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A photo gallery follows page 248.
The region that Americans and other Westerners generally call Vietnam’s Central Highlands is the broader, southern end of the Truong Son or Annamite chain, the range of mountains that forms the boundary between Vietnam and Laos and part of the boundary between Vietnam and Cambodia. Over the years various other names have been used for the region. Today the Vietnamese government calls it the Tay Nguyen (Western Highlands), for although it was central to the old French Indochina, it is on Vietnam’s western side.

Approximately 67,000 square km in area (450 km north–south and 150 km west–east), the Central Highlands constituted a large part of the landmass of the former South Vietnamese state (1954–1975), but it was by far the most sparsely populated region. Geologically, it is formed largely of granite and basalt, but there are sedimentary rocks too. Large parts of the region are too mountainous to support many people. There are, however, a number of plateau areas that are suitable for agriculture, and this is where the principal towns are situated. Among these plateaus are Kontum (elevation 545 m), Pleiku (800 m), and Ban Me Thuot (536 m). The highest peaks are Ngoc Linh (2,958 m), at the northern end of the region, and Chu Yang Sinh (2,410 m), in the east.

Because the Central Highlands is so topographically complex, the pattern of rainfall varies considerably. The dry season generally lasts from November to April, while rainfall from May to October is sufficiently heavy to permit the growth of tropical rain forest and thirsty commercial crops. The region is also watered by several sizable rivers and many smaller streams. For centuries the original inhabitants—the Highland ethnic groups, or Montagnards—had practiced simple subsistence farming on the more favorable terrain. By the early 1960s the Vietnamese were taking over increasing amounts of the best land and using it to grow a range of plantation crops, including coffee and tea.

Since 1975 large parts of the region have been drastically deforested. In the period covered by this book, however, a large proportion of it was still covered by jungle and grassland. Large, dangerous animals such as wild elephants, wild cattle, tigers, and leopards were present in some areas, and deer and wild pigs were abundant.
The aboriginal peoples of the Central Highlands, who were still a substantial majority of the region’s inhabitants in 1954–1965, are discussed at some length in the main body of the book. It would be pointless to preempt that discussion here. It is important to understand from the outset, however, that although they lived in a state called the Republic of Vietnam, they did not see themselves as Vietnamese and generally were not seen as such by others. The Highland ethnic groups spoke a variety of different tongues. Although their traditional cultures had much in common with one another, they had little in common with that of the Vietnamese. Most Highlanders did not understand the Vietnamese language, and many were fearful and suspicious of the Vietnamese people. Yet many became active participants in (and all had their lives massively disrupted by) what was essentially a Vietnamese civil war.

A study of the political and military struggle for control of this region in 1954–1965 surely needs little justification. The Second Indochina War is generally acknowledged as one of the most important conflicts of the latter half of the twentieth century. Everyone with a basic knowledge of that conflict understands that the Central Highlands was a strategically vital region and that control of it was fiercely contested. It is generally appreciated that many branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail entered South Vietnam through the Central Highlands and that American Special Forces worked there with Highland troops from an early stage in the war. It is also widely known that in November 1965 the US Army had its first major clashes with the North Vietnamese in the Central Highlands.

Serious students of the war also know that events in this region precipitated its end. The South Vietnamese defeat at Ban Me Thuot in April 1975 led to President Nguyen Van Thieu’s ill-judged order to abandon the Central Highlands, a move for which no contingency plans had been made. Taking advantage of the chaotic retreat, the North Vietnamese were able to cross the narrow coastal plain, cut South Vietnam in two, and thereby envelop South Vietnamese troops in the northern section. For the anti-Communist side, this was a long-imagined nightmare scenario. Once it became reality, a final Communist victory could not be long delayed.

Even in the early 1960s, when guerrilla warfare was the norm, highly placed Vietnamese on both sides realized that the fighting in the Highlands would eventually assume a more high-intensity, “conventional” nature. To the Communist high command, the rugged terrain and dense vegetation of the Central Highlands offered the best chance of ambushing and annihilating major units of the South Vietnamese armed forces and of drawing in and destroying their strategic reserves. When large American units arrived in South Vietnam, the Central Highlands seemed to be the most suitable place to engage them, too. Both sides seemed to sense from an early stage in the war, moreover, that
control of the high ground looming over South Vietnam’s narrow coastal plain might ultimately prove decisive.

The Central Highlands was therefore strategically vital ground in one of recent history’s major wars. The struggle to control this region seemed a worthwhile field of study, a point that first suggested itself when touring parts of it with Ed Flint, a Sandhurst colleague and friend, in December 2004 and January 2005. Covering the entire struggle, from 1954 to 1975, in a single monograph, however, always seemed more than could be managed effectively. From the outset, therefore, the intention was to stop at the end of 1965, after the US Army had fought its first battles in the region and after which, in the eyes of many Americans, the war entered a new phase.

Particular parts of the story told in this book have already been explored in print. There are memoirs and monographs concerning the US Special Forces and the counterinsurgency activities of the CIA. Specialist studies of the anthropology and ethnohistory of the Highlanders exist. One volume of the US Army’s official history covers the Pleiku campaign of October–November 1965, and there are at least three other substantial studies of the role of the US 1st Cavalry Division in that fighting. The aim of this book, however, is to examine the struggle for the Central Highlands from 1954 to 1965 as a coherent whole. The intention has been to consider the perspectives of all the warring parties and, where possible, those of the civilians caught between them.

