistics on the total number of repatriates and the proportion of European and non-European French citizens are difficult to ascertain. Trinh Van Thao cites 35 000 total in “Le retour des rapatriés d’Indochine. L’expérience des centres d’accueil (1954-1960),” in Jean-Jacques Jordi and Emile Temime, eds. *Marseille et le choc des décolonisations* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1996), 29; Colette Dubois also cites 35 000 in “La nation et les Français d’outre-mer: Rapatriés ou sinistrés de la décolonisation?” in Jean-Louis Miège and Collette Dubois, eds. *L’Europe retrouvée: Les migrations de la décolonisation* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1994), 75-101; Jean-Pierre Simon cites 30-35 000 in *Rapatriés d’Indochine. Un village franco-indochinois en Bourbonnais* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1981), 5. Bouda Etemad estimates that between 1945 and 1990, 25-30 000 European French citizens and 10-15 000 non-European French citizens were repatriated to France in *Possession du monde: Poids et mesures de la colonisation* (Paris: Éditions complexes, 2000).

¹⁵ Though it is a problematic term, and one that was challenged during the colonial era as well as since, ‘Eurasian’ is the most common term used by scholars to describe those of mixed European and Asian heritage, and is used here for the sake of simplicity.

children by French men, and particularly soldiers).¹⁶ A complicating factor for French citizens of Vietnamese or mixed background was the August 1955 *Convention sur la nationalité* (Agreement on Nationality), which gave them six months to choose French or Vietnamese citizenship. The socio-economic background of these repatriates was as varied as their ethnic background. Some were low or mid-level functionaries in the colonial administration, others were veterans of the French forces and the Vietnamese national army; still others were significantly less financially stable, especially those who had been forced to abandon whatever possessions they had once had. Eurasians who had held well-respected positions in the colony experienced a substantial transformation in their status upon their arrival in France. As Le Huu Khoa posits, they had been treated favourably, as French, while in Indochina, and had enjoyed a comfortable standard of living. Once in France, however, they were treated as indigenous.¹⁷ While the treatment of Eurasians by colonial society was certainly more nuanced than Khoa indicates, not to mention their treatment by Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laos, the change in status is nonetheless significant.

Most of this first wave was ‘repatriated’ to France by boat, a journey which could take anywhere from three to four weeks. Upon their arrival in Marseilles, repatriates without the means to support themselves were housed temporarily in the city, after which point they were directed to camps in the departments of the Lot-et-Garonne, the Allier, the Vienne, and elsewhere.¹⁸ Most of the Europeans and the naturalized citizens had the wherewithal to support themselves upon arrival in France, and so were not part of the camp system. Of the

¹⁶ It appears that this was the case for indigenous mothers of Eurasian children, for example.

¹⁷ Khoa, *Les Vietnamiens en France. Insertion et identité*, 115. “Les oubliés de Vietnam-sur-Lot,” *La Fabrique de l’Histoire*, France Culture, 26 March 2001.

¹⁸ Other departments include the Indre, the Seine, and the Var.

first 15 000 to arrive in France in 1956, the Ministry of the Interior estimated that approximately 12 000 went through the camps.¹⁹

Because of the high proportion of non-Europeans in this group of repatriates, it is often considered to be the first wave of post-1954 immigration from the Indochinese peninsula. The second major wave was initiated in 1975 by those fleeing newly-established communist regimes in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, a phenomenon commonly associated with the iconic image of the boat people.²⁰ The first wave of arrivals from the Indochinese peninsula, as Trinh Van Thao has demonstrated, was largely ignored by both French and Vietnamese public opinion, in direct contrast to the second wave of immigration. Not only was the second wave significantly larger – some 142 000, nearly four times the size of the first wave – but it benefited from considerable media coverage, in France and around the world.²¹

The ‘Welcome Centres’: Structure, Administration and Policies

Anticipating the potential issue of housing French citizens repatriated from the colonies, the French government began seeking sites for temporary centres as early as 1950.²² Little thought was given to the location of these camps with respect to employment opportunities, or the social and psychological impacts of isolation; essentially, authorities appeared to be satisfied with any site that could be transferred to the state and which could be

¹⁹ *Journal Officiel*, 22 January 1957.

²⁰ An intermediate wave of immigrants from the peninsula between 1954 and 1975 was constituted primarily by students studying in France, most of whom later returned home.

²¹ Thao, “Le retour des rapatriés d’Indochine,” 29.

²² This is the earliest date of correspondence found at the departmental archives of the Allier on the topic; several letters make specific reference to the need to find housing for “les Français rapatriés de l’étranger ou des territoires d’Outre-mer.” Letter from the Minister of Reconstruction and Urbanism to the Prefect of the Allier, 20 October 1950, *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 11 W 49.

converted to house upwards of several hundred people. Requests for suggestions were sent to departmental and municipal authorities. Many of the sites chosen were located in rural areas, outside of small communities whose population were matched or exceeded by the repatriate population. The type of housing provided varied significantly from camp to camp; at the CAFI in Sainte-Livrade and its annex site located in Bias, the housing consisted of converted military barracks [figures 5 and 6], whereas the site in Noyant was a subdivision of former miners' housing (*corons*). The site at Le Vigeant was a former detention center for prisoners of war and common criminals (*criminels de droit commun*). Interestingly, the two largest sites of Sainte-Livrade/Bias and Noyant had longstanding connections with foreign populations: from the end of the First World War until 1949, the mines in and around Noyant employed a majority of Polish workers, and the barracks at the CAFI had housed Spanish Republicans, and during the Second World War, colonial labourers. In all cases, the housing had been virtually abandoned for years before being converted for the repatriates, which resulted in the relatively poor condition of the units. The difference in housing also led to different atmospheres in the camps. With their military arrangement of barracks, the CAFI and Bias sites had a strong 'camp-like' atmosphere, which persists today, whereas the houses in Noyant led to something closer to a community atmosphere. However, this community was still segregated from the local Noyant population; as Jeanne Cressange describes in her novel *La feuille de bétel*, "Yellow and White live on either side of the cemetery."²³

While by many accounts the housing conditions imposed on the repatriates were inadequate, several factors must be taken into account. The housing at Sainte-Livrade and Bias was clearly not intended to be long-term; the administrative archives reveal as much.

²³ Jeanne Cressanges, *La feuille de bétel* (Paris: Casterman, 1963). The cemetery divides the community from the *corons* inhabited by the repatriates.

Residents were intended to stay only long enough to be retrained for new jobs, and then were to establish themselves elsewhere. Furthermore, as Trinh Van Thao has emphasized, France in the mid-fifties was experiencing a population boom and a shortage of housing, and so was in a poor position to come up with additional housing for overseas citizens. Finally, there is the issue of how significant the repatriate problem was deemed to be; Trinh points to the fact that the influx of these citizens was not large enough in scale, and wasn't sufficiently politically charged, to warrant the kind of budgetary sacrifices made to accommodate the Algerian French upon their arrival in 1962.

Though intended to be temporary housing centres, it was soon clear that the communities were likely to become permanent. Over time, the camps grew into something resembling self-sustaining, insular communities. Schools were built to accommodate the disproportionate number of children, and chapels and pagodas were established in order to meet the spiritual needs of residents. At the CAFI, a former missionary who had spent considerable time in Indochina tended to the Catholic flock in a small chapel. A building was also converted to serve as a pagoda for the Buddhist residents. In Noyant, a separate pagoda was built with an adjacent building that serves as a community centre, and the surrounding property is marked by large statues of the Buddha. Today, the municipality of Noyant promotes the pagoda as part of its tourism marketing program. The CAFI boasts two grocery stores selling Asian products, one of which doubles as a restaurant serving Vietnamese dishes.

Administratively-speaking, the camps fell under the purview of a succession of ministries over the decades, including Defence, Foreign Affairs, and the Interior.²⁴ All had

²⁴ The full list: Defence, Foreign Affairs, Overseas France, Interior, Health, Labour, Social Affairs. Within these, there was also a succession of sub-ministries that oversaw the camps.

closed by the early to mid-sixties, with the exception of the CAFI in Sainte-Livrade (the centre in Bias having been reassigned to house *harkis*, along with Le Vigeant and Saint-Laurent-d'Ars). Noyant stopped admitting new residents as of 1964, and existing residents were given the option to purchase their homes as of 1966. Many families thus continued to reside in the community, but the administrative structure of the camp was removed. The CAFI continued to change ministerial hands until 1981, when the municipality purchased the property. The longevity of the CAFI is due in large part to its increased identification as the camp for those 'unfit' (*inaptes*, also referred to as *incasables*) for work. This aspect of the camp was reinforced by the transfer of *inaptes* from other repatriate camps as they closed down; when the housing units at Noyant were put up for individual sale, several families "without sufficient means to support themselves" were sent to the CAFI in Sainte-Livrade.²⁵

The administration of the camps was entrusted to men who had experience in the colonies as soldiers or civilian functionaries, with a preference for those who had lived in Indochina. Medical personnel were also frequently chosen for their 'colonial' background, and many of the teaching staff had some kind of colonial experience, primarily in North Africa. In his sociological study of the community in Noyant, Pierre-Jean Simon points to the obvious implications of this policy: it resulted in the transfer of colonial attitudes, prejudices, and conflict. Frequently, he argues, functionaries' 'knowledge' of colonial subjects wasn't at much more than "the level of [...] comfortable stereotypes."²⁶ This judgment is borne out in

²⁵ Letter from the Prefect of the Allier to the Minister of the Interior, 8 December 1964. *Archives départementales de l'Allier*, carton 988 W 33, folder "Personnes mutées qui ont reçu notification de la décision."

²⁶ Pierre-Jean Simon, *Rapatriés d'Indochine: un village franco-indochinois en Bourbonnais. Aspects de la colonisation et de la décolonisation de l'Indochine orientale* (Paris: L'Harmattan/CNRS, 1981), 264. Letter from E. Bretonnière de Chèque to the Chef du service d'accueil et de reclassement des Français d'Indochine et des Français musulmans, 24 April 1964. *Archives départementales de l'Allier*, folder "Voitures accidentées et correspondance pour carte grise Citroën," subfolder "Dossier propositions faites à M. le Préfet pour le logement des familles et la liquidation du Centre."

at least one case: in 1964, the director of Noyant (formerly the director of the CAFI) wrote a letter to the director of the service in charge of repatriates from Indochina and North Africa to protest electoral candidates making promises of various kinds to voters residing in the camp. Citing 25 years of experience with Asians in general and Vietnamese in particular, he contends that they have “no political maturity whatsoever,”²⁷ and that they would (naively) expect candidates to make good on their promises. Warning of the potential consequences of inciting residents by playing to the problems they face in the camps, he ‘reminds’ the prefect that the repatriates have the potential to be like the Viet Cong, who are not real communists but rather “malcontents who have become rabid sheep.”²⁸ Many camp residents certainly felt that colonial structures had been transferred to the metropole: one resident featured in a France-Culture documentary on the CAFI commented that “at first, the heads of the camp colonized us, because they [...] couldn’t continue to colonize the indigenous people of Indochina. They considered us second-class citizens.”²⁹ The replication of the colonial system of authority was not unique to the repatriate camps for those arriving from Indochina; it would also be instituted after 1962 in the camps that housed the families of *harkis*, Algerians who had fought on the side of the French during the Algerian War.³⁰ Because the *harkis* were all veterans, however, the camp structure was much more military in nature than that of the *rapatriés d’Indochine*, who were primarily civilians. In both cases, the camps were heavily bureaucratized. Medical care was provided on site, with no option of seeking alternative treatment, financial subsidies for each family were handled by the camp

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Les oubliés de Vietnam-sur-Lot,” 26 March 2001.

³⁰ For more on the replication of colonial structures in *harki* camps, see Tom Charbit, “Un petit monde colonial en métropole: Le camp des harkis de Saint-Maurice-l’Ardoise (1962-1976),” *Politix* no.4 (2006), 31-52, and Michel Roux, *Les Harkis: Les oubliés de l’histoire, 1954-1991* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), especially chapter 8 “Le contrôle ‘colonial’ des supplétifs rapatriés.”

administration, and there was a curfew imposed on all residents. The comparison goes beyond *harki* and repatriate camps, however; there is a long history of camps in France and in the colonies.³¹ Housing for colonial workers in the metropole, which doubled as a means of surveillance and segregation, was commonplace as of the First World War. So-called *camps de regroupement* (resettlement camps) were established during the Algerian War in order to separate civilians from ‘rebels’ and empty problem areas of inhabitants. Camps were also established to detain Europeans fighting on the side of the FLN.³²

Most of the repatriates arrived at the camps with very few possessions and had virtually no financial resources. There was a variety of social and family subsidy programs, as well as special subsidies from the state that were granted for the first year after arrival. The paternalism inherent in the camp structure is evident in the fact that these subsidies, even those coming from institutions that served all inhabitants of the region, were disbursed by the camp director to the residents, rather than passing from the institution straight to the recipients. The housing was rent-free and depending on the camp, so too was heating, electricity, medical care, etc. Children were provided with school supplies as well as whatever additional items were required by boarding schools, for those who attended them. While this network of social assistance allowed families to maintain a basic standard of living (albeit a very basic one, in some cases), it also resulted in policies that served to create barriers to moving beyond that standard of living. For example, a ban was instituted by government decree in May 1959 on anything that qualified as an “outward sign of wealth” (*signe extérieur de richesse*) such as televisions, washing machines or cars. It was argued that anyone relying so heavily on government subsidies should not be seen as profiting from

³¹ On the phenomenon of camps in France, see Marc Bernardot, *Camps d'étrangers* (Paris: Éditions du Croquant, 2008).

³² Nathalie Funès, “Lodi, le camp des oubliés,” *L'Express*, March 18 2010.

them, and residents could be asked to leave the camp if they were found to be in possession of an ‘illegal’ item.³³ This policy was also tied to the objective of encouraging families to leave the camps once they had adjusted to life in France and found work; the director in Noyant wrote a letter in 1964 to the departmental prefect arguing that allowing items like televisions would encourage people to put down roots and stay in the camp indefinitely.³⁴

The education of children and job training for adults was a priority. Most adults were unable to find work that corresponded to their previous employment, but were frequently offered retraining possibilities, particularly in manual labour. The December 1957 spreadsheet indicating the reclassifying (*reclassement*) status of male heads of households in Noyant demonstrates that most of those capable of working were oriented towards employment as painters, locksmiths and labourers, among others.³⁵ Some worked far from the camps, leaving their families there, while others worked in the region. Many also worked under the table for local farmers, frequently for lower-than-average wages; for residents of the CAFI in Sainte-Livrade, picking green beans for local farmers is recalled with a certain degree of bitterness. The unemployed between the ages of 17 and 25 were often encouraged to participate in a professional training program (FPA, *Formation professionnelle pour adultes*). During the program, participants were granted room and board at a modest price, and also received a subsidy comparable to minimum wage (*SMIC*).³⁶ In 1966, attempts to

³³ A letter from the departmental Prefect to one of the residents of Noyant dated 9 March 1964 attests to the very real threat of expulsion on these grounds: “You are hereby notified that given your situation and lifestyle, which has allowed you to purchase a car, you are no longer entitled to state-subsidized housing in a welcome centre. Please make all necessary arrangements to vacate the premises by the deadline of 30 June 1964.” *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 988 W 33, folder “Automobiles, téléviseurs et autres appareils.”

³⁴ E. Bretonnière de Chèque, Letter to the Préfet de l’Allier, 19 March 1964, *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 988 W 38, folder “Voitures accidentées et correspondance pour carte grise Citroën,” subfolder “Téléviseurs et relogement.”

³⁵ A. Engrand, “État de reclassement des rapatriés d’Indochine hébergés au Centre d’Accueil de Noyant,” 1 December 1957. *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 988 W 37, folder “Divers.”

³⁶ Trinh Van Thao, *Étude d’un processus d’adaptation sociale. Portrait psycho-social du rapatrié*. PhD

create employment for residents of the CAFI and Sainte-Livrade resulted in the opening of a branch of the Miramont shoe factory within the camp. By 1973, the factory employed 85 people, roughly half of whom were camp residents, but it closed only three years later.³⁷

Children, too, were at a disadvantage; having faced years of war, they were frequently years behind in their educations. Providing schooling for so many children was no mean feat: between April and November 1956, 650 of the 1200 new arrivals at the CAFI were under the age of 14.³⁸ Local schools were in no position to take in that many new students, and so schools were hastily put together on site at the camps. The first classes at the CAFI were held on October 8th 1956 for 356 school-aged children;³⁹ Bias followed in November, opening 8 classes for 300 children there.⁴⁰ Although administrators and teachers tried to accommodate older students as much as possible, many reached the age at which their peers were beginning middle schools or vocational schools without having earned the Primary Education Certificate (*certificat d'éducation primaire*), and were too old to continue to attend the municipal primary schools. Exceptions were made where possible, but administrators often sought to enrol these adolescents in trade apprenticeships and other training programs, such as plumbing, carpentry and sewing, hoping to provide them with some means of supporting themselves in life. Like the adults, children and adolescents were evaluated according to aptitude tests (*examen d'orientation professionnelle*) to determine the appropriate career path.

dissertation, Université de la Sorbonne, 1966, 87.

³⁷ Jean Delvert, "Les rapatriés d'Indochine en Lot-et-Garonne. Le CAFI de Sainte-Livrade," *Revue de l'Agenais* 132, no. 4 (2005), 1299.

³⁸ "C.A.F.I. 1956-2006. Enfin l'après," *Ancrage*, hors série Indochine (April 2006), 6.

³⁹ Henri Alquier, Letter to M. l'Inspecteur de la l'Académie de Lot-et-Garonne, 10 November 1956, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne* (uncatalogued document). Unsigned, "Note pour Messieurs les Directeurs des centres," 15 September 1956, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne* (uncatalogued document).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Conflict Between the Residents and the Administration

The rigid structure of the camps, combined with the attitudes of the administration and the residents' reactions to their living conditions, led to considerable tension between the two parties, which at times escalated into serious confrontations. The earliest incident resulting from disagreements between residents and administration involved the resignation of the first director of the Sainte Hilaire annex of Noyant less than a year after the arrival after the arrival of the first repatriates. His resignation letter makes his position clear: "I believe that I have done enough for the repatriates in my Centre without having to withstand being insulted and assaulted by a few black sheep who live there, and who cannot be evicted by Social Services because their families are too large."⁴¹ Other clashes followed, including harassing anonymous letters addressed to the administration of Noyant in 1957, widespread graffiti on CAFI buildings and threats targeting the administration in 1959, and clashes between residents, Livradais and the administration in the late sixties. Rather than chronicle each of these incidents, it is perhaps more useful to explore a single event and the responses of the administration, camp residents, and local authorities to it.

Tensions between CAFI residents and the administration erupted in December 1958, leading to threats of violence and the establishment of a police detachment on the premises. On December 16th, an argument broke out between a resident of the camp at Bias and one of the groundskeepers, which escalated into a demonstration by 50 residents outside of the administrative building.⁴² There was little local press coverage of the "few episodes of

⁴¹ Letter from B. Dutrait to the Director of the *Cités d'accueil* of Noyant and Saint Hilaire, 28 March 1957. *Archives départementales de l'Allier*, carton 988 W 30, folder "Correspondance."

⁴² Letter from Piraudé to M. le Chef du Bureau des Rapatriés d'Indochine, 16 December 1958. *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W art. 2117, folder "Police des Centres," subfolder "Situation dans les Centres/états d'esprits/incidents."

internal unrest,”⁴³ which indicates a lack of appreciation of the seriousness of the incidents. Two days later, another incident between a resident and the assistant director led to shots being fired; that same day, residents protested by occupying the director’s office.⁴⁴ The police were called, order was restored, and six police officers were assigned to maintain surveillance at the camp for a period of 8 days beginning on December 19th.⁴⁵ The causes of the incidents were, unsurprisingly, perceived very differently by the administration and the residents. Administrative reports focus on the perception that morale at the camp had never been particularly good, despite the efforts of the administration to improve conditions, and attribute much of the blame to a small number of troublemakers who fomented discontent amongst the others; the recommendation was that these residents be expelled. The director of Bias claimed that he, his family and his subordinates were facing very real threats to their lives, and that he “was personally convinced that they [camp residents] would not back down even in the event of a bloody incident.”⁴⁶ He identified several residents as ‘troublemakers;’ these people also formed the nucleus of a residents’ association (*amicable*) within the camp. They were encouraged, the director argued, by a person external to the camp who maintained close ties with the *amicale*. There may also have been other external factors at work; a 1964 letter from the director of Noyant, who was at the time the director of the CAFI, refers to the context of “electoral propaganda” as a motivating factor of residents’ actions.⁴⁷ However, there is no mention of this aspect in any of the other archives consulted.

⁴³ “Remous au camp indochinois de Bias,” *Dépêche du Midi*, 19 December 1958.

⁴⁴ Telegram from *Renseignements généraux* in Agen to headquarters in Paris, 18 December 1958, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W art. 2117, folder “Police des Centres,” subfolder “Situation dans les Centres/états d’esprits/incidents.”

⁴⁵ L. Ottaviani, *Ordre de réquisition*, 18 Decembre 1958. *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W art. 2117, folder “Police des Centres,” subfolder “Situation dans les Centres/états d’esprits/incidents.”

⁴⁶ Letter from M. Piraudé to M. le Chef du Bureau des Rapatriés d’Indochine, 16 December 1958.

