

Main features of french rule in indochina



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Main Features of French Rule in Indochina By 1893 France had colonised all of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and renamed it the French Indochinese Union. The French were oppressive and self-interested. They ran Indochina as a profit making venture and tried to ensure it paid for its own administration. Colonial governor Paul Doumer made the people pay for the cost of their own rule by increasing customs duties and direct taxes. He created official monopoly on salt, alcohol, and opium.

Doumer concentrated on building railways and lighthouses while denying the people development and education. Before French rule 80 per cent of Vietnamese were literate in Chinese but by the end of 1940 only 20 per cent of boys were at school and a much smaller per cent of girls. The French exploited Vietnamese resources and labour. They paid the people minimal wages and forced them to work in horrific conditions. Vietnamese land was turned over to the production of rice, rubber, opium, spices and other commodities to export for French profit.

The French altered traditional land ownership and the Vietnamese peasants had to take out loans with the interest rate of up to 70 per cent to pay the rent of their land and homes. The French also introduced a currency system which was poorly understood and not trusted by the peasants who had always used bartering. With the change in land ownership came a massive change in Indochinese social structure. This destroyed village life which was the main Indochinese social unit. The village was the centre of their religious, cultural and economic lives and was the most important administrative unit in Vietnam.

This destruction of the social system along with land ownership changes resulted in a small elite group of Vietnamese land owners who collaborated with the French and left the 90% of the population of the peasants oppressed and in poverty. The French ruled Indochina with force and used repressive methods to end any rebellion. They divided Vietnam into three administrative divisions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. A number of Vietnamese groups tried to rebel and were executed by the French. The majority of Vietnamese were Buddhist and the French tried to convert everyone to Catholicism.

Anybody who rebelled against the French priests was imprisoned or executed. With the outbreak of World War Two France surrendered to Germany and allowed Japan to administer Indochina. This resulted in the destruction of culture and widespread famine. Towards the end of WW2 Japanese soldiers seized the bulk of the Vietnamese rice crop and French officials withheld the remaining supplies from the peasants. This resulted in a major famine where 2 million people died. After WW2 the French tried to reclaim Indochina supported by the United States and Britain.

Relations between the French and the Vietnamese deteriorated as key independence leaders Ho Chi Minh and General Giap began to fight for the rights of the Vietnamese. When the French broke the August agreement and bombed Haiphong killing six thousand civilians the first Indochinese war began. This war of attrition saw the Vietnamese develop skilled guerrilla tactics in the face of superior French fire power. By 1954 this conflict ended in the battle of Dien Bien Phu with a decisive Vietnamese victory. The

Geneva conference that began the day after battle ended resulted in the end of French rule in Indochina.