This was not the easiest of objectives. The great bulk of the secondary literature and the vast majority of the relevant primary source documents relating to this subject that are readily available to Western scholars were produced by Americans for Americans. Highlanders have left few written records of their experiences in these years. Relevant writings by Vietnamese who served on the anti-Communist side do exist and were consulted. But most significantly, perhaps, it has been possible to exploit a great deal of Vietnamese Communist historical writing, most of it never published in English. This literature, like all other sources, must be viewed critically and used cautiously. Yet some of the more recent Vietnamese accounts of the war contain breathtaking admissions of the Communist side’s errors and disasters and the catastrophic collapse of morale at certain times in some Communist units. Even the older histories published in Hanoi contain information on matters such as unit identities and command arrangements that are impossible to find elsewhere. The painstaking efforts and great generosity of a single individual are responsible for translating most of this material and making it available to scholars. This book could not have been written in its present form without the help of Merle Pribbenow.

When the idea for this book was first mooted with American Vietnam specialists, they warned that the Central Highlands from 1954 to 1965 was the most obscure region of Vietnam at the most obscure period of the war. They
doubted that sufficient primary sources could be found to make the project viable. It is certainly true that many records from the 1950s and early 1960s have gone missing. In particular, many of the papers of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG), the American headquarters that preceded the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), have disappeared. Although South Vietnamese government forces mounted thousands of military operations of various sizes in the first half of the 1960s, and although the Americans were putting great effort into equipping and advising those armed forces, only a handful of after-action reports survive in American archives. Even the records of the US Army Special Forces are somewhat patchy for this period of the war.

Yet masses of documents from this early period of the struggle do exist, and a substantial number are related to the Central Highlands. The great majority of those used in the research for this book are accessible in American public archives. The US Army’s official history of this period of the war is not yet completed, however, and some papers are still held at the Center of Military History in Washington, DC. Access to those records, graciously arranged by Dr. Andrew Birtle, was extremely important.

Even though the events considered here took place at least half a century ago, some participants are still very much with us and are willing to testify. Their evidence, too, was very important. Particular thanks are owed to Dave Nuttle, who, when still remarkably youthful, played a central role in important developments. His detailed recollections of distant events were repeatedly corroborated by documentary evidence that subsequently came to light.

Neither the accessible documents nor the surviving individuals can tell us everything we would ideally like to know. As with all histories, the account provided here is incomplete and grossly imperfect. This is especially true of the period up to the end of 1964. Yet a reasonably coherent picture of the struggle for the region in the decade after the Geneva Accords does emerge.

In 1965 the war in the Central Highlands changed. Though guerrilla actions persisted, there was also fighting on a significantly larger scale and of much greater intensity. As the Americans became increasingly involved, the quantity of records available to the historian expands dramatically. Both because of the increased scale and intensity of the fighting and because the greater availability of records allows more detailed analysis, a large part of this book deals with the events of that year.

Contrary to a common American perception, large North Vietnamese units were fighting major actions in the Central Highlands for several months before the US 1st Cavalry Division arrived there. As we shall see, the North Vietnamese did not always have these all their own way. Both in America and in Vietnam, however, by far the most famous series of military events in 1965 is the Plei Me–Ia Drang campaign of October–November. That campaign is
explored in considerable detail in these pages. Largely as a result of a detailed comparison of American and Vietnamese Communist accounts, a revised narrative and new interpretations are presented.

It is hoped that this book sheds fresh light on a vital theater of operations in the crucial early years of one of the twentieth century’s most important conflicts.
Republic of Vietnam, 1965 (including South Vietnam's corps areas, provinces, and Central Highlands)
Minority ethnic groups in South Vietnam
Vietnam and the Central Highlands to 1954

The Peoples Involved

The main participants in the struggle considered in the pages that follow were the Vietnamese, who became engaged in a civil war; the Highlanders (the original inhabitants of the region), who were sucked into it (in many cases against their will); and the Americans, who intervened because their leaders saw the conflict in Vietnam as part of a global struggle against communism. It is presumed that for most readers the Americans need no introduction. The provision of a little background on the Vietnamese and the Highlanders seems in order, if only to show why they were so different and why the relationships between them were often so fraught.

The Vietnamese before the French Conquest

For much of their history, the Vietnamese had little knowledge of the Central Highlands region. They as a distinct people and Vietnam as a political entity had originated hundreds of miles to the north in the region known as Tonkin, especially in the delta of the Hong (or Red) River. For about a thousand years, between the late second century BC and the early tenth century, the ancestors of the modern Vietnamese were under the control of the Chinese Empire. By the time they were able to break away and form a distinct kingdom in the early tenth century, the Chinese had exerted a very powerful—indeed, formative—influence on their language and culture.¹

Over the centuries successive rulers of China attempted to regain control over the Vietnamese. It is important to the Vietnamese national consciousness that, in some very bloody wars, they ultimately defeated these efforts. Displaying impressive military prowess and great determination, they also expanded
their territory southward along the coastal plain between the Truong Son mountain range and the sea. By 1471 they had largely broken the power of the once mighty Champa, a group of Hindu kingdoms forged by the Cham ethnic group.\textsuperscript{2}

Even though Vietnam was divided into northern and southern states for a lengthy period in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its southward expansion continued. By the late eighteenth century the Vietnamese had conquered the Mekong Delta, taking it from Cambodia.\textsuperscript{3} The Nguyen Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty in Vietnamese history, gained control of the whole of Vietnam in the early nineteenth century and ruled from Hue in central Vietnam. Initially it seemed powerful and splendid. But as that century wore on, like the Manchu Dynasty in China, it could neither isolate Vietnam from the European powers nor match their naval and military technology.