⁴⁷ Letter from E. Bretonnière de Chèque to the Chef du service d’accueil et de reclassement des Français

Residents' reactions were mixed. Some clearly felt uneasy with the truce between demonstrators and the administration, as witnessed by the submission of a petition on December 22nd signed by over 70 residents requesting that the police presence be maintained beyond the initial eight day period. A report was also submitted to the Commissioner for the *Rapatriés d'Indochine* by J.C., a member of the *amicale*, who was among those that the camp director had advised be expelled from the camp. In it, he identifies two primary reasons for the administration's "failure," which caused the recent "protest movements."⁴⁸ The first of these was the lack of a coherent housing policy, which was initially predicated on the assumption that the camp would be a temporary home for repatriates who would then move out. The problem, J.C. contends, is that the policy was not revised when it became apparent that few families were actually able to leave the camp, due to the high numbers of *inaptes*. The second major error on the part of the administration, he claims, was the absence of deadlines for subsidies. Although it was initially appropriate to offer residents free housing, electricity, coal, unemployment subsidies and medical care, it should have been offered with limitations to the quantity of subsidies and the period of time they were to be available. The second, no less important, dimension of this faulty policy is the fact that the administration had used its absolute control of the distribution of these subsidies to try and force departures from the camp, by reducing or eliminating residents' access to them.

Significantly, the solutions proposed by the report are framed in terms of permitting the residents to exercise their full rights as French citizens, and to be treated as such by authorities. J.C.'s proposals range from repatriate representation at the local, departmental and

d'Indochine et des Français musulmans, 24 April 1964.

⁴⁸ Letter from J.C. to M. le Haut Commissaire des Rapatriés d'Indochine, accompanied by a report entitled "Les raisons de l'échec de l'administration en ce qui concerne le problème des rapatriés d'Indochine. Les principes d'une refonte administrative. Leur réalisation pratique," 23 December 1958. Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne, carton 1 W 2117, folder "Administration des Centres," subfolder "Organisation/Aménagements."

national levels, to revising the policies concerning subsidies. He also recommends removing the administrative framework of the camp altogether, and allowing residents to rent or buy their homes. The question of housing, he contends, is the largest factor in ensuring that camp residents are not treated like full French citizens (*Français à part entière*). He summarizes the positions of residents as follows:

Effectively, at any point, eviction is possible, legally speaking. The Administration is all-powerful in this area. There is not a single French person, a single French citizen, who is in a similar situation. Even a young couple with children living in a hotel has laws to protect it, the equivalent of which does not exist with respect to the housing attributed to the repatriates.⁴⁹

It is fair to assume that J.C.'s report reflected the opinions of at least the other members of the *amicale*, of which he was a leading member, if not the entire population of the camp. However, there is little in the way of archival materials that offer any further insight into the reactions of the residents.

The responses of the administration and some residents seem to reinforce each side blaming the other for the problems facing the camps. While outside perspectives are not available for all of the incidents recorded in the archives, in this particular case we do have access to the reaction of departmental deputy and mayor of Villeneuve, Jacques Raphaël-Leygues. With experience as a representative on state missions to Indochina and as a representative to the assembly of the French Union, Raphaël-Leygues manifested a keen interest in the repatriates. In response to the events of December 1958, he wrote directly to the Minister of the Interior, who was scheduled to take over responsibility for the camps on 1 January 1959. His letter states that the administration of both camps (CAFI and Bias) had, over the previous three years, “not only demonstrated their incompetence, but at Bias

⁴⁹ Ibid.

tolerated, and sometimes encouraged, inadmissible practices.”⁵⁰ With respect to the outbreak of hostilities, he places the blame squarely on the administration, claiming that they were the result of “provocations on the part of the functionaries [...] who act as though they want to see the situation get worse, leading to tragic consequences.”⁵¹ He concludes by stressing that the replacement of the directors and assistant directors of both camps is absolutely necessary, without which there were sure to be worse (and bloodier) incidents. In fact, the director of the CAFI and both the director and assistant director of Bias resigned, although it is not clear whether these were forced resignations. What is clear, however, is that the director of the CAFI was not deemed to have been so unsuccessful as to warrant being removed from the system entirely; in fact, he was transferred to Noyant to take over the directorship there.

While the housing proposals put forward by J.C. were never put in place, there is evidence that the administrations of both the CAFI and Noyant sought to make changes that would, at least superficially, address the desire of residents to be treated as full citizens. For example, in 1959 the oversight of the camps was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior; among the changes at the CAFI prompted by this transition was the transfer of responsibility for distributing health care booklets (*carnet de soins gratuits*) from camp social workers to the Sainte-Livrade town hall. While camp residents would continue to be treated by camp medical staff, their records and subsidies would be governed by the municipality, just like every other local resident.⁵² Another example, albeit of a more trivial nature, is that of a 1964

⁵⁰ Letter from Jacques Raphaël-Leygues to the Minister of the Interior, 26 December 1958. *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W 2117, folder “Administration des Centres,” subfolder “Organisation/Aménagements.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Letter from the Head of the Department for the French Repatriated from Indochina, 12 February 1959. The letter actually states that “the residents of the camps will hereafter be subject to the same administrative structure as other French citizens.” *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W 2117, folder “Problèmes sociaux,” subfolder “Problèmes de l’emploi.”

request from the director of Noyant to the departmental prefect to allow residents to keep their televisions without penalty. He argued that enforcing this regulation would surely raise opposition from residents on the grounds that they weren't being treated like other French citizens,⁵³ and he was eventually successful in securing the right to own a television for the residents.⁵⁴ This request also indicates a shift in attitude, as this was the same director (referenced earlier) who had originally contended that to allow the ownership of televisions and cars would be encouraging residents to stay in the camps.

Integration, Assimilation and Citizenship

Central to immigration policy, in France as elsewhere, are the issues of integration and assimilation. The term 'assimilation' was increasingly avoided in the postcolonial era, precisely because of its ties to colonial policy, in favour of the term 'integration.' However, as Gérard Noiriel and Stéphane Beaud have shown, the two terms were frequently used interchangeably, and this until the 1980s.⁵⁵ According to this policy of assimilation-integration, *rapatriés d'Indochine*, like immigrants from other parts of the world, were to leave their distinct cultural practices at the door and take on French values, culture and practices. In the context of the repatriate camps, efforts to promote integration targeted both adults and children. Adults were expected to "assimilate" first in the workplace, and later by

⁵³ Letter from E. Bretonnière de Chèque to M. le Préfet, Chef du Service de l'Accueil et du Reclassement des Français d'Indochine et des Français Musulmans, 12 August 1964. *Archives départementales de l'Allier*, carton 988 W 38, folder "Voitures accidentées et correspondance pour carte grise Citroën," subfolder "Téléviseurs et relogement."

⁵⁴ E. Bretonnière de Chèque, "Communiqué," 22 June 1965. *Archives départementales de l'Allier*, carton 988 W 38, folder "Voitures accidentées et correspondance pour carte grise Citroën," subfolder "Téléviseurs et relogement."

⁵⁵ Stéphane Beaud and Gérard Noiriel, "Penser l' 'intégration' des immigrés," in Pierre-André Taguieff, ed., *Face au racisme. Tome 2: Analyses, hypothèses, perspectives* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), 262.

moving their families out of the camps altogether. Trinh Van Thao argues that the FPA was a success in terms of integration, if not in terms of professional training, because during this period “the repatriate learned to speak French and, thanks to the boarding house, to meet other metropolitans and to make his first social contacts since his arrival in France.”⁵⁶ Nonetheless, there was considerable doubt on the part of authorities that the adult repatriates would actually successfully adapt to metropolitan life, and efforts were therefore to be concentrated on the younger generation.⁵⁷ As the site where all children learn a common history, heritage and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the school was the natural place for the children of the camp to learn how to ‘be French.’⁵⁸ In the words of the director of Noyant in 1957, the objective of the school was “make our little Eurasians into good, honest French.”⁵⁹

Ideally, integration was to be facilitated not only by the curriculum, but more importantly through interaction with metropolitan children. The possibility of this interaction was, however, hampered by the fact that the schools were located within the camps, and thus attended solely (or predominantly) by the children who resided there. Moreover, in addition to the educational delays experienced by many students, mastery of the French language was a significant barrier to overcome. Many of the camp residents spoke a language other than French, usually Vietnamese, in the home. Some spoke no French at all when they arrived.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Thao, *Étude d'un processus d'adaptation sociale*, 91.

⁵⁷ “Note sur l’aspect actuel de la question des rapatriés d’Indochine,” 30 October 1956, *Ministère des affaires étrangères*, série Asie-Océanie, sous-série Vietnam-Sud, folder 106, ff 98-106

⁵⁸ The notion of the school as facilitating integration by enforcing a common culture and heritage is common to Durkheimian sociologists; for a discussion of the impact of Durkheim on integrationist strategies, see Beaud and Noiriel, “Penser l’ ‘intégration’ des immigrés,” 261-282.

⁵⁹ B. Dutrait, Letter to M. le Directeur du Bureau Universitaire des Statistiques, 12 February 1957, *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 988 W 73.

⁶⁰ The lack of French language skills among a population with such a large Eurasian component would seem to contradict the evidence provided by Emmanuelle Saada, Christina Firpo and David Pomfret on the education of

In a 1959 report, the director of the girls' school at the CAFI stated that the children's lack of language acquisition was a 'serious handicap,' and that no amount of punishment or threats could dissuade them from speaking Vietnamese at recess, and even in the classroom. This was exacerbated, she continued, by the persistent use of Vietnamese in the home. The situation could be remedied, she implied, by placing children in boarding schools.⁶¹ The director of the Noyant camp came to a similar conclusion regarding the boarding of three teenaged girls in an apprenticeship school: "the boarding school would have the advantage of freeing them from the family atmosphere, where they unfortunately continue to talk in their mother tongue and to follow Asian customs."⁶² This discourse of making "good" citizens out of children of mixed parentage has a strong resonance with established Church practices, but also with colonial discourse, especially that of the 1930s. As Emmanuelle Saada and Christina Firpo have demonstrated, aid societies in Indochina sought to remove children who had been abandoned by their European fathers, in order to place them in French-run orphanages and boarding-schools to educate them to be good French citizens. It was believed that these children could not live up to their full "French" potential while in the care of their indigenous mothers. The goals of the camp administrators and teachers clearly differed from those of French colonial authorities, whose "rescue" of Eurasian children was predicated on

Eurasian children by aid societies in the 1930s and 40s. However, I would argue that several factors likely contributed to this situation, including the disruption of war to children's education, the fact that not all Eurasian children would have been under the purview of these aid societies, and the significant number of indigenous mothers of Eurasian children who spoke little French themselves. Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie: Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007); Christina Firpo, "Lost Boys: 'Abandoned' Eurasian Children and the Management of the Racial Topography in Colonial Indochina, 1939-1945," *French Colonial History* no. 8 (2007), 203-221; David Pomfret, "Raising Eurasia: Race, Class and Age in French and British Colonies," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51 no. 2 (2009), 314-343.

⁶¹ "Rapport fait par Mlle la Directrice de l'École des Filles du Centre des Rapatriés d'Indochine de Ste Livrade," 16 September 1959, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne* (uncatalogued document).

⁶² B. Dutrait, Letter to Mlle la Directrice du Centre Féminin d'Apprentissage, 19 April 1957, *Archives départementales de l'Allier*, carton 988 W 73.

making them French and therefore useful tools of the colonial state. Nonetheless, there is a common logic basic to both policies regarding who is most fit to oversee the education of a child and their integration into French society.

The integration rate of children and adults alike was the subject of constant concern on the part of camp administrations and local authorities. After only two years, a bleak report on camp morale stated that all of those who could be expected to integrate had already left the camp, and that those who remained were far from integrated, a situation that was exacerbated by marriages and growing families within the camp. Reports also emphasized that the subsidies that residents relied on were creating a culture of dependence that made it easier for people to stay than to leave; such arguments came not only from the administration, but also from one of the residents who sent a report on the realities of the camp to the departmental prefect.⁶³ Even in 1973, the CAFI was deemed to represent the “story of a failed integration.”⁶⁴

The evaluation of how successful the integration of the repatriates naturally calls into question the relationship between them and the established local population. Initial contact seems to have been one of both curiosity and suspicion. In the case of the CAFI, residents of Sainte-Livrade were given little notice of the impending arrival of the repatriates, and the few newspaper articles announcing their arrival gave little in the way of actual information about their backgrounds or the situation that had prompted their departure. Reactions to the arrival of the repatriates was also likely shaped by locals’ previous experience with Indochinese subjects living in their midst. The military barracks of the CAFI and Bias sites had been used during and following the Second World War to house some 2500 soldiers from Southeast

⁶³ Letter from J.C. to M. le Haut Commissaire des Rapatriés d’Indochine, 23 December 1958.

⁶⁴ Anne Gallois, “Vietnam-sur-Lot,” *Le Point*, 17 December 1973, 65.

Asia. They were under close surveillance, as were the reactions of the local population. According to intelligence reports, the latter were not thrilled with the presence of the Indochinese: “the sympathy that existed a few months ago between the population and the Indochinese troops has completely disappeared. It has been replaced by suspicion.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, in 1948 the municipal council of Sainte-Livrade got wind of a potential plan to use the Moulin du Lot site to house workers from Indochina, and immediately passed a motion to oppose the project. The mayor and all members of the council informed the departmental authorities that they would resign *en masse* if the project were approved.⁶⁶ Pierre-Jean Simon’s sociological study of the repatriate experience in Noyant identifies three phases in inter-community relations. Prior to arrival, there was, *a priori*, sympathy for the repatriates. The first phase of contact was marked by a reciprocal curiosity, which he contends lasted until the early sixties. From that point forward, the relationship was characterized by a lack of understanding of cultural differences, and irritation with repatriates habits. Finally, he describes the third stage as one of “acclimatization to an environment of permanent hostility.”⁶⁷

Beyond mutual misunderstandings and suspicion, one also registers a number of altercations between camp residents and locals. The summer of 1968 was particularly marked by conflict, beginning with an argument between young people at a local dance on the evening of June 23rd, ostensibly prompted by a relationship between a young man from the

⁶⁵ Renseignements Généraux, “Note de renseignement no. 542,” 2 May 1946, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W art. 758, folder 5 “Notes des Renseignements Généraux sur l’activité des Indochinois.”

⁶⁶ Renseignements Généraux, “Note de renseignements no. 448,” 14 May 1948, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton 1 W art. 758, folder 5 “Notes des Renseignements Généraux sur l’activité des Indochinois.”

⁶⁷ Simon, *Rapatriés d’Indochine*, 417-19.

CAFI and a young woman from Sainte-Livrade. The young man in question was the target of insults from other Livradais youth, and he got into a fistfight with one of them. The following night towards eleven o'clock, a group of youth from the CAFI and a group of Livradais squared off in the town centre; police were alerted by a passerby, who stated that a fight had broken out between "Europeans" and "Eurasians." According to witnesses, some 30-50 youth from the CAFI had marched to the site of the festivities. One Livradais witness, who was injured in the mêlée, described the youth "armed with axe handles, and even one carrying an axe, arrived from a small street and came toward the entrance to the dance. They were shirtless, and brandishing their clubs, they screamed like 'Indians'." ⁶⁸ The youth from the CAFI, on the other hand, describe returning to the dance hall on the 24th to seek out the Livradais who had punched one of his friends the night before; he admits to being shirtless and to carrying a small axe. However, according to him the first blows were thrown by the Livradais, and he was hit several times in the head with a chair, until his face was bloodied.

This violent confrontation prompted further incidents in the days following it; on the 26th and 27th, *pétanque* players in the town square were harassed by CAFI youth throwing pebbles, and an employee of the shoe manufactory was allegedly attacked by several youth at the camp. The confrontations culminated in a demonstration of some 300 Livradais in front of town hall on June 27th. They were apparently looking to take revenge on six CAFI youth, who were meeting with the mayor and six Livradais youth in an attempt to bring an end to the hostilities. According to the police captain who filed the report, "it is certain that if the crowd gathered in front of the town hall had gotten their hands on the young Eurasians, the

⁶⁸ Gendarmerie, Brigade de Sainte-Livrade, "Procès verbal d'enquête préliminaire," 2 July 1968. *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton W Vrac Sous-préfecture de Villeneuve art. 254, folder "CAFI de Sainte-Livrade."

latter would have suffered a virtual lynching.”⁶⁹ The police reports and witness testimony tend to put much of the blame on youth from the CAFI, although the real responsibility is attributed to only 7 of them, identified as ‘troublemakers.’ The press reinforced this perception, referring to the aggressors “of Indochinese origin” as “sowing terror at the dances.”⁷⁰ The article goes on to validate the actions of Livradais: “really, (and we completely understand), the Livradais population had had enough of tolerating the ‘savagery’ of these youth with their revolutionary spirit [...]”⁷¹ The archives reveal no attempts on the part of the municipal authorities or camp administration to explore the underlying reasons for the conflict and violence; rather, the solution was to send the 7 instigators out of the community (and the department). The director of the camp was also replaced. According to a report dated September 11th, these two solutions calmed tensions considerably.

The events of the summer of 1968 provided evidence for many of the growing difficulties associated with the burgeoning adolescent population of the CAFI.⁷² Those who had arrived at the camp as young children in the mid to late fifties had since become teenagers, with few education or employment options. Clashes between some of these youth and authorities, as well as with youth from Sainte-Livrade proper, were on the rise from the mid-sixties on. The atmosphere of protest and rebellion across the country in the spring and summer of 1968 undoubtedly contributed to the tense atmosphere as well. Representatives of

⁶⁹ Capitaine M., “Rapport au sujet d’incidents sur la voie publique à Sainte-Livrade entre Eurasiens du Centre d’Accueil des Français d’Indochine à Sainte-Livrade et population locale,” 28 June 1968. *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton W Vrac Sous-préfecture de Villeneuve art. 254, folder “CAFI de Sainte-Livrade.”

⁷⁰ “Climat d’émeutes à Sainte-Livrade. Une bande de jeunes voyous voulait faire la loi,” *La Dépêche du Midi*, 29 June 1968. *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton W vrac.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² There were similar incidents at the harki camp in Saint-Maurice-l’Ardoise: in the summer of 1975, a group of youths rebelled and took control of the camp administration offices, taking hostages in the process. The camp was closed soon thereafter. See Tom Charbit, “Un petit monde colonial en métropole,” *Politix*, 33.

the CIMADE (*Comité inter-mouvements auprès des évacuées*; Inter-Organizational Committee in Support of Evacuees), a non-governmental organization founded in 1939 to assist displaced persons, amongst others, arrived in 1966. One resident, who had arrived at the CAFI at the age of 10 in 1956, remembers the arrival of the CIMADE as having had a positive impact: they arranged outings and short trips (to the mountains, for example, and even farther afield).⁷³ By the summer of 1967, it was decided that a youth centre would be of benefit, and the *Maison des jeunes et de la culture* (Youth and Cultural Centre) was created. Initially, the new director worked with three CIMADE representatives who were already established at the camp. A report by the new director of the centre linked youth delinquency with the “degradation of social relationships and morals”⁷⁴ created by the closed world of the camp. He contends that the repatriates were living as “*assistés*” (dependent on government subsidies), and had never been required to take on the same duties and responsibilities as their compatriots. Young people, who made up the vast majority of the camp population, suffered not only from this lack of civic engagement, but also from an absence of structure and authority. The author contends that the only means by which these youth can succeed is through integration into the national way of life (*intégration dans la vie nationale*), which left them with two choices: “rapidly becoming French, with the same rights and responsibilities as other French citizens, or spending the rest of their lives as asocials, searching in vain for a sense of balance in a universe that will have remained foreign to

⁷³ Author’s interview with a former resident, Paris, 25 June 2008. The name has been withheld for confidentiality reasons.

⁷⁴ G., “Maison des jeunes et de la culture de Sainte-Livrade-sur-Lot,” 2 July 1968. *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton W Vrac Sous-préfecture de Villeneuve art. 254, folder MJC.

them.”⁷⁵ The goals of the centre were thus to provide structure for the youth of the camp, and to encourage their integration.

The vision of a failed integration, which prompted the measures described above, has experienced a fascinating evolution in the period since the mid-1970s. In spite of clashes with local residents and the perceptions of a ‘failed’ integration in the first two decades following the creation of the camps, by the 1980s people of the region remembered the arrival, and eventual integration, of the repatriates with fondness. Writing in 1991, a local newspaper columnist claimed that “Livradais today have the impression of a successful integration.”⁷⁶ Another newspaper claimed that “the Vietnamese community has integrated itself perfectly for close to a half-century.”⁷⁷ This shift is evident in individual experiences as well: a former resident of the CAFI quoted in a 2004 *Libération* article claimed that “we didn’t dare bring school friends [to the camp],”⁷⁸ while a Livradais fondly remembers that “we got into the habit of walking them home to the camp [...]. I remember that at the time, we spent more time in the camp than in Sainte-Livrade!”⁷⁹ The shift in expectations of immigrants in the realm of integration and assimilation are also clear; in the late eighties, a local newspaper could claim that “cultural identity has never been an obstacle to integration.”⁸⁰ The question of cultural identity is an interesting one, given that the pagodas, Vietnamese restaurants and specialty grocery stores are now part of the local experience in Noyant and Sainte-Livrade, and are even used as selling points to attract tourists. However,

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Nadège Arnaud, “Sainte-Livrade-sur-Lot. CAFI: cité ouverte,” *Le Citoyen Libre*, 12 July 1991.

⁷⁷ David E., “Indochine, nuit chagrine,” *Sud-Ouest*, 10 February 1999.

⁷⁸ Charlotte Rotman, “Le village oublié des harkis d’Indochine,” *Libération*, May 15 2004, 17.

⁷⁹ Booklet from the 50th anniversary exhibit on the CAFI, CAFI 1956-2006...De Saïgon à Sainte-Livrade.

⁸⁰ Anne Pascal, “Indochine en Têt,” *Le Citoyen Libre*, 25 November 1988. E. Bretonnière de Chèque, Letter to M. le Directeur Départemental de l’Action Sanitaire et Sociale, 30 December 1964, *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 988 W 34, folder “Foyer de Noyant.”

these same aspects of cultural identity were considered impediments to integration decades earlier. For example, in 1964, the director of the Noyant camp worried that public events with an “Indochinese” flavour hosted by the youth centre drew people in based solely on the promise of “exoticism,” thereby promoting “a certain distinctive identity detrimental to integration.”⁸¹

This celebration of cultural difference can be understood in a variety of ways. It may be indicative of a shift in certain circles from expecting assimilation in the form of conformity to French norms to greater acceptance of multiculturalism. However, it is also possible that the acceptance of cultural practices is related to the perception of Asian immigration to France as being “successful,” which is further reflected by the rosy view maintained by locals of the arrival of the repatriates. This idea of a ‘successful’ immigration emerged in the late 1970s and particularly in the 1980s and later, and is frequently contrasted with what is perceived to be problematic immigrants originating primarily from North Africa. While no substantial academic study of this phenomenon has been undertaken, many scholars agree that it is more than simply hearsay. A 1984 poll of French perceptions of the relative success of minority ethnic groups found that 47% of respondents believed that Asian immigrants were well-integrated, while only 33 and 21% said the same of Moroccans and Algerians respectively.⁸² Alec Hargreaves explains this “relatively favourable evaluation of Asians” by connecting it with widespread public sympathy for the refugees that arrived after 1975.⁸³ A study published in 1990 comparing the degree to which immigrants from the

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² SOFRES opinion poll for MRAP (1984: 22). Cited in Alec Hargreaves, *Multi-ethnic France. Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*, second ed. (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 144. For more on the perception of Maghrebi, and Algerian migrants/immigrants in particular, see Neil MacMaster, *Colonial Migrants and Racism: Algerians in France, 1900-1962* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997).

⁸³ Hargreaves, *Multi-ethnic France. Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*, 145.

Maghreb and Southeast Asia were perceived as fulfilling the French ‘ideal’ found that the former were criticized in each category of evaluation, while Southeast Asians were seen as “exemplary citizens, even more so than ‘most French people’.”⁸⁴ Although there is an absence of in-depth scholarly studies of the positive view of Southeast Asian immigrants in France, anecdotal evidence can provide some insight into the phenomenon. For his study of Vietnamese immigration to France, Jean Hugues conducted interviews with a number of Vietnamese repatriates and immigrants, as well as those who had frequent contact with them (schoolteachers, classmates, work colleagues, neighbourhood residents). The principal of the Collège Victor Hugo commented that students from Southeast Asia “are reserved but active: they are the heads of the class, with a very low rate of failure. [...] They have such a will to integrate that they gallicise their names when they can. They look to blend in at school, in class, through their clothing in particular. They are methodical, perfectionists: their silence is often due to a desire to speak perfectly.”⁸⁵ Residents of the 13th *arrondissement* of Paris speak of the fact that “since the arrival of the Asians, we can take the dogs out as late as eleven o’clock, without worrying.”⁸⁶

The relatively positive view of Southeast Asian integration, contrasted with the far more negative view of Maghrebi integration, is not a recent dichotomy. In fact, the case of the CAFI highlights the different perceptions of locals vis-à-vis repatriates from Indochina and the harkis. In 1967, a proposal was put forward to create an outdoor centre in Sainte-Livrade for the children of the *harki* camp in Bias. This proposal came in reaction to an earlier attempt to send these children to the outdoor center in Villeneuve, one that the

⁸⁴ Wallace E. Lambert et al, “Assimilation vs. Multiculturalism: Views from a Community in France,” *Sociological Forum* 5 no. 3 (September 1990), 406. Respondents were asked to evaluate the two groups with respect to religious practices, personal hygiene, and connections with family, amongst others.

⁸⁵ Jean Hugues, *Nous venons du Viêt-nam* (Paris: Syros, 1988), 20.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

children of the CAFI had attended. However, the parents in Villeneuve balked at the idea, purportedly because they “[did] not appreciate having their children be in the presence of so many little Muslims.”⁸⁷ A 1973 article in *Le Point* quotes a resident as saying with respect to the repatriates: “when they came, we quite liked them. Much more than the Arabs.”⁸⁸ Even the repatriates themselves have identified the difference in perceptions and treatment. One interviewee reported to Le Huu Khoa that “we are not treated like Arabs and Blacks in France;”⁸⁹ another respondent, this time to Jean Hugues, stated that “people see us as nice (*gentils*).”⁹⁰ The narrative of a successful Asian immigration as one that has resulted in a high degree of assimilation, as compared to the perception of a problematic North African, predominantly Muslim, immigration is one that continues to resonate today.

The question of integration is particularly critical in the case of the repatriates precisely because they were French citizens, and not immigrants or refugees. The imposition of a policy of assimilation was experienced by some as an attack on their very nationality. After a visit to the CAFI, a veteran and self-described Eurasian wrote a report to local and regional authorities denouncing the policy of assimilation: “Assimilate who? Them? But they have been French for generations.”⁹¹ Residents’ demands, whether it be for televisions, access to medical services outside of the camp, or an end to the administrative structure, were framed by the question of citizenship and the desire to be treated as full French citizens. Relatively early on, residents were permitted to vote in municipal elections, but it took much

⁸⁷ Michel Levallois, Letter to M. le Préfet Pérony, Chef du Service d’Accueil et de Reclassement des Français Musulmans, 5 July 1967, *Archives départementales du Lot-et-Garonne*, carton W vrac Sous-préfecture de Villeneuve, art. 254.

⁸⁸ Gallois, “Vietnam-sur-Lot,” 65.

⁸⁹ Khoa, *Les Vietnamiens en France. Insertion et identité*, 187.

⁹⁰ Hugues, *Nous venons du Viêt-nam*, 152. The respondent goes on to say that she feels under attack herself when Africans or Maghrebis are attacked.

⁹¹ J.L., *Rapport sur les Français Rapatriés*, Paris, 1959, *Archives départementales de l’Allier*, carton 1 W, art. 2117.

longer for them to have access to subsidies directly from the agencies involved, or to seek medical care outside of the camp doctor's office if they chose to. The administrative structure lasted the longest at the CAFI, but this is primarily due to the fact that the CAFI outlasted all of the other sites.

The Repatriate Camps as Sites of Memory

The sites of the repatriate camps are not only home for a number of repatriates, but they also serve as physical reminders of the history and experiences of the residents. They straddle the history of immigration and the legacy of the Indochina War and decolonization. However, outside of the communities neighbouring the camps, there is little awareness of their existence, which makes it very difficult to ascribe them the status of 'sites of memory' that many repatriates and their descendants would like to see awarded. In fact, if the camps are the subject of any kind of attention, it is frequently in the context of commenting on their 'forgotten' nature. The media have expressed interest in them very sporadically; in the realm of television, between 1972 and 2006 only a dozen news stories on the topic had aired on the major French networks.⁹² Moreover, the image in the media of the camps and their residents has been overwhelmingly static. In 1959, an article on the CAFI in *France Observateur* referred to the residents as "forgotten."⁹³ In 1972, A2 aired a short documentary on Noyant, entitled *Les oubliés d'Indochine (The Forgotten from Indochina)*.⁹⁴ By 2004, France 2 and France 3 collaborated with a Hanoi television station to produce *Le camp des oubliés (The Camp of the Forgotten)*, hailed by the regional newspaper *Sud-Ouest* as having "filled a gap

⁹² This estimate is based on the records of the archives of the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel*.

⁹³ "Grandeur' ...et reconnaissance," *France Observateur*, 2 July 1959.

⁹⁴ "Les oubliés de l'Indochine," INF2 Dimanche, Antenne 2, 17 December 1972.

in national memory.”⁹⁵ While this praise is perhaps overstated, given that the camps have yet to emerge from their relative obscurity into the spotlight of national awareness, it is true that media coverage has increased, relatively speaking, since 2000. While national media coverage generally speaking continues to be limited, local media coverage has been on the rise. In the realm of film and investigative journalism, the camp has been the subject of six documentaries, five of which date from 1992 or later.⁹⁶

Faced with a public oblivious to the history of the *rapatriés d’Indochine*, and undoubtedly guided by an increased memorial imperative beginning in the early nineties, current and former residents of the camps have created a number of associations to lobby for official recognition and to write the repatriate experience back into national history. Some, like the *Coordination des Eurasiens de Paris* (CEP) and *Mémoire d’Indochine*, represent all repatriates. Others represent the residents of specific camps, such as the *Association des résidents et amis du CAFI* (ARAC; Association of Residents and Friends of the CAFI) and the *Association des rapatriés de Noyant d’Allier* (ARINA; Association of the Repatriates of Noyant d’Allier). All have sought to foster a greater awareness of the camps and the experiences of the repatriates, and the CEP and *Mémoire d’Indochine* in particular have also sought state recognition akin to that granted to the *harkis* in 2005; in fact, according to the current president of the CEP, it was the lack of inclusion in the 2005 law that prompted the creation of the association.

In 2006, the CEP identified its two primary objectives as follows: the defence of the CAFI as a historical and cultural site, and the “moral and material recognition” of the

⁹⁵ “Une douleur venue de l’Indochine,” *Sud-Ouest*, 7 December 2004.

⁹⁶ Pierre Andro, *Les oubliés de l’Indochine* (1972); Mathieu Samel, *Les fruits amers du Lot-et-Garonne* (1992) and *Les enfants de Quan Am* (2004); Marie-Christine Courtès and My Linh Nguyen, *Le camp des oubliés* (2004); Nora Genet-Lemque, *Saïgon-Sainte-Livrade. Aller simple pour l’oubli* (2007).

repatriates.⁹⁷ In the case of the former, the group envisions a space of 400 square metres with an information centre, library and rotating exhibits; an ‘exotic garden’ would also be maintained, to be tended to by residents. The current president is adamant that the site be one of “living memory,” rather than a stela or other “dead” monument.⁹⁸ Securing agreements regarding the construction of such a memorial seems like a small task in comparison with the second major goal of the organization. He maintains that while “moral recognition” of the contributions of the French of Indochina to the colonial state, as well as of their experience upon their arrival in France, is critical, the association will continue to push for financial compensation. Although the French government has passed a series of legislation since the era of decolonization granting indemnities to repatriated populations, the French of Indochina have not benefited from them. The most recent of these was the infamous law of 23 February 2005, which CEP members and others had hoped would include a provision for them. They were sorely disappointed when the law was passed granting indemnities only to the *harkis*.

The experiences and treatment of the repatriates have often been compared to those of the *harkis*, predominantly by the repatriates themselves. This tactic has become increasingly prevalent in the past decade as associations like the CEP and *Mémoire d’Indochine* lobby for indemnities and recognition. Comparison with the fallout of Algerian independence has a long history with the repatriates: in his 1966 doctoral dissertation, a sociological study of a sample group of repatriates living in Paris, Trinh Van Thao highlights the bitterness expressed by many repatriates comparing the (perceived) “surge of solidarity [...] that welcomed the Pieds-noirs,” as opposed to the “detached indifference” that the same

⁹⁷ *Coordination des Eurasiens de Paris*, “Rapport d’activité annuel, 2005-2006,” www.rapatRIES-vietnam.org/cep-rapport-activite-2005-2006.rtf (retrieved 28 November 2009). While the association’s statutes identify further goals, the centrality of these two in particular was also reinforced by the current president of the group in an interview with the author, 25 June 2008.

⁹⁸ Author’s interview with the president of the CEP, Paris, 25 June 2008.

population had shown them upon their arrival.⁹⁹ The comparison with the *harkis* is certainly valid, despite the fact that they were soldiers, while the *rapatriés d'Indochine* were primarily civilians. There were strong similarities in the treatment of the two groups through the process of 'repatriation' and their respective experiences of the camps, which were occasionally the same sites (as in the case of Bias and Saint-Hilaire). Nonetheless, the comparison has taken on particular currency in recent years as the *harkis* have gained increasing public attention. Yet, as Bruno Icher wrote in *Libération*, "if the scandal of the *harkis* returns regularly to the spotlight, that of the *rapatriés d'Indochine* is glaring in its absence from the debates."¹⁰⁰ At the time of writing, the repatriates had been granted no indemnities by the state, despite the arguments of Anne-Marie Payet (Senator from Reunion) during the Senate debates over the drafting of the legislation,¹⁰¹ as well as the efforts of Yves Simon (deputy of the Allier) to have the legislation amended after the fact.

While the struggle to acquire legal recognition of their status is ongoing, the memorial efforts of the CEP, *Mémoire d'Indochine* and the ARAC were validated by the events of the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the first repatriates. While both Noyant and the CAFI have been the subjects of commemorative projects, it is the CAFI that has been a focal point for repatriate memory, in part because it maintained camp status for the longest period of time. As former resident Émile Lejeune argues, "in all of France, it's the only area that marks the repatriation of the French of Indochina."¹⁰² It is not only residents, however, that confer a special status on the CAFI; in 1991, veteran and filmmaker Pierre Schoendoerffer chose the camp as a screening site for an *avant-première* of his major release *Diên Biên Phu*,

⁹⁹ Thao, *Étude d'un processus d'adaptation sociale*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Bruno Icher, "Abandon postcolonial," *Libération*, 7 December 2004.

¹⁰¹ Senat, session of 16 December 2004. Transcription consulted online at www.senat.fr/seances/s200412/s20041216/s20041216005.html#int1594. Retrieved 28 November 2009.

¹⁰² 19/20 news segment, France 3, 4 June 2006.

which chronicled the end of the Indochina War and of the French presence in the region. Events and ceremonies were held in both Noyant and Sainte-Livrade, although the latter was the centre of activity. The focal point was an exhibit running from April 29th to September 17th, hosted by the municipal library of Sainte-Livrade, entitled “CAFI 1956-2006...De Saïgon à Sainte-Livrade.” Showcasing archival documents, photos, testimony, household objects, clothing and other items, the exhibit illustrated various aspects of life at the CAFI over the years. Visitors were provided with carefully prepared documentation on the “Moulin-du-Lot” site, an overview of colonial Indochina and the migration of the repatriates, religious life, and important Vietnamese celebrations like Têt, amongst others. Sharing the history of the CAFI was expanded beyond the museum exhibit; visitors were also offered the opportunity to take a guided tour of the site during the summer months, including one apartment that had been redecorated as it would have been when the repatriates first arrived. Other stops on the tour included the pagoda, the chapel, the two grocery stores specializing in Asian products, and the garden of Asian vegetables grown from seeds originally brought from Vietnam. The ARAC also hosted a photo exhibit at their CAFI headquarters. In addition to the exhibit and the guided tours, the library put together a portable information kit on Vietnam, Indochina and the experiences of the repatriates. A miniature version of the exhibit, it was used as a pedagogical tool to be circulated throughout libraries in the Lot-et-Garonne. For its part, the CEP capitalized on the attention being paid to the CAFI to promote intellectual reflections on the camp experience. As part of the opening day events on April 29th, they hosted a round table featuring historians, sociologists, representatives of local authorities, and CAFI residents. In addition, they arranged for multiple screenings of the documentary *Le camp des oubliés* in Sainte-Livrade and Paris. In the case of the latter,

screenings were followed by commentary from established scholars Gilles Manceron, Charles Fourniau and Alain Ruscio. The interest in the 50th anniversary was also shared by regional and national publications; *Ancrage*, a periodical on the culture and history of the Lot-et-Garonne, dedicated a special issue to the CAFI.¹⁰³ *Carnets du Viêt Nam* published profiles of the camps of Noyant and Sainte-Livrade,¹⁰⁴ and even the national press published cursory coverage of the events. Finally, the anniversary events maintained the connection between the camps and the Indochina War by incorporating a ceremony to honour the dead of the war on June 8th.

The memorial imperative associated with the 50th anniversary of the camps was bolstered by the retabling of a plan to demolish the existing structures of the CAFI. The buildings were to be replaced with a subdivision of subsidized housing, in which those who still had claims to housing could reside, along with other Livradais. Projects had been tabled since the mid-seventies, but had been delayed or abandoned, frequently under the pressure of residents and their families. By 2006, there were fewer than 100 residents who had the right to housing at the CAFI; these *ayants-droits* were those who had arrived had been adults at the time of arrival. Of these, there were a number of quite elderly women known simply as the *mamies* (grannies) or the *tatas* (aunties). Most of them rejected the idea of moving, even if it were to better housing. While their experience in the camp had been a difficult one, they had come to think of it as home, with their gardens, grocery stores and friends all close by. There is also concern that a move might prove to be too much for the elderly residents, some of who are over ninety. In addition to logistical concerns over the renovation of the site is the

¹⁰³ “C.A.F.I. 1956-2006. Enfin l’après,” *Ancrage*, hors série Indochine (April 2006).

¹⁰⁴ Dominique Foulon, “Noyant-d’Allier célèbre l’arrivée des rapatriés d’Indochine,” *Carnets du Viêt Nam* 9 (October 2005), 14; Pierre Brocheux, “Sainte-Livrade: l’émotion cinquante ans après,” *Carnets du Viêt Nam* 12 (September 2006), 10.

fact that despite the quality of the current housing and the sometimes bitter history associated with the camp, the site is nonetheless home to a small community, one that expands exponentially during holidays and festivals. Each year during Têt and the CAFI celebration of August 15th, families of residents and former residents flock to the camp to visit and reconnect.

For those already concerned with the relegation of repatriate history to obscurity, the physical elimination of the site is tantamount to erasing it completely. Then-president of the CEP, Léon Nguyen, interpreted the demolition plans as a desire to eliminate the shame associated with the Indochina War: “The state says something must be done; razing the residual and recurring shame of the Indochina War. This is the cost of forgetting and erasing this indelible stain that is the Indochina War, this stain which consists of the survival of the older generation that is still around.”¹⁰⁵ Not all repatriates saw the same motivations on the part of the state or the municipality, but the majority agreed that to demolish the camp in its entirety was to erase part of France’s history, one that was already struggling to be heard. Demolition is currently underway, although it is scheduled to take place in a staggered manner. Buildings will be torn down in small groups, to be replaced with new housing in stages, rather than demolishing all of the buildings at once.

Conclusion

The repatriate camps of Noyant and Sainte-Livrade exist as the tangible legacy of colonialism in the metropole. They represent the intimate connections between the

¹⁰⁵ Léon Nguyen, “Les cinquante ans de Noyant et de Sainte-Livrade célébrés cet été,” LDH-Toulon online, August 2006, <http://www.ldh-toulon.net/spip.php?article1500>.

decolonization of the Indochinese peninsula prompted by the war and the history of the repatriation-immigration of French citizens to a homeland they have never seen. For residents, the camps also represent personal memories: of a childhood spent in rural isolation, of working under the table for local farmers, but also of celebrating Têt with an extensive network of family and friends. The process of seeking state recognition, both moral and financial, thus operates on a personal as well as collective level. In addition to providing financial compensation to individuals, such recognition has the potential to reinforce the place of the repatriate experience in the national narrative.

Chapter 5

Screening Indochina

“From *L’Amant* to *Indochine*, a certain kind of French cinema is truly occupying Viêt-nam. But even if it’s clearly using more peaceful means, it certainly isn’t the first time that this French occupation has established itself on Vietnamese territory. What is troubling and awful is that this cinema of occupation is starting over exactly as if it was the first time. [...] These three films [...] are all screaming the same thing: oh yes, I remember, now that you’ve said it, now that you’ve shown it, it was exactly like that. [...] In short, the good old days of the colonies [...].

~ Gérard Lefort, *Libération*¹

The release of three major motion pictures set in colonial Indochina – *L’Amant* (*The Lover*), *Diên Biên Phu* and *Indochine* – in the first months of 1992 caught the attention of the French public and the media, who rushed to cover this cinematic “reconquest” of the former colony.² The release of these films in such a short period of time was deemed to be indicative of a return of the colony, and of the Indochina War, within the French film industry and public consciousness more generally speaking. However, the notion of a ‘return’ of Indochina as a cinematic subject implies an earlier period of interest, when in actuality neither the colony nor the war have ever been particularly popular settings for filmmakers. Film (both fiction and documentary) can play a significant memorial role as a means by which to process painful periods of the past and challenge contemporary interpretations of them, as has been the case in France with memories of the Occupation (*Le chagrin et la pitié*, Marcel Ophüls, 1969) and the Algerian War (*La guerre sans nom*, Bertrand Tavernier, 1992). The US too worked through its ‘Vietnam syndrome’ through film: *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*,

¹ Gérard Lefort, “La France occupée par l’Indochine,” *Libération*, 15 April 1992.

² Anne Andreu, “Cinéma français: la reconquête de l’Indochine,” *L’Événement du jeudi*, 16-22 April 1992, 112-113.

and *Full Metal Jacket* have not only performed well at the box office, but brought new perspectives to the experiences of a generation of American conscripts and volunteers. The Indochina War, however, has not been the subject to a similar cinematic reckoning with the past. As Benjamin Stora and others have argued, the considerable cinematic production addressing the Algerian and Vietnam wars masks a neglect of the Indochina War. Yet in spite of the limited number of films addressing the Indochina War, a number of them have nonetheless commanded significant attention; a case in point is the uproar caused by Henri de Turenne's 1984 documentary series *Vietnam*.