\section*{The French Takeover of Indochina}

In the second half of the nineteenth century Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia all fell under French rule, and the Nguyen Dynasty’s emperors became no more than puppets of the French. The French conquest began under Napoleon III, whose forces captured Saigon in 1859. By 1867 the French had taken control of the whole of Cochin China, roughly the southern third of Vietnam. They also secured a protectorate over Cambodia. The French conquest of Vietnam was completed under the Third Republic, after the fall of Napoleon III’s Second Empire during the Franco-German War of 1870–1871. In 1883 France used military force to get Emperor Tu Duc to accept a protectorate over the rest of Vietnam. In 1893 the French rounded off their empire in Indochina by establishing a protectorate over Laos. Although Cochin China was technically a colony and the rest of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were protectorates, the French endeavored to establish a fairly unified administrative system throughout the area they ruled.\textsuperscript{5}

The Nguyen rulers had claimed a sort of suzerainty over the Central Highlands and had established settlements on the region’s eastern edge. But the Vietnamese had not yet colonized it on a substantial scale. The reasons are not hard to understand. The main economic basis of Vietnamese life was wet rice agriculture. The main direction of their expansion over the centuries had therefore been south, along the coastal plain and into the wetlands of the Mekong Delta, where the terrain was particularly suitable for that activity. To many Vietnamese, the Central Highlands, by contrast, seemed distinctly alien—the abode of evil spirits. The French would explore the region thoroughly for the first time and open it, for better or worse, to development and colonization.\textsuperscript{6}
The Traditional World of the Highlanders

Before they fell under French rule, the peoples of the Central Highlands were certainly primitive compared with the Vietnamese or the Cambodians. But they were Iron Age rather than Stone Age peoples and could not be considered “precontact” populations in the sense of having had no relations with more sophisticated societies outside their forests. Champa had in fact maintained outposts deep in the Highlands, had sought tribute from Highlanders, and had traded with them for a variety of commodities, including areca nuts, betel leaves, precious hardwoods such as ebony and eaglewood, cinnamon, elephant ivory, and rhinoceros horn. After Champa’s destruction the Vietnamese took over this trade. But the illiterate Highland societies seemed to the Vietnamese to fall well below their Chinese-influenced standards of what it meant to be civilized. Highlanders often wore little clothing, in some cases had darker skin, and practiced body modifications such as filing their teeth and plugging their earlobes. The Vietnamese called the Highlanders *Moi,* which means savages, and often made little effort to conceal their disdain.

Although the Highlanders were not precontact peoples before the French arrived, they were to a large extent prehistoric. With the exception of the Chru, a small group that adopted the Cham script, they had no written language of their own, and what the lowland peoples of Indochina recorded about them was extremely limited. Linguistic research undertaken in the twentieth century indicates that some Highland peoples, such as the Rhade and the Jarai, speak Austronesian languages. The speech of other groups, the largest being the Bahnar, belongs to the Mon-Khmer group of Austroasiatic languages (which have rather more in common with Vietnamese).

Western scholars have also undertaken ethnographic and anthropological studies, and a certain amount is known about the traditional customs and ways of life of the various Highland groups. Once French colonization gained pace after the First World War, however, these customs tended to change quite rapidly. With large-scale Vietnamese immigration to the Highlands from the second half of the 1950s and with war raging there from the early 1960s, it was very hard for traditional ways to survive.

Even the most thorough and scholarly studies of the Highland peoples are strikingly vague on some issues. Little is known about when most of the groups arrived in the Highlands, where they came from (except in the most general terms), how they moved around over time, or the history of their relations with one another. The Highland peoples are often regarded as divided into tribes, but the term “tribe” needs to be used cautiously. The Jarai, the most numerous of the Highland peoples, were certainly capable of identifying who among their neighbors was Jarai and who was not. But there were a number
of Jarai subgroups that had different customs and spoke somewhat different dialects. At the time of the Second Indochina War, the Jarai, like most other Highland groups, had no “tribal” chiefs or policy-making bodies above the village level.

The Jarai did have some priest-like or shamanic offices that, though not passed down from father to son, were held continuously over centuries. These shamans were called kings: the King of Fire, the King of Water, and the King of Wind. The first two commanded respect over a large area of the Highlands and apparently not just among the Jarai. But their authority involved primarily relations between human beings on the one hand and the spirit world and nature on the other. Though they may have exercised some form of political power on occasion, their primary function was not political in the sense that Westerners would understand it.

A lack of centralized authority was the norm among the Highland ethnic groups in the mid-twentieth century, and in most respects, individual villages had probably always run their own affairs. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, chiefs—in times of stress and for certain purposes—had authority over several villages and considerable geographic areas, raising war bands that were hundreds strong. Certain chiefdoms, though not necessarily passed from father to son, had endured within the same family or clan for several generations. The French tried to gain the cooperation of traditional chiefs and use them as intermediaries in running their administration in the Highlands. The French administration was destroyed completely in 1945, and although it was revived thereafter, in many areas it had collapsed again by 1954. By the mid-1950s most Highlanders acknowledged the authority of a village chief or village council, but they did not recognize any tribal authority outside the village. As an American Special Forces handbook from the 1960s warned its readers:

In Montagnard life, the village rather than the tribe is the important political, social, and economic unit. The villager’s life is conditioned by the immediate environment; he knows that environment well—but little beyond. Thus, a really accurate picture of this complex culture would not deal only with a dozen or so tribal groups but also with the thousands of villages. Such an elaborate study is clearly impossible for reasons of space and insufficient information.

As the village was the traditional center of Highland life, it needs attention here. Research suggests that villages of up to 180 houses were not unknown among the Bahnar in the precolonization period. Some traditional longhouses could house hundreds, so there may have been some villages with several thousand inhabitants. But the majority of Highland villages observed by Westerners
or testified to by Highlanders in the twentieth century were much smaller. A village of 400 people appears to have been well above the average size.

Observers found it almost impossible to generalize about the way Highland villages were sited and laid out, there being much variation according to tribal custom and local circumstances. Naturally, it was rare for a village to be located far from a reliable source of fresh water. Usually surrounded by the fields tended by their inhabitants, villages were also rarely far from the edge of the forest, which served both as an additional source of food and as a refuge in case of danger. In some Highland cultures, particular areas of forest were regarded as integral to the villages that exploited them.

Traditional Highland longhouses were built of wood found locally, with bamboo usually playing a large part in their construction, and were thatched with dried long grass. The living quarters were well above the ground, supported on pilings, to keep the occupants safe from dangerous animals. A common arrangement was to have a long, central corridor dividing the interior, with compartments on each side, each compartment housing a nuclear family with its own hearth. The family groups sharing the longhouse depended on the kinship system observed in the particular village. Among those peoples observing a system of matrilineal descent (including the Rhade and the Jarai), a young married couple would likely live with the wife’s parents; among those observing patrilineal descent, young couples normally lived with the husband’s family. Most longhouses had a large common room for general gatherings and for the reception of guests. Many Highland groups also had a large “men’s house” in the village that housed adolescent males and bachelors and served other communal functions. A smaller spirit house, where religious rituals were performed, was another feature of the villages of many Highland groups.

Agriculture was based largely on the slash-and-burn system (in which trees were felled and burned to fertilize the soil), and rice was the main crop. In most cases this was “dry rice,” which depended on rain for a healthy crop. But some Highland groups with access to sufficient water also practiced “wet rice” agriculture, involving paddies that were deliberately flooded. Manioc, maize, millet, sugarcane, and, by the twentieth century, tobacco were also cultivated. The Vietnamese sometimes labeled the Highlanders nomads. But for most Highland groups that cultivated essentially the same areas for generations, this was very misleading.

Chickens, pigs, goats, and buffalo were kept and eaten, although the last were normally reserved for special occasions. Women collected bamboo shoots, wild fruit, roots, herbs, and saffron from the forest. Men hunted deer, wild pigs, and other game and fished in the rivers. Highlanders used iron and steel to make farming implements, including machetes, and to fashion tips for spears and crossbow bolts. They had their own blacksmiths but apparently
did not smelt their own iron, which they generally seemed to obtain through trade.17

The spiritual side of Highland life was intimately linked with social customs and social status. The Confucian and Buddhist beliefs held by the Vietnamese barely penetrated the Highlands, where religion remained animist. Spirits were associated with topographical features, trees, stones, and animals, as well as with dead people. As an American handbook put it: “These spirits make explicable to these people the inexplicable. The spirits themselves may be good, bad or neutral; they are usually ranked in some sort of hierarchy, and they are always present. They must be appeased.”

Certain individuals were believed to have “more intimate contact with these spirits” than others and were considered particularly adept at appeasing them. Such magicians or shamans were awarded much respect. Most Highland groups also believed in witches who could use their spiritual powers to harm others. To keep the world in harmony, Highlanders believed it necessary to perform a variety of rituals and ceremonies. Sacrifice was an integral part of many of these. The sacrifice of a water buffalo had particular weight and brought social prestige to the person who provided the animal.

The consumption of alcohol and getting seriously drunk were important parts of many Highland rituals and festivals. A variety of home-brewed alcoholic drinks were consumed, but the most common was rice wine. Normally this was drunk through straws from large jars, allowing several people to imbibe at once. Among at least some Highland groups this sort of drinking was considered a recreational activity or social ritual that did not necessarily have religious significance.18

Given that the village was the basic sociopolitical unit, the village headman was an important individual. He was normally selected by a council of elders or by the adult population as a whole. The headman represented the village, officiated at rituals, took the lead in war, and helped settle disputes between families. The headman and village council arranged for the distribution of cultivable land among families in the village. Private ownership of land in the sense understood in the West was not common in Highland societies. Below the headman and the council of elders in terms of social status were the other married men in the village. Below them were bachelors and slaves; the latter were mostly debtors, prisoners of war, or the children of slaves. The French made an effort to stop the slave trade and ban slavery in the Highlands during the first half of the twentieth century, but it had not been completely eradicated by the end of French rule.19