The following is not an exhaustive examination of all cinematic production relative to the Indochina War, but rather an overview of the overall trends in representations of the war and a chronological analysis of particular films from different eras. The focus is overwhelmingly on the two films released in 1957 (*Patrouille de choc* and *Mort en fraude*), the works of Pierre Schoendoerffer, Henri de Turenne's documentary, and the three aforementioned films released in 1992. Without exception, these films fall into two categories: those directed by people with intimate connections to Indochina (as soldiers, the children of veterans, or journalists), and those that were based on novels whose authors had first-hand experience of the colony. In addition to this body of work, the chapter will consider the unique case of Paul Carpita's *Rendez-vous des quais*, filmed in 1953, completed in 1955 and seized by censors during a screening. The film was thought to be destroyed or lost for decades before making a miraculous appearance at the film archives in 1987. It was screened publicly for the first time after the discovery in 1989. *Rendez-vous* presents an interesting case not only because of this censorship, but because of the language used to describe it in the media and elsewhere: it was a 'lost' film that represented a 'repressed

collective memory' of the war. As Marc Vernet ably demonstrates, however, the realities of the film's trajectory and treatment are far more complex and nuanced.³ Given that few of the films that fall into this corpus are considered to be cinematically groundbreaking, the objective of the chapter is to engage with depictions of the war and the colonial era, and the reactions of critics, veterans, and the general public to these works.

The 1950s and Early 1960s: Patrouille de Choc and Mort en fraude

The immediate postwar years were characterized by a paucity in films addressing the conflict: until the end of the decade following the Geneva accords, only three such films were released. In addition, René Clément's *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*, 1956), set in 1930s Indochina, was released in this period; this was the first of several filmic adaptations of the work of Marguerite Duras. Marcel Camus' *Mort en fraude* and Claude Bernard-Aubert's *Patrouille de choc* were released in 1957, while Paul Carpita's *Rendez-vous des quais*, which was actually shot during the war, was released in 1955 and was seized by censors shortly thereafter. Given its limited exposure at the time of its seizure, particularly in comparison to the considerable attention it received when it was 'found' in the late 1980s, it will be addressed later in the chapter.

Filmed in a documentary style in South Vietnam, *Patrouille de choc* (*Shock Patrol*) tells the story of a small, isolated French military post which is eventually attacked by Viet Minh forces. Catherine Gaston-Mathé aptly summarizes the film as depicting "a 'civilizing' France attempting to fraternize with the indigenous people while facing a destructive Viet

³ Marc Vernet, "Si Orphée se retourne, Madame Dupont lui sourira," *Cinémathèque* no. 1 (May 1992), 92-105.

Minh and an inevitable decolonization.”⁴ The first film to deal explicitly with the subject of the Indochina War, *Patrouille de choc* is a tale of the “unfathomable absurdity”⁵ of the war, which the metropole was voluntarily ignoring. The sense of despair and the inevitability of defeat was captured by the film’s original title, *Patrouille sans espoir* (*Patrol of Despair*). This lack of hope was highly problematic for censors: the censorship report issued by the Ministry of Defence and made public by a journalist states that “hope is the fundamental idea that must guide the transformation of this film.”⁶ The attempt to infuse the story with a sense of hope was encapsulated primarily by changing the title and the ending of the film, in which the post falls to a Viet Minh attack in which the troops are massacred. The revised ending featured reinforcements arriving just in time to prevent complete defeat, and a postscript that announces that the five French soldiers surrounded by Viet Minh in the last scene did in fact survive. As Frédéric Delmeulle argues, this censorship indicates the unwillingness of authorities to accept the depiction of French defeat.⁷

Bernard-Aubert’s film has much in common with those of Pierre Schoendoerffer, who has become synonymous with the cinema of the Indochina War. Both experienced the war as young camera men in the French forces, though Bernard-Aubert was there for considerably longer (1949 to 1954, as opposed to Schoendoerffer’s tour from 1952 to 1954). Beyond the obvious impact that this experience has had on their respective choices of subject matter, they have both sought to maintain a focus on the experience of the average soldier, avoiding the broader subjects of political and military leadership and decision-making, or

⁴ Catherine Gaston-Mathé, *La société française au miroir de son cinéma. De la débâcle à la décolonisation* (Condé-sur-Noireau: Panoramiques-Corlet, 1996), 260.

⁵ Interview with Claude Bernard-Aubert, *Témoignage chrétien*, 15 August 1958.

⁶ Quoted in Frédéric Delmeulle, “Fiction cinématographique et guerre d’Indochine,” *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, no. 57 “Souvenirs d’Indochine” (October 1992), 64.

⁷ Delmeulle, “Fiction cinématographique et guerre d’Indochine,” 64.

whether France was justified in waging war in the first place. His goal, aptly summarized by *La Cinématographie française* as paying “homage to the abandoned heroes of Indochina,”⁸ echoes Schoendoerffer’s self-avowed objectives.

While the war was front and centre in *Patrouille de choc*, it is little more than a backdrop in *Mort en fraude*. Based on Jean Hougron’s 1953 book by the same name, *Mort en fraude* (*Fugitive in Saigon*) is the story of a French civilian grappling with the impact of French colonialism and the threat of the Viet Minh. The protagonist, Paul Horcier (Daniel Gélin), arrives in Indochina in 1950 to take up a low-level post with a large company. He is asked to transport a package containing a significant amount of money with him, which is stolen en route. Upon his arrival in Saigon, his story of the theft leaves the intended recipients unconvinced, and their threats soon escalate into a citywide manhunt. Horcier seeks refuge in the room of a young Eurasian woman, Anh (Anh Méchard, also credited as Anne Méchard), who agrees to take him to her native village, for a substantial fee. The village of Vinh Bao is located in a no-man’s-land coveted by both French forces and the Viet Minh, next to a dam built by the French that has radically decreased fish stocks and the villagers’ abilities to sustain themselves. It is here that Horcier grapples with his own stereotyped perceptions of the Vietnamese and falls in love with Anh. The villagers are hardly welcoming at first, fearing Viet Minh reprisals, but a symbiotic relationship eventually develops. Horcier lets go of his contempt and contributes to the village by buying medicine and rice and sharing in communal work. His ultimate sacrifice is to blow up the dam – literally destroying the work of French colonial authorities – which results in his being fired on by the French and the Viet Minh. As he and Anh make their escape in a canoe, they are

⁸ “Hommage aux héros abandonnés d’Indochine,” *La Cinématographie française*, no. 1724, cited in Delmeulle, “Fiction cinématographique et guerre d’Indochine,” 64.

stopped by French soldiers, who shoot Paul.

Camus' sympathies lie above all with the Vietnamese civilians. The villagers of Vinh Bao are depicted as merely trying to live according to traditional patterns, which have been disrupted primarily by the French. They stand in sharp contrast to the urbanized indigenous residents of Saigon, who are shown as being at the beck and call of Europeans; the goal is clearly to illustrate the corrupting effect of the French presence.⁹ Those living in close proximity to the French are depicted as base creatures, while the villagers, who have managed to maintain a certain distance from them, are eminently nobler. Thus, while Horcier is met, upon arrival, by a variety of men eager to transport his belongings or offering to do odd jobs for little pay, Anh's father is a wise and dignified village elder.

French soldiers and civilians on the one hand, and the Viet Minh on the other, are depicted in equally negative light. The former are presented as racist, oppressive and corrupt, the latter as cruel and violent. Camus did not conceal his criticism of the colonial project, stating that "historically, the French have brought nothing constructive or positive to the Indochinese peoples, and have only degraded and debased their culture."¹⁰ Corruption is accentuated in the depiction of the man who asks Horcier to carry the suspicious package and the gangsters who hunt him down for it, while the police in Saigon are characterized by incompetence. The company representative who meets Horcier at the ship to escort him to his quarters immediately reminds the latter that "we are at home here, don't you forget it," and advises him that when dealing with the natives, "there is only one approach...you have to keep them under control." Finally, he tells Horcier, "don't let yourself be disturbed by the poverty. They all look like they're dying of hunger, but in this country it's typical, it's part of

⁹ Delmeulle, 68.

¹⁰ Gaston-Mathé, *La société française au miroir de son cinéma*, 260.

the local colour.”¹¹ Camus’ depiction of French settlers doesn’t improve over the course of Horcier’s first night in Saigon; after escaping the gangsters, he asks a passing French couple directions to get back to the street where he’s staying. They advise him to take a rickshaw; after all, says the wife, “they are there for that.” The husband warns him that “they’re all thieves,” and that if they ask for ten piastres for the trip, they should be given three. The discrimination inherent in the colonial system is highlighted with Ahn’s explanation to Horcier that she cannot visit her village without a pass. In response to Horcier’s protestations that surely she has the right to see her family, she remarks bitterly: “the right...for a French woman, perhaps. You forget that I’m Eurasian.” Much later, when the two of them try to get a hotel room on route from Vinh Bao, they are turned away from a French hotel on the premise that “*congais*”¹² are not allowed. Two men in white dress and colonial hats accuse Horcier as being just another *encongayé*,¹³ the kind of person “who screws up the prestige we once had in this country.”¹⁴

In contrast, the Viet Minh are targeted not for their actions against the French, but attacks and reprisals against their compatriots. The residents of Vinh Bao serve to highlight the negative characteristics of both groups: they live in fear of the Viet Minh, and they have maintained a certain nobility and ‘traditional’ way of life in the absence of contact with the French. Camus’ commitment to a critique of colonialism is evident in the loose nature of his adaptation of Hougron’s novel.¹⁵ Hougron’s Horcier seeks to liberate the villagers of Vinh

¹¹ Marcel Camus, *Mort en fraude* (1957).

¹² This French term, from the Vietnamese *con gai* (daughter, girl, woman), became synonymous with concubine or prostitute, and sometimes simply referred to an indigenous woman (though with inherently pejorative connotations).

¹³ Literally, a man in a relationship with a *congai*.

¹⁴ Camus, *Mort en fraude*.

¹⁵ Hougron is credited as having contributed to the screenplay, and he may well have played a role in sharpening the critique of colonialism.

Bao from the Viet Minh alone, rather than it and the French. Most strikingly, his death in the novel is considerably less heroic: he is shot by the gangsters who had been searching for him since his arrival. Hougron's own body of work on Indochina reveals a critical evaluation of the French presence there,¹⁶ but his characters, including Horcier, are considerably more flawed than those depicted in Camus' film. Samuel Lachize, writing in *L'Humanité*, applauded Camus' evident anticolonialism as well as his pacifism. Camus, he writes, "hates war" and shows it.¹⁷ Furthermore, while he "seems to ignore those responsible for the massacre, [he] accurately identifies the responsibilities of the colonial system (and those who profit from it) in this war."¹⁸ The lesson learned from the film, he adds is that "one does not conquer the hearts of the people by sowing death, but by helping them to plant rice."¹⁹ Undoubtedly due in part to its critical portrayal of French colons, *Mort en fraude* was banned in France's overseas territories. This, however, was not the first case of censorship of the adaptation of Hougron's story: Henri-Georges Clouzot had sought to bring the story to the big screen in the latter years of the war, but had been prohibited from doing so. In an article in *L'Express* in December 1953, he stated that the reason for this prohibition was that "my perspective of events in Africa and Asia does not strictly conform to official doctrine."²⁰ While this undoubtedly played a role for censorship authorities, two other factors were surely as important: first and foremost, the war was ongoing, and it was thus unlikely that a film depicting resistance against the French was going to be approved. Secondly, Clouzot had hardly emerged from the period of the Occupation unscathed. He had released *Le Corbeau* in

¹⁶ For more on Hougron's critique of colonial society, see Jack Yeager, "Jean Hougron's Indochina: Fantasy and Disillusionment," in Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee, eds., *France and 'Indochina': Cultural Representations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 207-217.

¹⁷ Samuel Lachize, "A propos de 'Mort en fraude'," *L'Humanité*, 25 May 1957.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Henri-Georges Clouzot, "Le cinéma interdit," *L'Express*, December 5 1953.

1943, which depicted a small town beset by a poison pen letter writer. The theme of the French turning against and denouncing one another was not popular with Vichy authorities or the postwar regime, and the fact that the film had been produced by the German company Continental-Films only made matters worse. In 1944, Clouzot was banned from the film industry in perpetuity, a sentence that was later commuted to two years. Although the film proposal was made eight years after the end of the Second World War, following the release of a number of his films including the popular *Quai des Orfèvres*, his reputation with respect to 'sensitive' subjects was undoubtedly a factor in the censors' decision.

The 1960s were marked by a slight increase in the number of films depicting the war. These were characterized, for most part, by an emphasis on the heroism of French troops, the military values of courage and comradeship, and in some cases, the plight of the victims of the Viet Minh. Léo Joannon's 1963 *Le Fort du fou (Outpost in Indochina)* depicted both heroic French soldiers and the plight of Vietnamese Catholics fleeing from Viet Minh forces. In 1964, Henri Decoin's *Les Parias de la gloire (Outcasts of Glory)*, based on veteran Roger Delpey's novel of the same name, depicted the friendship that develops between a former member of the French Resistance, whose brother had been killed by a German officer during the liberation of Alsace in 1944 and who subsequently enlists to serve in Indochina, and a German plantation owner. Thrown together by circumstance in the Cochinchinese delta after the German's plane makes an emergency landing close to a French military post, the two join forces to combat their common enemy. Bernard-Aubert returned to the topic of the war in 1966 with *Le Facteur s'en va-t-en-guerre (The Postman Goes to War)*, and while the narrative differed from his earlier *Patrouille de choc*, the filmmaker's commitment to honouring the memory of the French troops is once again at the heart of the story. This time,

a group of legionnaires on their way to Dien Bien Phu are attacked by the Viet Minh and imprisoned in a camp for prisoners of war, from which they later escape. Bernard-Aubert would release a third instalment of his memorial project in 1980 with the release of *Charlie Bravo*.

Turning Point: La 317ème section

In the midst of these releases was one film which celebrated many of the same values, but which would catapult its director to a position of authority on the war. The film was *La 317ème section (The 317th Platoon)*, and the director, Pierre Schoendoerffer. As the first film on the Indochina War to gain considerable attention and praise, *La 317ème section* clearly marks a turning point in the cinematic memory of the war. In fact, Bénédicte Chéron argues in her DEA thesis that *La 317ème section* was “a formative part of national memory.”²¹ Like Bernard-Aubert, Schoendoerffer had volunteered as a cinematographer with the French forces, and was taken prisoner at Dien Bien Phu. Although he had filmed combat during the siege, he had destroyed his reels rather than allow them to fall into the hands of the Viet Minh. He remained in captivity for four months, and after his release stayed on as a press correspondent. His wartime experiences strongly coloured his subsequent filmmaking. One of his earliest films, *Ramuntcho* (1958) alluded to the war, but it wasn't until 1964, a full decade after the French defeat and the signature of the Geneva accords that he delved fully into the subject with *La 317ème section*, based on his novel of the same name. The film garnered the prize for best screenplay at Cannes in 1965, a success that would be matched over a decade later with the release of *Le Crabe-tambour (Drummer-Crab)*, another

²¹ Bénédicte Chéron, *Un cinéma d'aventure et de guerre: l'oeuvre de Pierre Schoendoerffer. De la condition du soldat à la condition de l'homme engagé*, DEA thesis, Université Paris IV Sorbonne (2006).

adaptation of his own novel, which itself won the grand prize from the Académie Française.

Even those films that are not set in Indochina maintain a connection with it. The title

character of *Le Crabe-tambour*, set in Algeria, is the brother of Sergeant Willsdorf of *La*

317ème section, and 1982's *L'Honneur d'un capitaine* features flashbacks to Indochina.

Schoendoerffer made a full return to the Indochina War in 1992 with the release of *Diên Biên*

Phu, and in 2004 with *Là-haut*. Each of these films, and especially *Diên Biên Phu*, reinforces

a narrative of war featuring heroic soldiers, abandoned by the metropolitan government and

public, making a last stand against an overwhelming enemy.

La 317ème section opens with an aerial view of the Lao jungle, eventually transitioning to a shot of soldiers lowering a French flag at a military outpost. It is 4 May 1954, and the 317th platoon has been ordered to abandon its post and retreat south. The platoon is composed primarily of Lao auxiliaries, led by a handful of French officers. Of these, Lieutenant Torrens (Jacques Perrin) and Sergeant Willsdorf (Bruno Cremer) play central roles in the development of the narrative. The former is a freshly-minted graduate of St Cyr, while the latter is a career soldier from Alsace who had been forcibly drafted into the German *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War and had been sent to fight on the eastern front. He later joins the French Foreign Legion, and following the end of the Indochina War, moves on to Algeria, where he is killed during a skirmish. The entire film takes place over the span of seven days, during which time the platoon is slowly decimated as they are stalked by the Viet Minh as they forge their way through the jungle, stumbling on villages from time to time. The audience is informed at the end of the film that “the 317th platoon no longer exists.”

Like *Patrouille de choc*, *La 317ème section* privileges the experience of a platoon of

soldiers over the analysis of the causes and responsibilities for the war and the eventual French defeat, a theme that Schoendoerffer would later return to in *Diên Biên Phu*.

Throughout the trials faced by the platoon, the camaraderie of its members is highlighted. The soldiers are committed to helping one another, French and Lao alike. The choice of a Lao auxiliary unit is not insignificant; in fact, it serves to reinforce a narrative of colonial partnership common to many veteran narratives of the war. On the level of production, the idea of a colonial partnership extending into the postcolonial period is reinforced by virtue of the film being shot in Cambodia with the assent of Norodom Sihanouk, whose support is recognized in the opening credits, and with the collaboration of the royal Khmer forces. Two scenes from the film itself serve to illustrate the commitment of French soldiers to anti-communist indigenous troops. The first is a scene in which a wounded French soldier tries to comfort a wounded Lao soldier, who is on the verge of death. The second is a much more light-hearted depiction of the friendship between the French and the Lao, in which two soldiers play a game with a stick to pass the time. As if to reinforce the theme of partnership, and perhaps to implicitly absolve the French colonial state of wrongdoing, the villagers encountered by the platoon are never shown to be unhappy with the colonial situation. Rather, they either assist the members of the platoon or ask them to move on out of fear of Viet Minh reprisals. In one case, a village chief asks the soldiers to leave, as the Viet Minh have already been there and if they return and discover that the villagers were sheltering French troops, they will be massacred. The soldiers encounter a similar reaction in another village, the residents of which desert their homes in the middle of the night while the soldiers are sleeping. The chief leaves a note, in which he apologizes for leaving but claims that they lived through the Japanese presence, and that they are not prepared to live with the Viet

Minh. Thus, the Japanese occupation and the treatment of civilians by the Viet Minh are both indicted by the villagers, but the French colonial presence is never questioned.

The self-sacrifice and courage of the soldiers is a second central theme, and is illustrated primarily by the obstacles that they face. The jungle is an oppressive force, and difficult to navigate. This is exacerbated by the ominous sense that the Viet Minh are always near, but impossible to locate. In fact, Viet Minh soldiers are rarely seen on-screen. In of the few such scenes, the platoon spots a Viet Minh commando group transporting supplies by bicycle, and engages in a small skirmish and retreats. Later, voices can be heard encouraging the Lao troops to leave the French and join their ranks, followed by threats of death should they refuse. One member of the platoon scans the surrounding hills with binoculars, but is unable to locate the source of the voice. A similar scene is repeated later, when the platoon finally gets a response on the radio and requests that supplies be parachuted in to them; the voice of a Viet Minh soldier comes across the radio informing them that all is lost, and demanding their surrender. Despite this emphasis on the heroism of the French forces, however, Schoendoerffer is careful not to depict the soldiers as being entirely beyond reproach, and includes scenes of soldiers pillaging villages.

La 317ème section was arguably the first French film about the Indochina War to gain widespread recognition and appreciation from critics and the public; historian Jacques Dalloz deems it to be nothing short of “the best film devoted to the conflict.”²² In addition to the success at Cannes, it won the favour of film critics across the political spectrum. *Minute* deemed it “the most beautiful French war film,”²³ although the reviewer doubted that it would have much commercial success. The reviewer from the *Nouvel Observateur* called it a

²² Jacques Dalloz, *La guerre d'Indochine, 1945-1954* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 175.

²³ “Le plus beau film de guerre français,” *Minute*, April 9 1965, 22.

“masterpiece” and the “first real film on the war.”²⁴ Even *L’Humanité*’s resident film critic Samuel Lachize praised the film as being “worthy of the best American productions of the kind.”²⁵ Common to all of these reviewers and others was an appreciation of the film’s realism. The *Nouvel Observateur* reviewer argued that Schoendoerffer’s film was distinct from the hundreds of others about “another platoon decimated in another war” precisely because “it is authentic.” All of the gestures, the words, the looks, the voices, the sounds – all were ‘authentic,’ as if the camera had disappeared.²⁶ Writing in *Le Monde*, Jean de Baroncelli praised the film for “hitting a rare note of authenticity.”²⁷ This authenticity is, however, understood differently by different reviewers; Lachize, for example, implies that the mark of authenticity is found in the fact that the characters do not know why they are fighting, only that they are paid to kill or be killed.²⁸ Although his review is essentially positive, Lachize does find fault with Schoendoerffer’s avoidance of the ‘bigger picture’ of the war. The filmmaker, he maintains, shows us the anguish and suffering of the soldiers, but fails to condemn the war that they were waging. Moreover, he continues, the people against whom war was being waged are absent from the film, with the exception of the auxiliaries, who are described as the “collaborators of the occupying army.” Finally, Lachize accuses Schoendoerffer of depicting a well-organized and virtually invincible Viet Minh without acknowledging the secret of its strength, which he identifies as the “virtually unanimous support of the population.”²⁹

The timing of the release of the film likely contributed to its reception as well. The

²⁴ M.C., review of *La 317ème section*, *Le Nouvel-Observateur*, 1 April 1965.