Some elite Highlanders became members of the French administration, which eventually supplanted the role of the traditional chiefs. So by the mid-twentieth century the village headman was the most powerful traditional native authority
figure with whom most Highlanders would have been acquainted. Although this meant that, for some Highlanders, their political world had narrowed, this was not true for all. Some Highlanders were capable of thinking outside the boundaries of their particular villages and even beyond their particular tribes.20

**Vietnamese-Highlander Relations before the Twentieth Century**

By the eighteenth century some Vietnamese had traveled up the river valleys from the coastal plain and founded villages in the Highland region. The military village of Tay Son in the An Khe valley, home of a famous family of rebels against the Nguyen lords, was one of these. The Vietnamese, like the Cham before them, also engaged in commerce with Highland peoples, trading for a variety of traditional Highland products.

From the Vietnamese point of view, it was important to have military posts on the edges of the Highlands. In addition to resenting Vietnamese encroachments, some Highland groups raided for and traded in Vietnamese slaves. Vietnam’s rulers also sought to regulate contact between Vietnamese and Highlanders, fearing that Vietnamese customs and standards might be degraded by too much contact with barbarians. Daring Vietnamese itinerant traders sought profits by bartering for forest products in the Central Highlands. But before the twentieth century, much of the region had never been systematically explored or charted, and other than the Catholic mission station at Kontum (which was established by French missionaries rather than by the Vietnamese), there were no towns.

To what extent the Vietnamese exerted real sovereignty in the Central Highlands before the French takeover is not entirely clear. It is certain that the Jarai Kings of Fire and Kings of Water had been bringing presents to the Nguyen court on a regular basis at least since 1751 (while Vietnam was still divided into two states), and it is possible that this practice had started centuries earlier. It continued when the Nguyen Dynasty ruled a united Vietnam in the nineteenth century. When the French established control over the Vietnamese monarchy, they based their claim to administer and colonize the Central Highlands upon it. But as already noted, the Kings of Fire and Water were not kings in the Western sense. They lived modestly, like other Highlanders, and had little political authority as that concept was understood by the Vietnamese or Westerners. In the early nineteenth century the Nguyen Dynasty apparently regarded itself as having some sort of dominion over at least the Jarai Highlanders because of the tribute their kings paid. But based on the logic that they had received diplomatic gifts from those countries, they also liked to regard France, Britain, and Burma as tributaries.21
Chapter 1

The French in the Highlands to 1940

It seems likely that before the French conquest, whatever its pretensions, the Nguyen Dynasty had little or no effective control over the lives of the vast majority of the peoples of the Central Highlands. By the 1880s, however, the French were actively exploring the region, and by the early twentieth century they were making fairly determined attempts at penetration, economic development, and, where necessary, “pacification.”

French probing into the Highlands was accompanied, in some instances, by Vietnamese settlement. The Highlanders’ reaction to both was sometimes violent. French Catholic missionaries had been based at Kontum since the mid-eighteenth century, so this was seen as a logical place to begin colonization and economic development. In 1900 and 1901, however, warriors of the Sedang tribe attacked and destroyed a number of Vietnamese villages north of Kontum. In early 1901 the French established a military post, with Vietnamese troops, on the Psi River near Kontum; its purpose was to protect Vietnamese villages and to prevent the Sedang from trading Vietnamese slaves to their Halang and Jarai neighbors. In May of that year, however, the Sedang overran the French post and inflicted twenty-four wounds on its commander; although he was taken to Kontum for medical help, he ultimately succumbed. In his absence the Sedang attacked the post again and burned it to the ground.

As late as 1914 some entire tribes (the Sedang and Mnong among them) were refusing to submit to French authority. On 5 August 1914 Henri Maitre, one of the most famous French explorers of the Highlands, was killed by a powerful Mnong chief whose warriors then overran a nearby military post. The following year a senior French official was ambushed and killed by warriors led by the same chief. Expanding their imperium in the Highlands clearly required considerable effort, and, faced with much more serious problems closer to home, the French largely stopped trying for the duration of the First World War.

Armed clashes were not the whole story of French involvement in the Central Highlands in the early twentieth century. Violence appears to have been only sporadic and small in scale. The Highland chief whose warriors killed Maitre may have had as many as 500 at his command at one time. But this was exceptional. Most chiefs probably commanded only a few score, and it quickly became obvious to the more intelligent of them that their warriors’ crossbows and spears were no match for the rifles of French-controlled armed forces. However much they resented their intrusion, many Highland leaders saw the inevitability of some sort of accommodation with the French. By 1914 the French had organized a provincial administration in the Highlands, and in most areas their efforts at pacification were generally effective.
By 1914 French administrative centers at Kontum, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat were growing into small towns, and French commercial firms were beginning to establish plantations. The French were also attempting to establish regular and reliable access from the coastal plain to their Highland towns. They were constructing roads and, in the case of Dalat, a railway branch from the main Hanoi-Saigon line. Rather than shattering preexisting leadership structures, the French approach was to identify local chiefs and use them as intermediaries between French officials and the bulk of the population. As some of the French demands were irksome, this did not always help the chiefs’ images with their own people.

For most Highlanders the taxes imposed by the French were the first they ever had to pay. As in the rest of their empire in Indochina, the French also imposed the corvée, or compulsory labor, for several days each year. This normally consisted of building roads and other public works, but it might involve plantation work too. Many Highlanders were not particularly healthy or robust, as dietary deficiencies and tropical illnesses were fairly common. They often found this labor very hard. It could also be dangerous. There were some fatalities for which the French appear to have offered little or no compensation to the families concerned.22

On the positive side, the French made some real efforts to administer justice in local disputes. They attempted to learn and codify tribal law and used native chiefs as judges. The French also established schools and offered education to the children of the Highland elites. In many respects the model French administrator of the period was Leopold Sabatier, who took charge of the province of Darlac in 1914. Although this province had been in existence since 1899, it had undergone little development since then. By extracting greater tax revenue from the Highlanders, Sabatier expanded public works, putting particular stress on improving the roads. At the same time, he adopted a paternal and benevolent attitude toward the Rhade, the main Highland people in the area, and, in general, maintained fairly good relations with them.

Sabatier demonstrated respect for Rhade law and customs and sought positive Rhade cooperation in his efforts to develop the province. As part of his paternalism toward the Rhade, he severely restricted Vietnamese immigration. He believed that, with French education and training, the Rhade could develop a modern, productive economy that would be mutually beneficial for the Highlands and for France. He was instrumental in providing schooling for members of the Rhade elite at Ban Me Thuot, the settlement that served as his provincial capital. He took steps to develop a written Rhade language and to codify Rhade law in written form. He was also the first to create a Garde Indigene (militia) unit manned by Highland personnel.
Sabatier had critics among both Highlanders and Frenchmen. His style resembled that of an oriental potentate, and he could be arrogant. He apparently took several young Rhade girls as mistresses and fathered a daughter by one of them. He was not a devout Catholic, and the missionaries suspected him of Freemasonry, which they detested. In retrospect, Sabatier generally epitomized the most acceptable face of French imperialism in the Central Highlands. In 1926, however, he was relieved of his post and sent back to France. Darlac, like the rest of the Highlands, was opened to colonization.\textsuperscript{23}

The 1920s and 1930s saw the granting of large blocks of land to French companies for use as tea, coffee, and rubber plantations. At the same time the French developed a more formal administrative system in which the traditional roles of Highland chiefs and village headmen were somewhat diminished, although Highlanders were brought into the French administrative system as “canton chiefs.” Change led to discontent. Resentment of the land grants to French companies caused some members of the Highland elite to withdraw their children from French schools. The French, however, persisted in their educational efforts, and not without success. Some Highlanders educated in French schools became very effective teachers.

The French were always able to find educated, elite members of the largest and most important tribes—the Rhade, the Jarai, and the Bahnar—who were willing to work with them. Farther south, near the attractive, flourishing town of Dalat, which served as a recreational hill station for French officials employed on the hot, humid coastal plain, the French established particularly good relations with the leaders of the Chru, a small but exceptionally sophisticated tribe. By 1930 the French were able to form a regular military unit from Highlanders loyal to their regime.

Among many Highlanders, however, the corvée remained intensely unpopular. Colonization and the development of plantations made some tribesmen fear that their lands would be taken away and their traditional way of life destroyed. There was a renewed outbreak of violence northeast of Kontum in the late 1920s. Vehicles traveling on the new roads were ambushed, the roads themselves were cut, telegraph poles were felled and their wires removed, and Vietnamese colonists were attacked.

In March 1929 the Garde Indigène mounted a pacification effort aimed at the village of Kon Bar, a center of the insurgency. For the first time a Highland village was bombed from the air. In 1931 there was revolt in the southern part of the Highlands involving M侬g and Stieng tribesmen. French troops were ambushed, and French posts and plantations were attacked. The revolt lasted until June 1935, when a French military operation involving some loyal Highland troops reportedly killed the rebellion’s M侬g leader, Pu Trang Lung. In the late 1930s a strange millenarian religion known as the Python God
movement swept through much of the Highlands but did not inspire actual armed revolt.

While coping with dissidence in the Highlands, the French continued to open schools, including village schools designed (quite successfully) to address the Highlanders’ reluctance to send their children to boarding schools in the towns. The town schools, however, continued to be very important. The French sent some graduates of their secondary schools, generally members of elite families, for more advanced study at colleges at Qui Nhon and Hué on the coastal plain. There, the Highland students mixed with Vietnamese youth and, in many cases, learned to speak Vietnamese.

These beneficiaries of French education became the next generation of Highland leaders. Like their Vietnamese counterparts, they learned to think independently of their French masters. Some later joined the Viet Minh, while others became involved in movements for Highland autonomy. Even so, the level of indigenous opposition to French rule in the Central Highlands before 1940 was well within the capacity of the French to contain and “pacify.” External factors, particularly militant, Communist-directed Vietnamese nationalism, ultimately brought France’s rule in this region to an end. Vietnamese nationalism became a serious threat mainly because of the impact on Indochina of the Second World War.24

The Impact of the Japanese, 1940–1945

After the defeat of France in the German military campaign of May–June 1940, the collaborationist Vichy regime became the effective government of France. The French colonial authorities in Indochina accepted the authority of that regime. But their willingness to align themselves with the Axis side in the Second World War did not save Indochina from Japanese intrusion. The French briefly tried to resist Japanese demands for military bases, but they were forced to accede. Even so, the Japanese left the administration of Indochina largely in French hands until 9 March 1945. At that point, realizing that the French authorities in Indochina were now trying to assist the Allies (by this time, clearly the winning side), the Japanese pounced. They shattered the French administration and imprisoned most French officials. In relation to the size of the region, the Japanese were not present in large numbers, but even a handful of them were capable of inspiring considerable awe. Over the next few months their authority was hardly challenged in the Highlands or elsewhere in Indochina.