²⁵ Samuel Lachize, “Les éternels vaincus,” *L’Humanité*, 7 April 1965.

²⁶ M.C., review of *La 317ème section*.

²⁷ Jean de Baroncelli, “La 317ème section,” *Le Monde*, 2 April 1965.

²⁸ Lachize, “Les éternels vaincus.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*

10th anniversary of the end of the war was perhaps the first that was granted any kind of public attention. There was a marked increase in media attention to the war from 1959, the year of the 5th anniversary of the war's end, to the 10th in 1964. Articles appeared in newspapers ranging from *Minute* and *Le Figaro* to *Le Monde* and *Combat*. *Cinq colonnes à la une* aired a special episode on 8 May 1964 featuring interviews with Schoendoerffer and Bigeard, which focused primarily on their experience of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu and their reactions to footage of the battle that was presented as having been filmed by the Viet Minh.³⁰ This renewed attention to the war is attributable in part to the expansion of the American involvement in Vietnam in 1963-64. Under Kennedy, the number of American troops in South Vietnam had increased from 800 to 16700.³¹ By the late summer of 1964, Congress had approved more drastic measures, including the bombing of North Vietnam. With this resolution, the Johnson administration had fully committed itself to war. The press certainly drew connections between the two conflicts,³² and Schoendoerffer himself embodied a cinematic link between the conflicts. Sent by *Cinq colonnes à la une* to film the American war, he released the documentary *La Section Anderson (The Anderson Platoon)* in 1967, which subsequently won an Oscar and an Emmy. The American Vietnam War was naturally not the only point of reference for the audience; the Algerian War had drawn to a close only two years earlier. The connections between the two conflicts are drawn implicitly and explicitly. The heroism of soldiers combating an elusive rebel force is evocative of both conflicts, and Schoendoerffer even slips in a reference to the *gégène*,³³ which was pioneered

³⁰ It was later revealed that the footage was in fact the result of a restaging of the battle by Russian director Roman Karmen. The footage itself has appeared in a majority of documentaries and televised news clips since.

³¹ Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 103.

³² See, for example, "Dix ans après Dien Bien Phu. La nouvelle guerre du Vietnam connaît une brusque accélération," *Le Monde*, 6 May 1964.

³³ A form of torture using a radio or other device rewired to generate electric shocks.

in Indochina, but was later associated primarily with the Algerian War. The transition from one colonial war to the next is also made explicitly in the epilogue, in which the narrator states that Willisdorf went on to fight in Algeria, where he was killed.

Ironically, *Figaro* columnist Louis Chauvet's 1964 reaction to Schoendoerffer's film was to wonder if indeed the film had not come too late. "Have the French not gained the necessary spiritual fortitude in the meantime to free themselves from the bad memories of Indochina?"³⁴ As Henri de Turenne's televised documentary series *Vietnam* would demonstrate that the French had most certainly *not* freed themselves from these bad memories, and that in fact they had barely begun to face them. The film aired in January and February 1984,³⁵ and is best understood as a 'flashpoint' of memory akin to the Boudarel affair, though not one of the same order or magnitude. The response to the series was unprecedented in France for a film dealing with the Indochina War. This was due in part to the fact that it was the first extended documentary on the war to be produced in France, but the impact of timing cannot be underestimated. The political context of the early to mid 1980s was characterized by the shift to the left of the government, the reaction of right-wingers to that shift, and the rise in popularity of the National Front. The result on the right and extreme right was renewed emphasis on traditional values, including military ones. Along with the recent state recognition of veterans of Indochina through the burial of the unknown soldier, and the impact of the heavily mediatized plight of the boat-people, the atmosphere was such that veterans felt they could legitimately promote their narrative of the Indochina War, with its emphasis on the evils of communism and the heroism of combatants. 1984 also marked the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the war, an event that was marked by

³⁴ Louis Chauvet, "La 317ème section," *Le Figaro*, 2 April 1965.

³⁵ The first three episodes aired on A2 on January 15th, 22nd and 29th; the second three on February 12th, 19th and 26th.

unprecedented coverage in the press. Although there were no state-sponsored ceremonies, and those organized in Pau by veterans' organizations were closed to the public, the year nonetheless marks a shift toward greater public discussion of the war.

Flashpoint: Henri de Turenne's Vietnam

Vietnam was the result of collaboration between Antenne 2 in France, Central Independent Television in the UK, and PBS in the US.³⁶ There was considerable difference in the final products, however. Whereas the French series featured six episodes divided evenly between the French and American periods, the American series, entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*, featured thirteen episodes of which only two covered the French period. PBS actually began airing the series several months before Antenne 2, beginning in October 1983. The producer of the French series, Henri de Turenne, was a career journalist. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, he was hired by the *Agence France Presse* (AFP) and sent to Berlin and Korea, where his reports for *Le Figaro* were awarded the Albert Londres prize in 1952. In June of 1954, he accompanied Geneviève de Galard from Saigon to Paris, and wrote a series of cover stories for *France-Soir* based on his interviews with the heroine of Dien Bien Phu.³⁷ Turenne had deep family ties with Algeria – his mother's family were *pieds-noirs*, and his father had been posted at the garrison in Alger for four years – and spent considerable time there in his youth. Reflecting on his childhood years later, he admitted to

³⁶ Antenne 2 produced two episodes, Central Independent Television four, and PBS the remaining seven, according to the *New York Times*. See Fox Butterfield, "TV Returns to Vietnam to Dissect the War," *New York Times*, 2 October 1983.

³⁷ The series was entitled "Les jours héroïques de Geneviève de Galard," and appeared in the issues of June 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th, 1954.

believing that it was legitimately part of France.³⁸ He would later cover the Algerian War for *France-Soir*. In the late sixties, he turned to documentaries, gaining recognition for his *Grandes Batailles (Great Battles)* series. Over the span of his career, he produced over a hundred documentaries, including *Vietnam*.

The first three episodes of the French version of *Vietnam* focus on the French colonial era, with a brief survey of the pre-colonial era, and the Indochina War. The final three episodes of the series were focused on the American war, but these prompted far less heated controversy. The depiction of the colonial period in the first episode was quite critical of both colonial authorities and policies, and Turenne presented the first Indochina War as a valiant struggle for independence, though he acknowledged the courage and sacrifice of French troops as well. Although the series received only moderate coverage by the press of the centre and left, reviews by Patrice de Beer of *Le Monde* and others were favourable. Veterans, on the other hand, proved intensely critical of the series, and were supported by some Franco-Vietnamese and the press of the right. Their criticisms stemmed from two major concerns. First, the representation of the colonial era showcased all of the negative aspects of colonialism without illustrating any of the French contributions to ‘progress’ in Indochina. Second, they construed Turenne’s portrayal of the war as a struggle for independence as outright support for communism. The reaction of the ANAI was particularly vehement; as was discussed in Chapter 2, the group engaged in a letter-writing campaign, contributed to the publication of *Indochine: Alerte à l’histoire*, and participated in a ‘TV trial’ of Turenne.

The opening episode of *Vietnam* sets the tone for the rest of the series. Like a number

³⁸ “À voix nue,” special guest Henri de Turenne, part I, *France-culture*, 26 February 2007.

of American historians of Vietnam, Turenne is interested in understanding how the Vietnamese succeeded in overthrowing a succession of occupying powers, from the Chinese to the Americans. Early in the first episode, the audience is presented with a bird's eye view of Vietnamese history from the era of Chinese domination through to the wars of the twentieth century. A voice-over specifies that the Vietnamese had, over the course of several centuries, perfected a system of defence against outside powers, in which the village played a critical role. Turenne also describes the consolidation of Vietnamese control over its current territory according to the standard narrative of a southward movement (*nam tien*). The French system is introduced in terms of its "original sin" and rigid system of control: "[Governor General] Sarraut controls everything, governs everything, regulates everything."³⁹ Evident throughout the episode, Turenne's opinion of the French colonial project is perhaps best illustrated in the juxtaposition of archival footage of Vietnamese workers in a coal mine, who are described by a narrator as volunteers receiving good pay, with Turenne's own evaluation of the dire situation of the workers. Contrary to the claims of the document's narrator, he argues that these 'volunteers' were in fact slaves recruited by force and paid little, whose workplace was closer to a penal colony (*bagne*). The second and third episodes tackle the "forgotten war" and the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The former begins in 1945-46 with the negotiations with Ho Chi Minh, which Turenne identifies as a missed opportunity for a peaceful resolution of the increasing tensions. France, he maintains, missed its chance to "invent" decolonization.⁴⁰ He attributes considerable responsibility to the French for sparking open conflict with the bombing of Haiphong in November 1946.

³⁹ Henri de Turenne, *Vietnam*, Part I, "La perle de l'empire."

⁴⁰ This choice of language is particularly interesting in light of Todd Shepard's recent work on the Algerian War, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Nonetheless, his depiction of the French soldiers who fought what became a terribly long conflict is generous, emphasizing their heroism while targeting the general staff, whom he claims consistently underestimated the enemy. The third episode on the French period deals exclusively with Dien Bien Phu. The most notable (and most criticized) scene is that of the French surrender. Turenne used footage shot by the Soviet filmmaker Roman Karmen, which was not of the actual French surrender but was rather a fictionalized re-enactment using recently captured prisoners of war.⁴¹ His critics were appalled by this inclusion because he had failed to acknowledge that the scenes were staged, and therefore not an accurate representation of the end of the battle, and because he was making use of what amounted to communist propaganda.

Media coverage of the series prior to and during the airing of the first two episodes was well within the range of what might be expected for a televised documentary. Antenne 2 aired a brief interview with Turenne during the midday news, and short articles introducing the series were published in leading dailies like *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *La Croix*. These early reviews were mixed: *Le Monde* reviewer Patrice de Beer applauded the series for not shying away from the “flip side of the ‘civilizing mission’,” all the while qualifying the war as “bloody, absurd and useless.”⁴² *L’Humanité* provided no weekly summaries, but at the series’ conclusion judged it as having been “honest” and “balanced.”⁴³ *Libération* concluded that despite “fascinating” interviews and “amazing” archival footage, Turenne had produced “a series that was lazily chronological and without passion.”⁴⁴ The position of *La Croix* was more nuanced. In addition to publishing an interview with historian Jean-Pierre Rioux on the

⁴¹ This is the same footage that was presented on *Cinq colonnes à la une* in 1964 as being authentic Viet Minh footage of the defeat. See Introduction, 23.

⁴² Patrice de Beer, “Des missionnaires à Dien-Bien-Phu,” *Le Monde*, 8 January 1984.

⁴³ J.M. (Jean Maille?), “Indochine 1949-1954,” *L’Humanité-Dimanche*, 13 May 1984.

⁴⁴ Gérard Lefort, “Histoires nous fait l’Indo,” *Libération*, 14-15 January 1984.

subject of “submerged Vietnam” (*le Vietnam englouti*), the Catholic daily published a review by Noël Darbroz, in which he addressed the absence of a real examination of French cultural and missionary activities, as well as what he terms the “negative, if not masochistic” tone of the series.⁴⁵ Antoine Keomanivong’s summary in *Le Figaro* is more critical of Turenne’s emphasis on the “errors and abuses of the colonial administration,” and characterizes the series as “a panegyric to the Viet Minh and its struggle.”⁴⁶

Reactions grew increasingly heated as the series progressed. *France-Soir* and *Le Figaro* both published weekly summaries of each episode; in the case of the former, the headlines went from relatively benign “A Pamphlet Against Colonialism” (episode 1) to the far more critical “Long Live Ho Chi Minh!” (episode 2) and “Still the Same Disinformation” (episode 4).⁴⁷ By the time the third episode aired, which covered the battle of Dien Bien Phu, reactions from the right wing and veteran press had reached a fevered pitch. Among the most immediate and vehement reactions in France was that of the ANAI, which published a letter to the editor of *Le Monde*. The author stated that “on behalf of all *anciens* of Indochina, I cannot accept that France’s work in Indochina, nor the sacrifices she made, be so grossly distorted: it is an insult to both history and the nation.”⁴⁸ This sentiment was echoed by other veterans, who denounced the series as “Soviet-Marxist propaganda that glorifies the heroes of the Viet Minh”⁴⁹ and charged Turenne with “intellectual dishonesty.”⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Beucler and Geneviève de Galard both published open letters to the filmmaker in the pages

⁴⁵ Noël Darbroz, “Une immense tristesse,” *La Croix*, 14 January 1984.

⁴⁶ Antoine Keomanivong, “Parti pris indochinois,” *Le Figaro*, 14-15 January 1984.

⁴⁷ Louis Baudoin, “Un pamphlet contre le colonialisme,” *France-Soir*, 14 January 1984; “Vive Ho Chi Minh!”, 21 January 1984; “Toujours la désinformation,” 11 February 1984.

⁴⁸ J.F., “L’histoire falsifiée,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1984 no. 1, 2.

⁴⁹ Letter to the editor, *Le Figaro*, February 2 1984.

⁵⁰ Jean-Jacques Beucler, “Le Vietnam sur l’A2: lettre ouverte de Beucler à Henri de Turenne,” *L’Est Républicain*, February 17 1984.

of *Le Figaro*, and Pierre Schoendoerffer published his reactions in both *Le Figaro* and *Paris-Match*. Even Marcel Bigeard weighed in on the debate in an interview with Michel Laurillard of *Le Républicain lorrain*.⁵¹ The reactions of these prominent veterans reflected the standard discourse: Turenne had ignored the ‘noble mission’ of those fighting at Dien Bien Phu to protect the ‘free world’ and the sacrifice of nationalist Vietnamese who fought to save their country from Communist oppression (de Galard); he had presented the war as a colonial one when it was anything but (Schoendoerffer); he had passed off enemy propaganda as ‘real’ footage (de Galard and Beucler), and he was clearly in support of the Viet Minh. Beucler went so far as to say that Turenne should have saved himself the trouble of making the documentary, and simply written “Long Live Ho Chi Minh!” on the screen instead.⁵² That the film had been praised by at least one Vietnamese newspaper only reinforced the belief that Turenne was serving the cause of communism.⁵³ These reactions were reinforced by journalist Brigitte Friang, who referred to the series as a “caricature of history,” and former colonial administrator Jacques Gandouin who attempted to rectify what he saw as Turenne’s omission of the positive French contributions to Indochina.⁵⁴ As a result of the controversy, two requests for a formal rebuttal (*droit de réponse*) were made: the first was a request from Turenne to the editorial staff of *Le Figaro* that he be allowed to respond to the expansive critiques that had been published in the paper, and the second came to Antenne 2 from the

⁵¹ Jean-Jacques Beucler, “Lettre ouverte à Henri de Turenne: Faire du fait avec du vrai,” *Le Figaro*, 24 February 1984; Geneviève de Galard, “Lettre ouverte à Henri de Turenne,” *Le Figaro*, 4-5 February 1984; Pierre Schoendoerffer, “Y en a marre de tous ces mensonges!”, *Figaro-Magazine*, 11 February 1984 and “Trop de sourires pour l’oncle Ho!”, *Paris-Match*, 24 February 1984; Michel Laurillard, “Tout cela est truqué affirme Bigeard,” *Le Républicain Lorrain*, 1 February 1984.

⁵² “Débat spécial Turenne,” A2, 14 May 1984.

⁵³ Lê Tiển, “Bộ phim sử thi truyền hình Việt Nam,” *Quân đội Nhân dân*, 26 August 1983. The episodes aired earlier in the US, as part of the American version, than they did in France.

⁵⁴ Brigitte Friang, “Une caricature de l’histoire,” *Le Figaro*, 24 February 1984. Friang had been a war correspondent in Indochina; Jacques Gandouin, “L’oeuvre de la France,” *Le Figaro*, 30 January 1984. Gandouin was private secretary (*chef de cabinet*) to Émile Bollaert, High Commissioner for Indochina, in 1947-48. He was later named to the Académie des sciences d’outre-mer.

ANAI.

Turenne's letter of response was published on February 13th, opening with a statement of his exasperation with the *Figaro* columnists:

I must protest. Enough is enough. For the last month, *Le Figaro* has taken up the vicious campaign unleashed against my television series. [...]. That my opinions and my talent are criticized, that my mistakes are identified – fine. I will keep quiet. But I refuse to allow my good intentions and my integrity to be undermined.⁵⁵

He dismissed most of his critics' attacks as absurd, but claimed that he was responding because he felt he owed an explanation to those victims of the Communists who had felt wounded or dismissed by his film; he specifically mentions Vietnamese refugees, who have been left "stateless," and soldiers "who were left to rot for eight years in the paddies of Indochina, without giving them the means to win a war that we were resigned to losing."⁵⁶ Turenne goes on to remind his readers of his original goal for the documentary – that is, to reflect on France's missed opportunity for a peaceful decolonization – and to address the more serious criticisms. To each he responds with references to the narrative text and to time allocated to various issues. For example, he counters the claim that he overlooked the positive aspects of colonialism by citing the voice-over from the first episode:

France should be proud. She built cities in the image of a miniature Paris at the ends of the world, like Hanoi with its theatre built in the style of the Garnier Opera... [The companies] greatly increased rice production, and Indochina became the third-largest rice exporter in the world. They introduced the rubber tree, and rubber production that met French needs, never mind the superb tea and coffee plantations...⁵⁷

To refute the second accusation that he granted more time for Vietnamese testimony about Dien Bien Phu than French, he points to the fact that French witnesses have nearly double the speaking time of their Vietnamese counterparts – 8 minutes and 49 seconds as compared to 4 minutes and 28 seconds. These refutations were hardly, however, going to convince his

⁵⁵ Henri de Turenne, "Henri de Turenne répond," *Le Figaro*, 13 February 1984.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

critics, and thus it is his reflections on the willingness of his compatriots to face the past that are most significant. “I thought,” he writes, “that after thirty years – almost two generations – we could examine the events in Indochina with cold and detached eye. I was wrong.” He ultimately concedes that he was wrong to have “thought highly enough of my compatriots to have believed that they were capable of looking the truth in the face. Apparently, some of them were not ready for this painful exercise.”⁵⁸

The second *droit de réponse*, this one emanating from the ANAI, was granted by Antenne 2, which agreed to air a debate between Turenne and his critics on May 14th. Turenne made it clear that he welcomed the opportunity to respond to the criticisms and accusations levelled against him. Hosted by Philippe Labro, the debate featured Jacques Gandouin, Jean-Jacques Beucler, General René de Biré and Professor Vu Quoc Thuc. Gandouin was the first to speak, and his comments encompassed virtually all of the criticisms of Turenne’s detractors:

Sir, as you know, your television series aroused [...] considerable indignation among all those who know Indochina, as well as among the Vietnamese who sought refuge in France. This indignation [...] is prompted by the fact that we believe that your series was an apology for the Viet Minh, which is within your rights, but that was presented as a historical account of the facts. It was full of inaccuracies, errors, and omissions, voluntary or not; in a word, what is commonly referred to as disinformation.⁵⁹

Beucler was much more vicious with his comments, accusing Turenne of using doctored (*truqué*) footage and of brainwashing the audience; he went so far as to affirm that the filmmaker reminded him of the political commissars in the Viet Minh camps. The documentary, Beucler charged, presented the war as a long war of liberation on the part of the Viet Minh, when in fact France was there to protect the population and prepare the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Débat spécial Turenne”

colony for independence. Moreover, he continues, the Viet Minh gained support only through the use of force and intimidation. Thuc, a professor at the University of Paris XII and a former government minister for Ngo Dinh Diem, was confronting Turenne on-air for the second time; the first followed the airing of the last episode in February. Thuc spoke on behalf of the *Comité d'action contre la falsification de l'histoire du Vietnam* (Committee Against the Falsification of Vietnamese History) in that first discussion, and his statements during both interviews shared a similar focus: Turenne had wrongly cast the conflict as one of national liberation rather than a civil war between nationalists and communists. On some levels, the televised exchange between Turenne and his critics is reminiscent of Boudarel's appearance on *Le Droit de savoir* seven years later. Both were, as Pierre Brocheux has argued, televised 'trials'⁶⁰ which pitted the accused against a panel of critics. Boudarel was granted the right to bring an ally, though, while Turenne faced his judges alone. However, Boudarel's critics were undeniably more vicious than Turenne's, and Philippe Labro maintained a much calmer atmosphere as moderator than did Patrick Poivre-d'Arvor. Patrice de Beer, who had favourably reviewed the documentary in *Le Monde* of January 8th and February 11th, described the televised rebuttal as a "strange atmosphere" in which the journalist Turenne "appeared as the accused, alone against four."⁶¹ He went on to criticize the television station for not having defended its programming or the filmmaker. Although he recognized that there were a few minor factual errors in the series, he took issue with Turenne's critics, and Beucler in particular, whose comments he qualified as outright

⁶⁰ Pierre Brocheux, "La mémoire contre l'histoire: l'affaire Boudarel 1991-1997," in *Decolonisations, Loyalties and Nations. Perspectives on the wars of independence in Vietnam, Indonesia, France and the Netherlands*, Amsterdam, 2001.

⁶¹ Patrice de Beer, "La France et l'Indochine: L'honneur d'un journaliste," *Le Monde*, 16 May 1984.

“abuse.”⁶² Citing their most stringent accusation – that Turenne did not celebrate the accomplishments of the French colonial state – de Beer questions whether they would have preferred that the filmmaker also “change the end of the film and make the ‘good guys’ win.”⁶³

The American version of the series elicited a much more mixed response from audiences and critics. It garnered high ratings and positive reviews from many mainstream media sources, and won a variety of awards, including six Emmys, the Dupont/Columbia University Broadcast Journalism award and the George Foster Peabody award, and was also used in classrooms to teach about the Vietnam War. *Focus on Asian Studies* published a special issue entitled “Vietnam: A Teacher’s Guide” to provide additional support for educators, and chief correspondent for the film Stanley Karnow also published a companion book, entitled *Vietnam: A History*.⁶⁴ The series was praised by the *New York Times* for its “meticulously researched and carefully balanced”⁶⁵ approach to the conflict.