The situation thus became rather favorable to those who militantly opposed the restoration of French rule. The Japanese were, at this stage, prepared to
look benevolently on fellow oriental peoples who rejected European colonial rule. Indeed, on 10 March 1945 the Japanese officially informed Emperor Bao Dai, up to this point a puppet of the French, that Vietnam could celebrate its national independence. Bao Dai then formed a government under Tran Trong Kim that appeared to be progressive in its intentions but limited in terms of its real power and actual achievements.25

Most French officials in the Highlands were quickly rounded up, but others escaped into the jungle. It is impossible to generalize about the Highlanders’ reaction to the Japanese coup. Most of those serving in French military and militia units seemed to try to remain loyal. Some were able to melt into the forest; others were imprisoned, and the Japanese reportedly beheaded at least one. Some units of troops from the Central Highlands then serving in northern Vietnam were able to flee into southern China, where the Chinese looked after them until the war was over. Other Highlanders who had done military service with the French were prepared to cooperate with the Japanese and joined military units under their control. Nor was the ordinary civilian population of the Highlands solidly loyal to the French. The Japanese offered rewards for French officials and officers who, after the coup of 9 March, had fled into the forest, and some Highlanders brought Frenchmen in and collected the rewards.26

The Rise of the Viet Minh, 1941–1946

The Vietnamese had never been entirely quiescent under French rule. There had been some major revolts, which the French had usually put down with great severity. By 1945 there was a wide variety of Vietnamese nationalist, anticolonial groups. The most skillful Vietnamese leader, however, was an individual who, beginning in 1943, called himself Ho Chi Minh. A committed Communist and long-term Comintern member, he had also always portrayed himself as a Vietnamese nationalist. Before he adopted the name Ho Chi Minh, his previous pseudonym had been Nguyen Ai Quoc: Quoc the Patriot. Like many twentieth-century Communist leaders, he apparently saw no contradiction between Marxism–Leninism and nationalism.

Ho Chi Minh spent most of the Second World War in China, where, in 1941, he managed to get a number of other Vietnamese political parties to join a Communist-dominated coalition called the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (League for Vietnamese Independence), or Viet Minh for short. In 1942 Vo Nguyen Giap, a Communist colleague of Ho’s, began to organize and train guerrilla groups in the Highlands of Tonkin, on the Chinese border. According to some reports, Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam from China in October 1944.
When Japan capitulated on 15 August 1945 the Viet Minh had a nationwide political network that was better organized than that of any competing nationalist group. The politically astute Viet Minh leadership curried favor with the Americans by offering the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), intelligence on the Japanese. In exchange the OSS supplied the Viet Minh with some weapons and radios. But the Viet Minh appear to have done very little, if any, actual fighting against the Japanese. The latter were extremely dangerous military opponents but, by 1945, were not a long-term problem for the Viet Minh; their ultimate defeat seemed inevitable. After their surrender in August of that year, the Japanese permitted fairly large quantities of their arms to fall into Viet Minh hands, further strengthening that organization’s position.

In Hanoi the Viet Minh were able to take control. As soon as the Japanese capitulated, armed Viet Minh units made their presence felt in the city. The Viet Minh organized big demonstrations on 17 August, and some of their leaders appeared on a public platform there for the first time. The Viet Minh’s Communist leadership never had the slightest compunction about using violence against rival Vietnamese nationalists, and within days such groups had largely been driven off the streets. Over the next few years the Viet Minh’s domination of Vietnamese nationalism would be consolidated by assassination—the leaders of a Trotskyite group and of the armed Hoa Hao religious sect among their many victims.

The evident strength of the Viet Minh discouraged Tran Trong Kim, who in March had established a regime in Hue with Bao Dai’s approval. But on 22 August he resigned. Bao Dai accepted his resignation and invited Ho Chi Minh to form a government. On 24 August Bao Dai abdicated. Ho Chi Minh announced the formation of a provisional government on 29 August and declared Vietnamese independence on 2 September, deliberately borrowing some of Thomas Jefferson’s words from the comparable American declaration of 1776. He called the new state the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.27

The Allies, however, agreed that Vietnam should return to French rule. The British assumed responsibility for the country as far north as the sixteenth parallel, and the Chinese Nationalists assumed responsibility north of that. The British arrived in the South with a division of Indian troops on 12 September, and the first French troops arrived on British warships on 21 September. With British cooperation, the French commenced efforts to reestablish control of southern Vietnam, and street fighting broke out in Saigon almost immediately.