However, the series also garnered considerable criticism. As in France, the majority of critics were veterans and members of the Vietnamese community, although the latter was arguably more vocal in the US than in France. Like their French counterparts, American critics moved beyond the pages of the press to demand redress for what they perceived to be a heavily biased depiction of the conflict. While Antenne 2 had agreed to a televised response from a group of critics, PBS agreed to air a second, competing documentary by a group called Accuracy in Media, entitled *Televisions’s Vietnam: The Real Story*. In addition to rectifying some of the ‘errors’ of the PBS series, AIM sought to expose the ways in which

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Vietnam: A Teacher’s Guide,” *Focus on Asian Studies*, special issue, no.1 (1983); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983).

⁶⁵ Fox Butterfield, “TV Returns to Vietnam to Dissect the War,” *New York Times*, 2 October 1983.

media coverage of the war had led to distorted perceptions of American soldiers and strategies.⁶⁶ The collaborative publication *Indochine: Alerte à l'histoire* found its counterpart in James Banerian's *Losers Are Pirates*.⁶⁷ There were, however, significant differences in the objectives of these two publications: the former focuses exclusively on the positive merits of the French colonial project, while the latter presents an examination of the perceived errors of the series episode by episode.

Le Rendez-vous des quais

Five years after the Turenne debacle, the screening of Paul Carpita's 1953 film *Le Rendez-vous des quais* (loosely translated as *Protest on the Docks*) caused a stir in its own right. The film had ostensibly been lost for some 35 years following its seizure by police in 1955, and had only recently been discovered in the film archives at the Bois d'Arcy. It was restored and screened publicly in 1989, prompting considerable fascination from film scholars, who considered it a prime example of neo-realism and the 'missing link' of French film.⁶⁸ The PCF and other antiwar militants applauded its depiction of anticolonial activism, and the public was generally intrigued by this film that had been censored and 'lost'. The small-budget film by the first-time film maker had been shot in the Marseilles docks in 1953, and spent a further two years in production. The production company, Procinex, received a favourable recommendation for a non-commercial license from the accreditation board

⁶⁶ For a more detailed examination of the PBS and AIM documentaries, see Stephen Vlastos, "Television Wars: Representations of the Vietnam War in Television Documentaries," *Radical History Review* 36 (1986), 115-132.

⁶⁷ James Banerian, *Losers Are Pirates: A Close Look at the PBS Series "Vietnam: A Television History"* (Phoenix: Sphinx Publishing, 1985).

⁶⁸ For an examination of whether or not the film can properly be described as neo-realist, see Claude Martino, *'Le Rendez-vous des quais'. Un film de Paul Carpita et ses histoires* (Mallemoisson: Éditions de Provence, 1996).

(*Commission d'agrément*) in April 1955, which represents the first in a two-stage process of acquiring said licence. However, when the request was forwarded to the regulatory board (*Commission de contrôle*) for approval in July 1955, the eventual response in August from the full committee was a denial of the license and of the right to export the film. As film scholar Marc Vernet emphasizes, total prohibition of this sort was extremely rare.⁶⁹ By the time the film was screened publicly, then, it had been denied the license to do so. *Rendez-vous* was screened twice in 1955 for the workers and dockers who had supported and participated in the production process, before being seized by the police.⁷⁰ The official (and rather weak) reason given was that the film “contained scenes of violent resistance to police”⁷¹ and as such constituted a threat to public order. This vague statement could refer to several sets of circumstances, including the recent docker strikes in Nantes and Saint-Nazaire, as well as the more pressing context of the Algerian War.

The film’s importance is two-fold: first, it is one of very few that depicts opposition to the war in France, and the only one to represent the anti-war militancy of the Marseilles dockers. In this respect it is the only film under study that truly represents the narrative of the Indochina War maintained by the PCF and other members of the left and extreme-left. Second, the film was subject to extensive censorship from the production period through to its re-release in 1989. As a result of this censorship, it was the story of the ‘discovery’ of the censored and ‘lost’ reels that captured public attention between 1989 and 1993, when the

⁶⁹ Vernet, “Si Orphée se retourne, Madame Dupont lui sourira,” 100.

⁷⁰ There is some disagreement with respect to the number and site of screenings prior to the seizure; in a televised interview, Carpita claims that there were two screenings, while scholar Marc Vernet claims that the date of the seizure corresponded to at least the third screening. Claude Martino implies that there were numerous screenings, beginning in March-April at the Rex Cinema in Marseilles and followed by screenings in June-July at the Ciné-club Action in Paris. The copy that was seized on October 5th was at the Saint-Lazare Cinema in Marseilles.

⁷¹ Vernet, 94.

film aired on French television for the first time. However, at least one scholar has argued that this narrative is faulty; there is evidence, Marc Vernet argues, that the film was neither lost nor forgotten from 1955 until 1988. All of this adds considerable complexity to the question of censorship, and also raises questions about the public interest in ‘forgotten’ eras of the past.

Featuring an interesting mix of fiction and documentary footage, *Le Rendez-vous des quais* cast non-professional actors, primarily workers from the docks. Filming an antiwar scenario within the Marseilles port in 1953 was impossible,⁷² so Carpita and André Abrias (who played Robert Fournier, and who is also known as André Maufray) approached the authorities and explained that they were schoolteachers who wanted to shoot an educational film.⁷³ This gave them access to the port, although the heavy CRS⁷⁴ presence made it difficult to shoot. In order to maintain the illusion that the subject of their film was harmless, scenes were shot of the actors exchanging banal dialogue, which was later dubbed with the real dialogue in Marcel Pagnol’s Victorine studios. In addition to the scenes filmed in the port and neighbouring districts, Carpita incorporated footage of real events shot by Cinépix, a collective he had helped to form during the Second World War to produce what they called *contre-actualités*, news clips that showed scenes and events that ran counter to the official reports. These ‘counter-news’ clips were originally shown prior to union meetings. Carpita’s self-professed goal, as the son of a docker, was to make a film that defended the dockers and

⁷² Indeed, it would have been difficult to have filmed any fictional scenario in the port during the war, since it was the primary point of departure for troops, weapons and supplies and the point of arrival for returning troops, the dead and the wounded.

⁷³ Interview with Paul Carpita and André Abrias, *La Marche du siècle*, France 3, 13 February 1991.

⁷⁴ The CRS is the *Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité* (Republican Security Company), a branch of the national police force that is mandated to maintain order and undertake surveillance duties.

brought them out of the humiliation they had suffered as a result of the crushing of the mass strikes of 1950 and 1953.⁷⁵

Initially entitled *Le Printemps des hommes*, the story itself is a simple one: a young couple struggles to make ends meet and find an apartment together while embroiled in union politics and strikes, all against the backdrop of the Indochina War. Robert comes from a long line of dockers, but work on the docks has been drying up; his fiancée Marcelle (Jeanine Moretti) works in a cookie factory. Early on in the film, Robert reminisces about the work opportunities right after the Liberation:

It wasn't the work that was lacking after the Liberation. [...] Getting hired every morning was normal. There weren't enough tractors, cranes, arms for all of this work. It was hard, of course, but we hoped to be working towards something. It only lasted two years, despite our efforts. And then the work changed [shot of bags being loaded onto ships fades into loading of canons and tanks]. And at the same time it became harder to get.⁷⁶

Several short scenes later, Robert's brother Jean (Roger Manunta) makes an explicit connection between the decline in available work and the war: "there's only room for their tanks. Kilometres of dock for their dirty war. This morning, hundreds without work."⁷⁷ These antiwar sentiments are echoed by other characters, who move to take action. The actions depicted are, however, limited to a relatively peaceful strike, and the painting of "Peace in Vietnam" on a pier in time for the impending arriving of the *Pasteur*, which was bringing home the dead and the wounded. Several of the women are also seen talking about events for the celebration of Bastille Day and encouraging the men to follow the example of a group of youths, who were planning on marching with pro-peace banners. This is followed by shots of a demonstration, which were actually *contre-actualité* footage shot by Cinépix.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Paul Carpita, *Le Rendez-vous des quais* (Éditions Montparnasse, 1996; originally released 1955).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

While antiwar sentiments are common to the majority of the characters, at least one of Robert's friends is heard complaining about union politics and the war, which he claims "is none of our business."⁷⁸ A second scene in which several characters are discussing the war, the strikes and the arrival of the *Pasteur* reveals that not all of the dockers are in agreement about the connection between the war and the lack of work. One character, Jo (Albert Mannac), is overheard saying that "we stop working for the slightest things," but that "people want to explain everything by the Indochina War."⁷⁹ Jo's unwillingness to support antiwar activism and strikes becomes an increasingly significant obstacle for Jean, who is the leading militant of the group. While the others are on strike, Jo tells Robert that he is going back to work. While initially it appears that Carpita is allowing for divergent opinions within the dockers, it becomes clear that Jo is not merely a dissenting voice, but actually working for management against the strikers. In particular, he puts considerable pressure on Robert to return to work and to oppose the strike organized by Jean, hoping to disrupt the latter's efforts; ultimately, Robert discovers Jo's double game, slaps him and heads off to join the strikers, who are facing off with the police. Thus, the unanimous antiwar militancy of the dockers is maintained as a moral standard, one that has been upheld by the PCF in the decades since the release of the film.

Along with individual heroes like Henri Martin and Raymonde Dien, the dockers held a position of prominence in the anticolonial narrative of the party; by 1950, according to Jacques Dalloz, the docker had replaced the miner in the "communist Pantheon."⁸⁰ While there were several incidents involving dockers refusing to load war materiel, the strikes of

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Dalloz, *Dictionnaire de la guerre d'Indochine, 1945-54* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 84.

1950 in the port of Marseilles were the most significant, lasting some forty days. Former docker Alfred Pacini, who co-wrote his memoirs with Dominique Pons, describes the scenes as follows:

There were protests in the Canebière [the neighbourhood around the port] and strikes everywhere – in the textile and chemical plants, at the SNCF [the French national railway], among the sailors. For example, they impeded the departure of the *Pasteur*, with 4000 soldiers on board. [...] The sailors are walking off the job, everyone is walking off the job, coffins continued to arrive from Vietnam. At the CNASE, a munitions factory, the CRS charged at the workers, who were refusing to build Vampire bombers. There were 5 wounded, one of whom was in critical condition.⁸¹

Pacini also addresses other measures of antiwar protest undertaken by the dockers, and their reasons for doing so. He mentions distributing leaflets to soldiers boarding the *Pasteur* and other ships, and even engaging them in conversations about the war and their role in it. While opposition to the war was the guiding principle, Pacini also frames his position as being in support of the soldiers, to the degree that he believed that they were dying for an unjust cause, and that those who returned in coffins were not given due reverence. He describes coffins being left wherever they ended up on the docks, “like ordinary merchandise,” without so much as a proper military guard.⁸² This image of the dockers as heroes has not gone unchallenged. The dockers, along with other antiwar militants in Marseilles in particular, have been much maligned by veterans. The latter claim that they were the targets of verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse upon their return to France at the hands of the dockers and other protesters.

The support of the PCF, despite being somewhat underwhelming (it supplied the film reels and the camera), seemed natural given the prominence of the docker in recent party mythology and the anticolonial and pro-solidarity messages of the film. However, this

⁸¹ Alfred Pacini and Dominique Pons, *Docker à Marseille* (Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1996), 75-76.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 125.

backing vanished with the seizure of the reels. There was some support expressed by local party members, but virtually nothing from Paris; interviewer Jean-Marie Cavada described it as a case of “abandonment.”⁸³ Marc Vernet underlines two possible factors for this lack of support: first, the potential impact of the film was significantly reduced due to the fact that the war was over. It was no longer current, in other words. Second, the anticolonial message of the film was perhaps somewhat awkward for the party, given that its position on the Indochina War was significantly different from that on the Algerian War. While the party had unequivocally opposed the former, especially since 1947, it had initially favoured a French Algeria, supporting independence only later. Thus, although the anticolonial message of the film clearly referred to Indochina, it made the PCF’s position vis-à-vis the Algerian War somewhat uncomfortable.⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, the party glossed over its lack of support for Carpita when the film’s re-release offered the opportunity to remind the public of its anticolonialism. One of the first screenings of the film in 1989 was sponsored by the PCF in the context of its Festival 89; prominent PCF member Guy Hermier took the opportunity to remind the audience that “with this screening, we simply want to demonstrate that the PCF contributed to the preservation of the original version of Carpita’s film from the effects of time and censorship.”⁸⁵

Media coverage of the discovery of the film in 1988 and its public re-release in 1989 was characterized by the leitmotiv of memory and forgetting. *L’Express* described it as “the

⁸³ *La Marche du siècle*, France 3, 13 February 1991.

⁸⁴ Claude Martino challenges this explanation, maintaining that since the Algerian “events” had begun in November 1954, the party could have halted production on the film, but did not. Moreover, he argues that once the party withdrew support from Guy Mollet in January 1957, the film once again coincided with the party line, yet there was no call to lift the prohibition. However, this line of argument presupposes that the film was considered to be significant enough by the party to warrant either of these actions.

⁸⁵ Claudine Galéa, “Moteur: la vie qu’on vit,” *L’Humanité*, 22 July 1989.

film no one was able to watch,” which was finally “emerging from the shadows,”⁸⁶ while *L'Événement du jeudi* emphasized that it had been “a forbidden film for thirty-five years.”⁸⁷ Its first public screening in February 1990 was thus a public “resurrection,” both of the film itself and of the particular moment in the history of the working class that it represented.⁸⁸ Even five years after the discovery of the reels, this tantalizing language of censorship and prohibition continued to characterize descriptions of the film. *L'événement du jeudi* titled its synopsis of the film “Rendez-vous interdit” when it aired on French television for the first time in 1993. As titillating as this narrative of lost film is, it has been undermined by Marc Vernet in several ways. First, he has found evidence that two copies of the film were given to the film archives by the National Centre of Cinematography (*Centre national de la cinématographie*) in 1968, which raises the question of where the second copy originated, given that only one was seized in 1955. Moreover, both film reels were some 300 metres shorter than that seized in 1955. The deposit of the negatives of the film reel in the film archives in 1979 by Procinex raises further questions about the role of the company in concealing the film. The final evidence marshalled by Vernet is the fact that Carpita had signed a deal in 1982 to buy back the rights to the film, suggesting that someone, somewhere knew that the film had not been destroyed, and might even have been aware of its location. So how can the path of this mysterious film be explained? Vernet argues that multiple degrees of censorship were at work: official censorship, of course, but also self-censorship on the part of Carpita, and censorship on the part of the PCF, whose political line was no longer reflected by the film it had initially supported.

⁸⁶ Dominique de Saint Pern, “Le film que personne n’a pu voir,” *L'Express*, 9 February 1990, 122.

⁸⁷ Michel Boujut, “‘Le Rendez-vous des quais’: un film interdit pendant trente-cinq ans,” *L'Événement du jeudi*, 22 February 1990.

⁸⁸ Edouard Waintrop, “Le deuxième ‘Rendez-vous des quais’,” *Libération*, 13 February 1990.

Several years after Vernet's analysis was published, Claude Martino presented new information surrounding the film's seizure and disappearance. He clarifies that Carpita, far from thinking his film was lost for 35 years, had asked that the prohibition on the film be lifted in 1957, a request that was denied due to the circumstances of the Algerian War. In 1979, the negatives of the film were given to the film archives by Unicité, the PCF body responsible for film and audiovisual material. Between 1957 and 1979, however, Unicité had failed to tell Carpita that it had the negatives in its possession. In 1981-82, Carpita actually found the copy that had been seized in Marseilles at the film archives. Thus, the film was actually not lost for the whole period from 1955 to 1989, although the idea that it had been certainly helped generate publicity upon its re-release. With respect to the length of the film and the missing segments (some 12 minutes of footage), Martino suggests that some of the editing was undertaken by Procinex in order to make it more suitable for screenings in Communist film clubs (*ciné-clubs*) – this included a scene showing Robert working as a scab. Such a scene, Martino argues, would have been unthinkable for audiences who had paid dearly for their involvement in the strikes.⁸⁹ In addition, he suggests that some of the editing took place with Carpita's knowledge between the screening of the original film for the authorities, and the screening of an edited version that was seized in October.⁹⁰

Despite these inconsistencies, the myth surrounding the film has been maintained. Vernet's arguments, published in *Cinémathèque* and thus not destined for a broader audience, have not ultimately changed public perceptions. This fascination with the 'forgotten' film is unsurprising, given that the story was breaking at a time when interest in history and memory was gaining momentum. It is, however, interesting to note that the film did not prompt much

⁸⁹ Martino, 137.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138-141.

in the way of discussions about the memory of the Indochina War itself, at least in the press. The focus was much more on the film as both an early example of neo-realism and the ‘missing link’ in French film, as well as on its ‘forbidden’ status. It would take the trio of films released in 1991-92 to prompt public discussions about the colonial project and the Indochina War that have become familiar territory in previous chapters.

1992: L’Amant, Diên Biên Phu and Indochine

L’Amant, Diên Biên Phu and *Indochine* were released in rapid succession between January and April 1992. Touted as the “return of the repressed”⁹¹ and French film’s rediscovery of Indochina,⁹² this cinematic trio can be considered to be a high point of filmic representations of the former colony and the war of decolonization. Film critic Anne Andreu argued that

Our filmmakers did not appear to suffer from an Indochinese syndrome until last year, when the opening of the borders of Vietnam suddenly liberated collective memory. All at once, this led to the great return of the repressed in the profession; Indochina was in the air, and a number of directors were seized with the obsession of revisiting our Asian past on the grand airs of bad conscience or nostalgia.⁹³

At the time, many columnists and film reviewers considered this to be the beginning of a new period of interest in Indochina; however, there have been few films devoted to the colonial era or the war since, with the notable exceptions of Pierre Schoendoerffer’s *Là-Haut, un roi au dessus des nuages* (*Above the Clouds*, 2003) and Rithy Panh’s remake of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*, 2008). All three were big-budget films that performed well at the box office, though *Diên Biên Phu* rapidly trailed off by the fourth week in

⁹¹ Jean-Pierre Léonardini, “Retour du refoulé,” *L’Humanité*, 4 March 1992.

⁹² Caroline Jurgenson, “Le cinéma français redécouvre l’Indochine,” *Le Figaro*, 16 December 1992, 14.

⁹³ Andreu, “Cinéma français: la reconquête de l’Indochine.”

theatres.⁹⁴ All three were also nominated or won a variety of awards: the score of *Diên Biên Phu* was nominated for a César, while *Indochine* won multiple Césars as well as the Golden Globe and Oscar for Best Foreign Film. *L'Amant*, for its part, won a César and was nominated for an Oscar. Of the three, only *Diên Biên Phu* addresses the war as a central theme; however, taken together, the films are evidence of a nostalgia for empire and the exoticism of the 'Far East.' Filmed to showcase the height of empire, *L'Amant* and *Indochine* are most marked by this nostalgia. The press evoked the "monsoon of emotions"⁹⁵ of the "dream of empire"⁹⁶ with respect to these films. Though centred on the military defeat, *Diên Biên Phu* is also staged as the "end of a dream." Panivong Norindr emphasizes the characterization of the colonial relationship between France and Indochina as a 'romance' or 'love affair';⁹⁷ these affective bonds are celebrated in the 1992 films, particularly in *L'Amant* and *Indochine*, although Schoendoerffer also described his work as a "film of love."⁹⁸

The three films have very little in common in terms of plot: *Diên Biên Phu* chronicles the battle and ultimate defeat of the French forces, while *L'Amant* chronicles the relationship between a (white) French adolescent girl and a wealthy Chinese businessman. *Indochine* is an epic tale of the relationship between a female French plantation owner and her adopted Vietnamese daughter set against the backdrop of economic crisis in the 1930s and the rapidly shifting dynamics between colonizer and colonized. What, then, do these films have in common? All three are set in Indochina (of the 1920s through to 1954), but the setting is much more than a backdrop. The landscape became a studio, enhancing the plots with lush

⁹⁴ "Les entrées à Paris," *Le Monde*, 2 April 1992.

⁹⁵ Claude-Jean Philippe, "'Indochine'. Une mousson d'émotions," *France-Soir*, 18 April 1992.

⁹⁶ Guy Gauthier, "Indochine, rêve d'Empire," *La Revue du Cinéma*, no. 483 (1992).

⁹⁷ Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 132.

⁹⁸ Interview with Pierre Schoendoerffer. Alan Riou, "Schoendoerffer: Si je t'oublie, Indochine...", *Le Nouvel-Observateur*, 27 February 1992, 20.

jungles, rice paddies and colonial architecture. As Andreu contended, the three filmmakers “found, through this return to Indochina, an endless source of dreams and adventures.”⁹⁹ Moreover, this ‘return’ was not only artistic in nature, but quite literally a return of the French to Vietnamese territory. Aside from Schoendoerffer’s filming of *La Section Anderson*, no French filmmaker (or American, for that matter) had released a film set in Vietnam that had been filmed on location since Camus’ *Mort en fraude*.

Each of these works is shaped by ‘memory,’ on both personal and collective levels. *Diên Biên Phu* is informed by Schoendoerffer’s personal experiences during that battle,¹⁰⁰ but is also a requiem for a lost colony. *L’Amant*, based on Marguerite Duras’ semi-autobiographical novel of the same name, clearly influenced by her own memories of the colony.¹⁰¹ Finally, *Indochine* is framed by the protagonist’s narration of the plot through flashback, as Éliane tells her grandson Étienne of his mother’s life. The memorial aspect of these films goes beyond plot devices and framework to include an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. *L’Amant* and *Indochine* depict a bygone era permeated by exoticism, while *Diên Biên Phu*’s secondary storyline is essentially a farewell to empire.

The nostalgia of *L’Amant* and *Indochine* is intertwined with a fascination for the exotic and the erotic. The ‘exotic’ landscapes were central to this fascination; Anne Andreu identified the two stars of *Indochine* as being Catherine Deneuve and the Vietnamese

⁹⁹ Andreu, “Cinéma français: la reconquête de l’Indochine.”

¹⁰⁰ Schoendoerffer himself insists that the film is not based on personal memories in *Diên Biên Phu: de la bataille au film* (Paris: Lincoln: Fixot, 1992); however, the film is undoubtedly shaped by his own experiences. He also cast his son, Ludovic, as an army cinematographer – a wink to his own role in the battle.

¹⁰¹ In fact, Duras was so unhappy with Annaud’s adaptation of her novel that she wrote a screenplay of her own, published as *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The same story is at the heart of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L’Amant*, and this third book, although details such as the ethnicity of the lover do change. Duras’ falling out with Annaud was quite widely publicized.

landscape.¹⁰² Each film features ‘familiar’ colonial sites: the Continental hotel, Catinat street, Halong Bay, and the legionnaires’ bar, where soldiers and others drink cognac-soda, the colonial cocktail *par excellence*. The nostalgia for these colonial sites is matched by a fascination with the ‘ancient’ qualities of the people and rituals. This fascination is a softer echo of colonial ideology, which viewed the ancient societies of the colonized territory as being suspended in time, and as therefore necessitating French guidance in order to modernize. This is not to suggest that these films were promoting or justifying a civilizing mission, but there are certainly similarities between the depiction of the royal funeral in *Indochine* and the Chinese marriage ceremony in *L’Amant*. These films arguably have more in common with the fantasies of colonial cinema than a postcolonial re-evaluation of the colonial project.¹⁰³ Both Gérard Lefort and filmmaker Danièle Rousselier commented on this lack of re-evaluation; the former argued that “any film (worthy of the name) on the French ‘presence’ in Vietnam should provoke debate, an uproar, or at least discomfort. Instead: three big pieces of feeble consensus.”¹⁰⁴ In order to explore these common themes, I would like to offer a brief overview of each film and its reception by the public, interest groups and critics. Given that these films have been extensively analyzed by film critics and scholars alike, this treatment will focus on those aspects of the films that are directly relevant to broader questions of the memories of war and empire.

Pierre Schoendoerffer’s objectives for *Diên Biên Phu* were twofold: to pay homage to his fallen comrades, and to foster a renewal of ties between France and Vietnam. While the

¹⁰² Andreu, “Cinéma français: la reconquête de l’Indochine.”

¹⁰³ Alison Murray-Levine makes this argument with respect to *Indochine* and two other films set in a colonial context: *Chocolat* and *Outremer*. See Alison Murray-Levine, “Women, Nostalgia, Memory: ‘Chocolat’, ‘Outremer’, and Indochine,” *Research in African Literatures*, 33 no. 2 (summer 2002), 237.

¹⁰⁴ Lefort, “La France occupée par l’Indochine”; Danièle Rousselier, “Cinéma,” *Bulletin de l’Association d’amitié franco-vietnamienne*, 1992 no. 3, 14-15.

former is the same objective he claimed for *La 317^e Section*, the latter was clearly new. He also suggested that the film was an exorcism of sorts – a “farewell to Indochina.”¹⁰⁵ Although he was initially reticent to film on location, Schoendoerffer eventually sought and received permission from the Vietnamese government to film on site in 1989, and the project later became a joint initiative, with the support of the French Ministry of Defence and the participation of the French and Vietnamese militaries. In 1993, Schoendoerffer accompanied French president François Mitterrand to Dien Bien Phu as part of the latter’s tour of Vietnam and Cambodia, the first for a French president (or Western head of state) since the end of the Indochina War. This was a landmark event by all accounts, and the fact that Schoendoerffer was permitted to accompany Mitterrand leads Norindr to conclude that his film was granted greater political legitimacy as a result.¹⁰⁶ On the contrary, I would argue that Schoendoerffer’s presence lent greater legitimacy to Mitterrand’s presence at Dien Bien Phu, given his positions as one of the most prominent authorities on the war.¹⁰⁷

The film opens on March 13th on a hill overlooking the camp at Dien Bien Phu; two French soldiers are smoking a cigarette and discussing the military situation, thus introducing the primary storyline of the film. The secondary plot is revealed through the transition to a scene in Hanoi, where American writer Howard Simpson (Donald Pleasance) is on his way to the press headquarters. The rest of the film alternates between Dien Bien Phu and Hanoi, where the storyline centres on the arrival of a French violinist to play with the Hanoi symphony orchestra. The ebbs and flows of French success in the battle are reflected in a

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Pierre Schoendoerffer, *Journal de 20 heures*, Antenne 2, 1 March 1992.

¹⁰⁶ Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, 150.

¹⁰⁷ He was also the only one of the three who agreed to return to Vietnam – both Geneviève de Galard and Marcel Bigeard declined, although the latter would eventually go on his own well-documented return visit.

series of bets placed with a Chinese bookie.¹⁰⁸ The last days of the battle are paralleled by the orchestra's performance of George Delerue's *Farewell Concerto* (*Concerto de l'adieu*). Schoendoerffer's farewell to Indochina was thus not a subtle message; the French violinist was intended to represent the voice of France, and the orchestra that of Vietnam.¹⁰⁹

Schoendoerffer's focus on the experiences of the common soldier is reminiscent of *La 317^e Section*; both films celebrate the heroism and courage of the French forces and their allies, though the latter have a stronger presence in the earlier film than in *Diên Biên Phu*. Moreover, he explicitly opts not to engage fully with questions of political or military responsibility.¹¹⁰ He does, however, make some pointed commentary through his characters. One soldier voices Schoendoerffer's criticism of the failure of the leadership: "a soldier hates to be sent to his death for nothing, because of stupidity, because of incompetence, because of spinelessness. It disgusts us."¹¹¹ This statement could be read as a criticism of the military or political leadership, or both. Toward the end of the battle, troops are ordered to destroy the artillery and drop back, leading to a more open criticism of the command as one soldier responds: "what a bunch of idiots. They think it's hopeless. Blow up my canons? For the first time in my career as a soldier, I refuse to obey an order."¹¹² The most critical statements, however, are not made by a member of the French forces, but by the Chinese bookie (speaking to Howard Simpson):

¹⁰⁸ The depiction of Vietnamese as avid gamblers is a standard colonial stereotype. Significantly, it is one that carried over into the repatriate camps as a subject of considerable criticism and concern from camp administrators.

¹⁰⁹ Pierre Schoendoerffer, Jean Noli and Patrick Chauvel, *Diên Biên Phu: de la bataille au film* (Paris: Lincolnd: Fixot, 1992), 127.

¹¹⁰ He confirmed this in an interview with Vincent Rémy in *Télérama*, 4 March 1992.

¹¹¹ Pierre Schoendoerffer, *Diên Biên Phu* (1992).

¹¹² *Ibid.*

See this guy Bigeard, he sends these people, his soldiers, to their deaths, and they're the only people he likes. [...] And for what? For who? People he doesn't like, people he hates, people he looks down on. Speculators, mediocre politicians, everyone, me, you, Mr. Simpson. It's a bizarre situation, really too strange. How do you say it? A paradox, that's it, a paradox.¹¹³

These scenes, along with the majority of the battle scenes, serve to reinforce the standard narrative of heroic soldiers abandoned by their country. Schoendoerffer's second goal, that of renewing ties with the Vietnamese people (though not with the government, of which he disapproved), was to be accomplished primarily through collaboration on the production of the film itself, as well as through the fraternization between Vietnamese and French soldiers, who played the roles of the Viet Minh and the expeditionary corps respectively. His attempt to restore ties between the two peoples is revealed through his script as well: a conversation between Howard Simpson and a Vietnamese newspaper editor by the name of Mr. Vinh leads the latter to state that "our struggle for national independence is not about resistance to French culture. [...] I like Victor Hugo, French philosophers, and I also like drinking red wine."¹¹⁴ The military consultant for the film, Colonel Jacques Allaire, claimed that "there are great affinities between the Vietnamese and French people, an ancient and relatively similar history, a real complicity. The shooting of this film is contributing to reconciliation."¹¹⁵

This emphasis on the cooperation between colonizer and colonized (as well as between French and indigenous troops) is a particularly interesting one, given that it is often reflected in the narrative of the war maintained by veterans and the political right.

Schoendoerffer himself describes colonialism in Vietnam as being "an encounter between

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Jean-Luc Macia, "Dien Bien Phu, notre 'Apocalypse Now'," *La Croix*, 6 March 1992.

two ancient civilizations” rather than as “a colonial power in the midst of a desert.”¹¹⁶ The differences in perception of the relationship between French and indigenous soldiers is made glaringly apparent in a documentary based on footage shot during Schoendoerffer’s return to Hanoi to present the finished film, where he was accompanied by eight other French veterans. In one scene, a veteran asks a Vietnamese (possibly Meo) man what memories he has of the French presence:

“What memories do you have of the French presence here? What lasting memories?
(Long pause as the man fumbles for a reply). But we were friends!

“You were the masters, and we were the servants.”

“Not masters, exactly...”

“Yes, yes. But you did a lot for us.”¹¹⁷

Reactions to the film from critics and the general public were mixed. *France-Soir*, the *Figaro* and *Figaro-Magazine* were quite positive in their reaction, the latter deeming it a “masterpiece.”¹¹⁸ *Képi blanc*, the Foreign Legion’s monthly magazine, initially gave a positive review of the “magisterial” way in which Schoendoerffer brought the sacrifices of the soldiers to life,¹¹⁹ but a later article took issue with the fact that the filmmaker failed to take a definite stand on any of the critical issues: “we would have liked to have known his point of view, heard him decry France’s abandonment of the people of Vietnam, the mistakes of the army general staff in Hanoi, or express a longing for the colonial paradise; in short, that he say something.”¹²⁰ Other evaluations from the press ranged from deeming it a “semi-

¹¹⁶ Pierre Schoendoerffer, Jean Noli and Patrick Chauvel, *Diên Biên Phu: de la bataille au film* (Paris: Lincolnd: Fixot, 1992), 120.

¹¹⁷ “Retour à Dien Bien Phu,” TF1, 6 February 1993.

¹¹⁸ Patrice de Plunkett, “Le caporal de l’armée morte,” *Figaro-magazine*, 15 February 1992, 57.

¹¹⁹ “Dien Bien Phu,” *Képi blanc*, March 1992, 56.

¹²⁰ “Diên Biên Phu,” *Képi blanc*, May 1992, 54-55.

successful monument”¹²¹ to “a very long monument of boredom.”¹²² The *Canard enchaîné* criticized the film for depicting the battle of Dien Bien Phu without telling the audience anything about the Indochina War.¹²³ Norindr takes this further, comparing *Diên Biên Phu* with American films about the Vietnam War like *Apocalypse now* and arguing that while the latter make a point of revealing the absurdity of war, the former does not engage with this dimension of futility, nor does it reveal the motivations or responsibilities for it,¹²⁴ an oversight for which it “should have been criticized severely.” In drawing these conclusions, however, Norindr appears to miss the point concerning Schoendoerffer’s own interpretation of the war (as one that was perhaps badly managed, but that was unquestionably a war that needed to be fought) and the fact that the goal of the film was to depict the common soldier’s experience.

The reaction from veterans was generally positive, but there was some debate prompted by the criticisms of a vocal minority in the pages of the *Figaro*. The film premiered on March 4th, and by March 10th the second page of the newspaper was devoted to responses and letters to the editor. The letters to the editor cover a wide spectrum of reactions; some clarified what they saw as critical details, such as the French ‘recognition’ of Vietnamese independence in 1947-48, or the alleged treatment of the wounded arriving in Marseilles by communist protesters. Others praised Schoendoerffer for exposing viewers to the ‘real’ “war without a name.” One reader questioned “what masochistic instinct pushes the French to celebrate their defeats and humiliations.”¹²⁵ This proved to be only the beginning: the letters

¹²¹ Macia, “Dien Bien Phu, notre ‘Apocalypse Now’.”

¹²² Bill Chernaude, “Cinéma,” *Libération*, 4 March 1992.

¹²³ Patrice Vautier, “Diên Biên Phu (Au feu, aux fous!),” *Le Canard enchaîné*, 4 March 1992.

¹²⁴ Norindr, 147-149.

¹²⁵ “Courrier des lecteurs,” *Le Figaro*, 10 March 1992. In a lengthier letter entitled “Pourquoi nous combattions,” Bernard Magnillat-Rapp challenges the idea that the fall of Dien Bien Phu brought about the end

to the editor of March 17th and 27th were exclusively devoted to the debate over the film, and Max Clos gave considerable space to the topic in his weekly column.¹²⁶ The edition of March 26th featured a full page on “the great debate” over the film, which included testimony from four prominent veterans, including Marcel Bigeard and Geneviève de Galard.¹²⁷ The most prominent criticisms centred on the depiction of the soldiers and the military command. General Hervé Trapp’s commentary, published in the *Figaro* of March 20th, lambasted:

[The soldiers] were not oafish gravediggers or clumsy stretcher-bearers, panicked and floundering, shamelessly manhandling the dying. [...] Contrary to what you imply, they were led by honourable commanders, [...] not left to their own devices or to the fantasy of a few vapid officers that you depict in your film.¹²⁸

In addition to the coverage of reviews and reactions to the film, there was a considerable mobilization of print and television media around the topic of the war. Special issues of magazines and journals, like *Historia*, were published to coincide with the release of the film. A virtual “televised offensive”¹²⁹ was aired during the month of March, including a special episode of *Bouillon de culture* featuring Schoendoerffer and Bigeard, Danièle Rousselier’s two-part documentary *Vietnam, la première guerre* (*Vietnam, The First War*), Yves and Ada Rémy’s *La mémoire et l’oubli* (*Memory and Forgetting*) and Patrick Jeudy’s *Récits d’Indochine* (*Tales from Indochina*).¹³⁰

In much the same way that *Diên Biên Phu* was an epic drama that ultimately reinforced the standard narrative of the war, *Indochine* and *L’Amant* were visually stunning

of colonialism, arguing that Vietnam had been independent since 1947.

¹²⁶ March 20th and 27th.

¹²⁷ Valérie Duponchelle, “‘Diên Biên Phu’: le grand débat,” and “Pour ou contre: des acteurs du drame témoignent,” *Le Figaro*, 26 March 1992.

¹²⁸ “Pour ou contre: des acteurs du drame témoignent,” *Le Figaro*, 26 March 1992.

¹²⁹ The phrase is that of Colette Boillon, “L’offensive télévisuelle,” *La Croix* 5 March 1992.

¹³⁰ *Bouillon de culture*, A2, March 1st; Danièle Rousselier *Vietnam, la première guerre*, A2, March 1st and 8th; Patrick Jeudy, *Récits d’Indochine*, TF1, March 6th; Yves and Ada Rémy, *La mémoire et l’oubli*, FR3, March 19th.

films set in the colonial era that failed to challenge assumptions about colonialism itself. Of the two, *Indochine* was far more evocative of the colonial relationship; while the success of *L'Amant* was undoubtedly due in large part to the exotic setting, this setting was ultimately the backdrop for the torrid love affair between the two protagonists. Much like the novel on which it is based, *L'Amant* is virtually devoid of Vietnamese or other indigenous characters, except as servants, peddlers and other background figures. *Indochine*, on the other hand, features a broader array of characters, and seeks to depict the colonial relationship between France and Vietnam through the lens of the familial relationship between French settler Éliane Devries (Catherine Deneuve) and her adopted Vietnamese daughter Camille (Linh Dan Pham). In a symbolic relationship akin to Schoendoerffer's symphony, Éliane represents France, Camille represents Vietnam, and the adoption is the metaphor for colonialism.¹³¹ The casting of Catherine Deneuve is all the more apt given her role in the 1980s as the model for Marianne, symbol of the French republic. Éliane is, however, a self-described 'Asiate,' and thus arguably embodies 'French Indochina' more than France itself, a country she has never seen.¹³² Joel David carries the metaphor through to Camille's son, Étienne, arguing that he represents the part of Vietnam that the French brought home;¹³³ this is particularly appropriate given Étienne's mixed Franco-Vietnamese heritage.

It is to Étienne that Éliane tells the story that is the plot of the film, although the audience is not aware of this until close to the end. The opening scene is that of the royal funeral for Camille's parents, who are close friends of Éliane's. She adopts the child, raising her as her own. Éliane essentially runs her family's rubber plantation, and faces considerable

¹³¹ Anne Andreu quotes Wagnier on this topic in "Cinéma français: la reconquête de l'Indochine."

¹³² This is the same term that Marguerite Duras, who was born and raised in Indochina, used to describe herself.

¹³³ Joel David, "*Indochine* and the Dynamics of Gender," Asia Culture Forum (2006), 264.

difficulties due to the economic crisis of the 1930s. Crisis soon strikes her personal life as well, when she falls in love with a French naval officer who later becomes the object of Camille's affections. Against the backdrop of growing Vietnamese nationalism and colonial instability, Camille sets off on a northward trek to find Jean-Baptiste. They are reunited, but quickly become fugitives when Camille kills one of the French officers running a slave auction. Camille gives birth to their son while in hiding, and both fugitives are eventually caught. Camille is sent to the island penitentiary of Poulo Condore, and Jean-Baptiste entrusts the baby to Éliane before committing suicide. When Camille is released from prison as part of the Popular Front's amnesty program, she leaves her son with Éliane in order to commit herself fully to the Viet Minh. The closing scene is set in Geneva in 1954, where Éliane has brought Étienne to meet his mother, now a member of the Vietnamese delegation to the peace conference; he opts not to go through with it, telling Éliane "you are my mother now."

Indochine was criticized for what was perceived by some to be a negative, or at least problematic, depiction of colonialism. However, the film reinforces more traditional depictions of colonialism than it undermines. The scenes in which Jean-Baptiste sets fire to a sampan he believes is transporting contraband, the slave auction intended to furnish southern plantation owners with workers, as well as Camille's experience on the prison island of Poulo Condore (which is alluded to, though never depicted), are certainly not rosy visions of the colonial system. However, Éliane is depicted as a largely sympathetic character; indeed, the audience is virtually forced to identify with her as the first voice and narrator of the film. She acts in the best interests of her daughter, subscribing to local custom and arranging a proper marriage for her to a young Vietnamese intellectual. She seeks to provide decent

living and working conditions for ‘her’ coolies. The destructive or corrupt actions of the French colonial regime are imputed to a few ‘bad’ or ignorant characters, such as the chief of police Guy Asselin, rather than to her. Even when she is shown whipping one of the plantation workers, she asks him whether he “think[s] a mother likes beating her children.”¹³⁴ The implication is that French actions, even when violent, were based in paternalism and a belief in the betterment of the colony. As Delphine Robic-Diaz states, it is a case of “responsible but not guilty;” at most, the film criticizes the principle of an authoritarian colonial system, not those who participated in it.¹³⁵ Moreover, the colonial relationship as a fundamentally affective one is reinforced by the depiction of France as a devoted mother.

The film’s opening scene sets a tone similar to that of *Diên Biên Phu*’s theme of farewell to empire; the funeral is not only that of the royal couple, but “a macabre apotheosis, a sombre finale that mourns a world on the verge of disappearing.”¹³⁶ Despite the negative aspects of colonialism that are depicted, the overall impression of the film is one of nostalgia for that era. Wagnier and Deneuve both made comments in the media that are coloured by nostalgia, and echo colonial discourse about the static, unchanging nature of the ancient civilizations of conquered territories. Wagnier described Halong Bay, with its fishermen and sampans, as being straight out of the Middle Ages;¹³⁷ for her part, Deneuve expressed her enchantment with Vietnam in these terms: “there is something so archaic and spiritual in this country; it’s as if I had been in a virgin land.”¹³⁸ Wagnier had a personal connection with the former colony through his father, who had served in the expeditionary corps, but denied that

¹³⁴ Régis Wagnier, *Indochine*, 1992.

¹³⁵ Delphine Robic-Diaz, “Mémoires d’Indochine: Étude de la représentation cinématographique du colonialisme français en Indochine,” DEA thesis, Université de Paris X Nanterre (2001), 2.

¹³⁶ Benjamin Stora, *Imaginaires de guerre. Algérie-Viêt Nam en France et aux États-unis* (Paris, La Découverte, 1997), 247. Stora was actually the historical consultant on the film.

¹³⁷ Andreu, “Cinéma français: la reconquête de l’Indochine.”

¹³⁸ Laurence Melville, “Vietnam studios,” *Présence du cinéma français*, March-April 1992, 35.

his characters were deliberately shaped by nostalgia.¹³⁹ Film critic Thierry Jousse takes the analysis of colonial nostalgia even further, contending that the most tangible impact of the latter is that the film actually replicates the treatment of Indochina in film 40 years earlier – in other words, it is “the exact replica of a style of film that they just don’t make anymore.”¹⁴⁰

A number of viewers had the opposite reaction, however, taking issue with what they perceived to be an unfairly negative portrayal of colonialism. One letter to the editor of the *Figaro* attacked the depiction of colonialism as “perfectly odious,” arguing that it was no wonder that the Vietnamese government facilitated the shooting of the film given that “[the filmmakers] made the propaganda film that even they [the Vietnamese authorities] wouldn’t have dreamed of!”¹⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, similar opinions were expressed by veterans and former settlers, including one who acknowledged that while the colonial regime was not without its faults, it nonetheless ensured “peace, order and security.” Moreover, the author writes, “French Indochina was a rich and prosperous nation,” while “Vietnam is one of the ten poorest countries in the world.”¹⁴² The ANAI also expressed its disapproval of certain aspects of the film. President Guy Simon claimed to have appreciated the homage paid to the landscape, but refuted the message that he argued was emphasized over and over again: that the poor treatment of the Vietnamese by the French was bound to result in social unrest and the emergence of the Communist Party. Given what he sees as the vast number of problems

¹³⁹ Interview with Régis Wagnier by Emmanuel de Brantes, “La légende de la congai,” *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 15 April 1992. Producer Eric Heumann also had a Indochinese connection as the grandson of a rubber plantation owner.

¹⁴⁰ Thierry Jousse, review of *Indochine*, *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 455-456 (May 1992), 35.

¹⁴¹ “Courrier des lecteurs,” *Le Figaro*, 24 April 1992.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* This is obviously a weak comparison, given that “Indochina” was not a nation. Moreover, the wealth distribution was such that the majority was concentrated in the hands of the few.

with the film, he deliberately focuses on a single scene: that of the slave market, which he describes as ‘intolerable.’ Though he responds to the scene through a series of unanswered questions – “did the colonial authorities control the process? Did they consciously separate families?” – the answers are implied. This criticism was echoed by a letter from a former recruiter for rubber plantations, who challenges the scene in its entirety.

Of the three films, *L’Amant* is the least engaged with depicting and interpreting periods of the French past; rather, director Jean-Jacques Annaud was concerned with conveying the essence of Duras’ semi-autobiographical novel in a visual form, and thus with reincarnating the exoticism of late 1920s Saigon and surrounding areas. The storyline centres on the relationship between a French adolescent (Jane March) from a family of relatively poor settlers and her budding relationship with the wealthy son (Tony Leung) of a Chinese businessman, who is also considerably older than she is. The girl’s widowed mother has been struggling to keep her creditors at bay and make something of her property, and her brother is continually in trouble. Her involvement with the Chinese man reflects a combination of adolescent curiosity, passion, enhanced social standing and a desire for the gifts that result from the relationship. Annaud himself acknowledges that part of what prompted him to adapt the novel was his fascination with the element of the French colonial empire, stating that: “I have maintained a nostalgia for this period of French presence and greatness, even though I did not live through it.”¹⁴³ This position is particularly interesting given Annaud’s earlier work: his *La Victoire en chantant* (*Black and White in Colour*) is quite critical of colonialism. Speaking to the nostalgic qualities of the film, Marcel Oms drew broader implications for the memories of former settlers:

¹⁴³ Pierre Billard, “L’Amant le film,” *Le Point*, 11 January 1992.

Thus, idealized or not, fantasized or not, the affair between the young adolescent and the seductive Chinese man is of the same nature as the memories of Indochina maintained by former settlers, as well as the fascination with the Far East and its essence of opiate-induced eroticism.¹⁴⁴

What is particularly interesting about the nostalgic element of all three films is that their release in 1992 coincided with a critical revisiting and re-evaluation of the Indochina War by historians, filmmakers and other commentators. While Schoendoerffer was promoting a standard narrative of the Indochina War, and Wargnier and Annaud were presenting audiences with a nostalgic view of the ‘good old days’ of the colony, Bertrand Tavernier was challenging narratives of the Algerian War with his hard-hitting documentary *La guerre sans nom* (*The War Without a Name*). Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot, and later Panivong Norindr, have argued that the ‘return to the colonies’ in the early 1990s resulted in a radically different treatment of Indochina and Algeria; the films dealing with Indochina, as has been demonstrated, tend toward a certain colonial exoticism, whereas this was completely lacking in Tavernier’s film.¹⁴⁵ They maintain that this is due to the fact that Algeria was still too political and too sensitive as a topic, while Indochina had been “isolated [...] in a distant and mythical era,”¹⁴⁶ the result of a certain disconnect between contemporary Vietnam from the past ‘Indochina’. Although the evidence they provide to illustrate this Algeria-Indochina dichotomy is weak – they contrast the lack of support that Tavernier had from veterans with Schoendoerffer’s considerable support from the same, without taking into account the vastly different goals of the two projects – the argument itself is credible.

¹⁴⁴ Marcel Oms, “L’Amant,” *Les cahiers de la cinémathèque* (October 1992), 93.

¹⁴⁵ Francis Ramirez and Christian Roulot, “D’une Indochine l’autre,” *Cinémathèque* no. 2 (November 1992), 40. See also Panivong Norindr, “Phantasmatic Indochina: *French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 132.

¹⁴⁶ Ramirez and Roulot, “D’une Indochine l’autre,” 42.

Conclusion

Despite the relatively small corpus of films that address colonial Indochina or the war, particularly in comparison to the body of work on the Algerian and Vietnam wars, it is evident that cinematic representations of Indochina largely reflect dominant narratives and the war and colonialism. There are, of course, notable exceptions, the most prominent of which was Henri de Turenne's attempt to produce an objective re-examination of both the colonial project and the ensuing war. Those films that have focused exclusively on the war have been dominated by veterans, like Claude Bernard-Aubert and Pierre Schoendoerffer, which has led to a genre that reinforces the images of heroic soldiers betrayed or abandoned by the metropolitan government, the public or the military command. Those that have engaged with the colonial era, primarily from the 1920s through to the end of the Indochina War, have tended to reflect a certain nostalgia. The exception here is Marcel Camus, whose *Mort en fraude* is perhaps the only film set in the colony that challenges the premises of the civilizing mission, and does so more convincingly than did Régis Wargnier. Like *L'Amant* and *Indochine*, *Mort en fraude* centres on an interracial couple, but without the attendant eroticism; in fact, French discrimination against the Eurasian Ahn is depicted on several occasions.¹⁴⁷ The fact that a French character is shown as single-handedly trying to 'save' a Vietnamese village works at cross-purposes with this critique of colonialism, however, and ultimately casts Horcier as a character not unlike Éliane. While the 'return to Indochina' of the early 1990s, itself undoubtedly shaped by the emerging interest in all things Indochina throughout the 1980s discussed in previous chapters, was certainly a remarkable period, it

¹⁴⁷ For a study of colonial policy regarding Eurasian children, see Emmanuelle Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie: Les métis de l'empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007). Kim Lefèvre has also published her autobiography about growing up as a *métis* in Indochina; *Métisse blanche* (Paris: B. Barrault, 1989).

has yet to lead to a firm commitment to re-evaluating the colonial past or the Indochina War. This is evident in the release of *Là-haut* (2003) and *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (2008), which have been the only two major releases on the subject since the 1992 'return'. Once again, we have one film that is directed by a veteran, and one that is a literary adaptation. In this latest film, Schoendoerffer returns to the device of the flashback to depict the war, but maintains essentially the same narrative as in earlier films. Panh provides a more convincing critique of colonial society than did Wargnier, and although he maintains some of the eroticism of *L'Amant*, he does not make it a focal point. Panh is perhaps the closest of all of the filmmakers to challenging the status quo by giving far greater agency to the indigenous characters, but like Wargnier he tends to condemn the system but not those that participate in it. Overall, the filmic representation of the Indochina War and the French colonial period reflects the broader trends with respect to public memory of the war: a majority of voices supporting the status quo, with a few dissenting voices. There is little actual evolution or challenge to the dominant narratives. However, there is hope that Panh's most recent film will prove to be a starting point for a more critical examination of French Indochina, and from there, possibly the war.

Conclusion

In 1994, Daniel Lindenberg wrote about France's so-called "memory wars," and the way in which the French relationship with memory provoked "particularly violent controversies."¹ He opened by tracing the phenomenon back to the French Revolution, before shifting his focus to several critical periods of the twentieth century: the First World War, the Vichy period and the Algerian War. The Indochina War was omitted, save for a brief discussion of the Boudarel affair contained within the rubric of "Communist memory, Anticomunist memory." A decade and a half later, Pascal Blanchard and Isabelle Veyrat-Masson published an edited volume on the subject of French memory wars, to which a great number of leading specialists contributed.² Again, the Indochina War was ignored, while May '68, the Holocaust, Vichy, Algeria and colonialism were all featured. Trends in historical research of twentieth-century France have, since the early 1990s, revolved around the memory of traumatic periods, events that have pitted the French against one another (*guerres franco-françaises*), collaboration and resistance, colonialism, decolonization and immigration. The Indochina War is inherently connected with each of these phenomena, and yet it remains understudied, as does the public memory of the conflict.

And yet it is evident that the Indochina War is far from being a 'black hole' of French public memory. On the contrary, uncompromising narratives of the war are fiercely defended and promoted by particular interest groups. The two most prevalent interpretations of the war – as a 'dirty' war of colonial reconquest or as a war to contain communism – have clashed time and again, whether it be over the depiction of the war in a documentary or the

¹ Daniel Lindenberg, "Guerres de mémoire en France," *Vingtième siècle*, no. 42 (April-June 1994), 78.

² Pascal Blanchard et Isabelle Veyrat-Masson, eds., *Les Guerres de mémoires: La France et son histoire. Enjeux politiques, controverses historiques, stratégies médiatiques* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008).

controversial past of a Paris university professor. This conflict has only increased as veterans have become increasingly outspoken about their experiences and their opinions, and their pressure on the government has led to the initiation of a series of commemorative projects. It is also clear that evaluations of the colonial legacy are intertwined with debates over the nature of the Indochina War. Moreover, there are other associated memories to consider. Decolonization did not mark the end of the French connection with Indochina; rather, the fallout of the war was in some ways repatriated to France with the soldiers, the settler community, and the French citizens of indigenous background. In a very real way, they brought Indochina home with them, a phenomenon they referred to as “*le mal jaune*,” no different from a tropical disease contracted in Southeast Asia. The so-called ‘repatriates’ (*rapatriés*) in particular see themselves as embodying the legacy of colonialism and the state’s failure to assume responsibility for that legacy. The sites of their repatriation to France commemorate a chapter in the history of French immigration, albeit a small one. There is also the question of a public memory of the Cold War, which although not addressed directly in this dissertation, is nonetheless present. Memories of the militancy and activism of the PCF during the war, of the staunch anticommunism of many soldiers and the political right, and the impact of the collapse of the Eastern bloc have all left their mark on the events and processes described here, as have ongoing public debates over issues like the equality of pensions between French and colonial veterans.

The divisive nature of the war, and the lack of consensus over its primary objectives, has led to the creation of a divided memory. Even if, as we saw in the Introduction, the majority of public opinion was not consistently or heavily concerned with the war, it did nonetheless provoke sharp divisions between political parties, between protestors and the

military, and between pro and anticolonialists. The recent experience of the Second World War coloured the perceptions of the colonial conflict, leading both soldiers of the expeditionary corps and those who actively or passively supported the Viet Minh to claim the mantle of the Resistance. In the latter years of the conflict, it was the politics of the Cold War that came to define policy and perceptions, effectively substituting the tropes of one totalitarian system (Nazism) for another (Communism). The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, and the subsequent negotiations at Geneva, confirmed the independence of the successor states of French Indochina, and marked the beginning of a long and bloody process of decolonization of the French Empire.

The opposition of the PCF and others to the war and to colonialism, which led to protests, strikes, and the heavily publicized Henri Martin affair, has formed the basis for the narrative of the ‘dirty’ war. In casting the war as one of colonial reconquest, this narrative emphasizes the abuses of the colonial system, the creation of a society based on the exploitation and oppression of the majority of the indigenous population, and the rights of people to self-determination.³ This narrative has also privileged the nationalist and anticolonial aspects of Ho Chi Minh’s rhetoric, leading to an emphasis on the war as one of liberation. The veteran narrative, which is reflected in that of the political right and extreme right, rarely acknowledges the colonial dimension of the war. The conflict is reduced to the ideological conflict of the Cold War, in which Indochina (and more specifically Vietnam) became the site of a battle between international communism and the ‘free world’. Far from

³ The emphasis on the oppressive nature of colonial society has been countered by groups seeking to present a positive ‘memory’ of the colonial era, or at least of settlers, such as the Association of Rubber Plantation Owners (*Amicale des planteurs d’hévéas*). See the Association’s two publications: *Planteurs d’hévéas en Indochine: 1939-1954* (Nogent-le-Rotrou: Daupely-Gouverneur, 1996) and *Les Planteurs d’hévéas en Indochine de 1950 à 1975: Contre vents et marées, souvenirs, récits et témoignages* (Panazol: Lavauzelle, 2006).

waging war against the Vietnamese people, a majority of veterans saw themselves as fighting to protect the Vietnamese (as well as Laos and Cambodians) from the communist threat. This interpretation was reinforced after the Halong Bay accords of 1948, which are held up as proof positive that France was collaborating with an independent Vietnam, whose soldiers were partners of the French, fighting alongside the expeditionary corps. In this schema, non-communist Vietnamese (and Cambodians and Lao) were the potential or actual victims of communism. To this community of victims are added all those who fought on the French side. The narrative highlights not only the heroism and sacrifice of the soldiers, but it casts them as the victims of communism (through the experience of the prisoner of war camps) and as the victims of the ineptitude of the French government and the indifference of the French public. Virtually silent as a group for nearly two decades after the end of the war, veterans became increasingly vocal after 1975, and particularly as of the early 1980s. Their objective, echoed by the political right and extreme right, was to overcome their status as 'forgotten' and to force the state to acknowledge their sacrifice during the war. In so doing, they brought their interpretation of the war prominently into the public sphere.

As a result of their lobbying efforts, an unknown soldier was laid to rest along with the unknowns of the other major wars of the century, a memorial complex was built, special status granted to former prisoners of the Viet Minh, and a national day of homage created. The close involvement of veterans, and more specifically of associations like the ANAI, with the development of state-sponsored commemorative initiatives has meant that their narrative has come to characterize the 'official' memory of the war. This influence includes an emphasis on the heroism of the soldiers, whose mission is portrayed as having ultimately been a lost cause. Between the burial of the unknown soldier in 1980 and the creation of the

national day of homage in 2005, the state narrative has shifted away from the outright criticism of the Vietnamese communist regime (evident, for example, in François Léotard's 1988 speech at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Memorial), and toward an acknowledgment of the war as one of decolonization.

Inherent in these contrasting interpretations of the war are competing visions of the colonial period that preceded it. Indeed, there are frequent instances of debates over the Indochina War spilling over into debates over colonialism; the Boudarel affair presents perhaps the most prominent example. As has been discussed, those who understand the war as one of colonial reconquest view the colonial project as one that was flawed at best, and destructive at worst. While many veterans refuse to make pronouncements on the colonial system, there are those who, like the ANAI, seek to promote a positive interpretation of colonialism. In this view, the French colonial system's achievements were set into stark relief by the abuses of the communist regimes that succeeded it. Debates over France's colonial legacy have continued to shape public discourse, as evidenced by the lobbying for, and subsequent outcry against, the 2005 law on the positive aspects of colonialism.

The difficulties in commemorating defeat are apparent in veterans' long campaigns for moral and legal recognition and the delays in establishing prominent national monuments and memorials. But what of the memory of the victors? In her recent review of a new collection of Vietnamese veterans' memoirs, Carole Vann characterizes the conflict as a black hole in Vietnamese collective memory.⁴ As is the case in France, the war has been subsumed by the subsequent American war, but also by the larger project of unification and

⁴ Carole Vann, " 'Dien Bien Phu vu d'en face', paroles de vétérans vietnamiens," *Rue 89*, 9 May 2010. www.rue89.com.

state-building.⁵ Moreover, the war is the “intellectual and political property of the government,” and so there is little variation on the official narrative that emphasizes the anticolonial struggle and roots the second and third Indochina wars firmly in the first.⁶

Although the Vietnamese landscape has been increasingly dotted with museums and monuments to the past,⁷ commemorative sites and ceremonies connected with the French Indochina War are few and far between. Many museums, including the War Remnants Museum in Hanoi and the museum dedicated to the final battle in Dien Bien Phu, do depict the abuses of the French colonial system and present the war as one of national liberation. Several of them include images of antiwar protest in France, in particular Henri Martin. Dien Bien Phu, which has grown into a city of well over 100 000 people, has maintained some of the war sites, though primarily for tourism purposes. The hill known to the Viet Minh as A1 and to the French expeditionary corps as Éliane has been maintained as a tourist site, trenches and all.⁸ De Castries’s bunker, too, has been preserved [figure 7], and there are numerous pieces of decommissioned artillery dotting the landscape. Military cemeteries are impeccably maintained [figure 8], and the small museum contains a few historical artefacts, weapons and displays depicting battle scenes.

⁵ Existing work on memory in Vietnam has focused on these events. On the memory of the American war, see Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); on memory and commemoration more broadly speaking, see Hue Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory and the Remaking of Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). On the period from 1954-1975, see Christina Schwenkel, “Exhibiting War, Reconciling Pasts: Photographic Representation and Transnational Commemoration in Contemporary Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3 no. 1 (2008), 36-77.

⁶ See Lien Hang T. Nguyen, “Vietnamese Historians and the First Indochina War,” in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 41-55.

⁷ Hue Tam Ho Tai attributes this “commemorative fever” to the unintended by-product of the economic reforms of the late 1980s. See her introduction, “Situating Memory,” in *The Country of Memory*.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the maintenance of historic sites in Dien Bien Phu, see William S. Logan, “Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam: Managing a Battle Site, Metaphoric and Actual,” *Outre-Mers* 94, no. 350-351 (2006), 175-190.

In 2004, the state undertook a number of commemorative initiatives in honour of the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. Events included a performance by thousands of dancers wearing different coloured uniforms to create a mosaic effect depicting scenes from the battle.⁹ A new Victory Memorial was installed in Dien Bien Phu, and the Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi curated a special exhibit on the battle. The Vietnamese government collaborated with the French and Chinese governments to host one meeting of a three-part international conference series. It also published a collection of letters written by French prisoners of war (to Ho Chi Minh, as well as to the French government and public), under the title *The Indochina War Told Through the Voices of the French Expeditionary Corps*.¹⁰ Given that these letters were written under duress, the volume presents a blatantly biased view of the conflict. More recently, a team of Vietnamese journalists undertook a project to record individual memories of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, interviewing veterans who fought the French and publishing their testimony in the aforementioned volume reviewed by Carole Vann.¹¹ This volume is, in some sense, the analogue to Pierre Journoud and Hugues Tertrais' *Voices From Dien Bien Phu* (2004).¹²

The events of 2004, in France and Vietnam, may well represent a commemorative peak where the Indochina War is concerned. Although the French government's involvement in the events marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the war was significant, the commemorative ceremonies remain first and foremost the domain of the veterans. Despite

⁹ Clips of this performance aired on the evening news program *19/20* (national edition), FR3, 7 May 2004.

¹⁰ *La guerre d'Indochine à travers la voix des soldats du corps expéditionnaire français* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 2004). The texts were printed in Vietnamese and in French.

¹¹ The Vietnamese version was published in 2009. It was recently translated into French, with a preface by Jean-Pierre Rioux, under the title *Dien Bien Phu vu d'en face. Paroles de bô dô* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2010).

¹² Pierre Journoud and Hugues Tertrais, *Paroles de Dien Bien Phu. Les survivants témoignent* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004).

their tireless campaigns to foster public interest in the war, it has remained a relatively ignored period of twentieth century French history. The recent death of General Bigeard,¹³ a prominent self-professed guardian of the memory of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, reminds us that as veterans age and die, commemoration itself may disappear with its custodians.

¹³ Bigeard passed away as this dissertation was being filed.

Images



Figure 1: Rolf Rodel's monument at Dien Bien Phu. (Author's photograph)



Figure 2: The bas-relief on the Monument to the Dead of Indochina (1983), Fréjus. (Author's photograph)



Figure 3: The memorial wall (1996), Fréjus. (Author's photograph)



Figure 4: The Memorial to the Indochina Wars, Fréjus. (Author's photograph)



Figure 5: Entrance to the CAFI in 2004. The old sign was resurrected for the 50th anniversary. (Author's photograph)



Figure 6: Barracks and the water tower at the CAFI (2004). (Author's photograph)

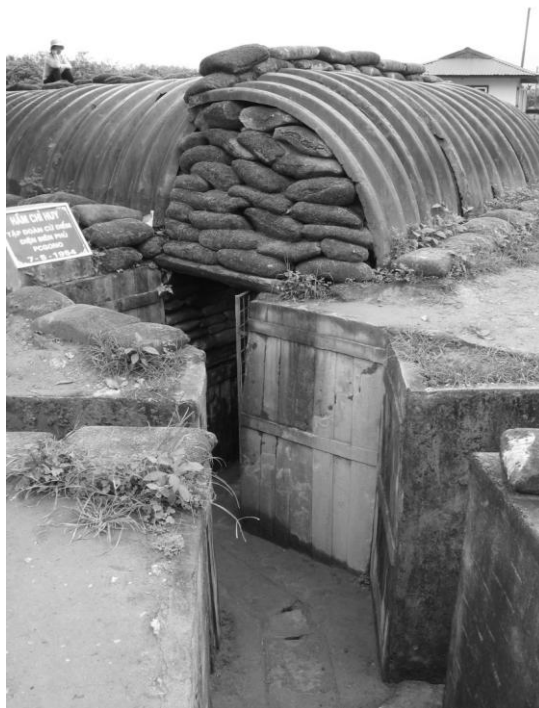


Figure 7: De Castries' bunker, Dien Bien Phu. (Author's photograph)



Figure 8: Military cemetery in Dien Bien Phu. (Author's photograph)

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