The Viet Minh had more armed forces at its command than any other Vietnamese nationalist group. Yet Ho Chi Minh did not consider his organization ready for an all-out war with a European power. He was very keen to avoid war, if possible, and hoped to secure the future of his regime by negotiation.
Although the French had gained control of the cities of Cochin China, their former colony in the South, by the end of 1945, they entered into negotiations with the Viet Minh before attempting to take the rest of the country. The details of these negotiations need not concern us. Suffice it to say that by the end of 1946 they had broken down, and an all-out war between France and the Viet Minh ensued.28

*Early Stages of the First Indochina War, 1946–1950*

The Viet Minh developed local militia forces and “regional force” units consisting of full-time light infantry troops operating in battalion strength across much of the country. But the principal seat of war was Tonkin. By the end of 1950 the Viet Minh were in control of much of northern Tonkin, including the Chinese border. This was crucial. From 1949, after a huge civil war, China had a Communist government. Mao Zedong, its leader, was ideologically committed to supporting his fellow revolutionaries in Vietnam.

With lavish Chinese military aid, the Viet Minh were able to develop, in northern Tonkin, a powerful, more or less conventional, “regular” army (the immediate predecessor of the People’s Army of Vietnam [PAVN]). It consisted of several 10,000-man divisions, incorporating artillery and engineers as well as infantry, and was capable of taking on French forces in full-scale battle. It became part of the Viet Minh style of war to integrate the operations of local militia, regional force units, and “regulars.”29 The Vietnamese Communists would continue to employ this style in the Second Indochina War.

An early political development in the Highlands during the First Indochina War was the formation of the Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois (PMSI) in 1946, which separated the administration of the Central Highlands from that of the rest of Vietnam. What the French intended to accomplish by this is not entirely clear. In any case, the arrangement did not last very long.

*War in the Central Highlands, 1950–1954*

The major battles of the Franco–Viet Minh War were fought in Tonkin. The Central Highlands region was always a backwater in comparison. There were still relatively few Vietnamese in the region, and for the first few years of the war, Viet Minh activity there was very low key. By 1950, however, French control of the region was increasingly contested as Viet Minh propaganda teams and small military units became active. Roads were frequently mined and ambushed. Outposts were attacked. The French were particularly concerned
that the Viet Minh might seize the town of Ban Me Thuot, so they established
defensive posts around it.

In 1949 the French had conceded a limited form of independence to Viet-
nam within the French Union. Bao Dai, who had briefly joined the Viet Minh
government at one point, agreed to be its head of state. Despite his earlier
abdication, he once again assumed the title of emperor, leaving the question
of whether the new Vietnamese state would ultimately be a monarchy or a re-
public undecided. Bao Dai adopted the Highland town of Dalat as his place of
residence, and the Central Highlands theoretically became his crown domain,
although the region continued to be administered by French officials. In late
1950, with French backing, Bao Dai began to establish an army for the new
Vietnamese state, which attracted some Vietnamese who were unhappy at the
prospect of a Communist future. In March 1951 his military staff and its French
mentors decided to establish the 4th Vietnamese Light Division to operate in
the Highlands.30 This unit became known as the Division Montagnarde, as
most of its personnel were not ethnic Vietnamese but Highlanders from a va-
riety of tribes, including the Rhade, Jarai, Bahnar, Mnong, Sedang, Maa, and
Hre. Ultimately, the division numbered 9,000 men and operated four infantry
battalions, in at least three of which the rank and file consisted entirely of
Highlanders. Although most of the officers were French or Vietnamese, there
were some Highlanders as well.

Some of the 4th Division’s officers were trained at the Vietnamese army’s
principal military academy at Dalat (the equivalent of West Point) and others
at the Ecole Militaire Regionale du Lac at Lac Thien in southern Darlac Prov-
ince. One of the most senior officers was Touprong Ya Ba, commander of the
7th Battalion; a member of the Chru ethnic group, he had been serving in the
French army since 1941. The formation of the 4th Division brought together
Highlanders from many different ethnic groups and helped develop an increas-
ing sense of Highland solidarity. The Rhade tended to be the most educated,
sophisticated, and politically conscious of the major Highland groups, and the
Rhade language became something of a lingua franca for this Pan–Highland
elite.

The 4th Division’s operational area was huge. In its first year of operations
it claimed 1,000 Viet Minh killed and 600 captured. With no artillery or heavy
weapons of its own, and with a relatively loose, informal style of discipline, the
troops of the 4th Division could be effective in counterguerrilla operations but
were less suited to more conventional, high-intensity fighting.

In addition to the 4th Division, there were a number of smaller Highland
military and paramilitary units. Some of these were essentially home guard
units providing security for towns and villages. But they also included the
Detachements Legeres de Brousse (Light Brush Detachments), designed to be
more mobile and play a more aggressive role, including performing reconnaissance in remote areas and ambushing small enemy units.

From mid-1951 the French also began to organize commando (or maquis) units, which were designed to remain in the field for long periods, gather intelligence, disrupt Viet Minh communications, and destroy weapons and food stocks. These units, which had a total strength of somewhere between 15,000 and 25,000 by the end of the war, operated in various parts of Indochina and were recruited from several ethnic groups. A substantial proportion, however, were Highlanders operating in the Central Highlands region. Commando units varied in size from 10 to 1,000 riflemen, with the average being about 400. A French officer or noncommissioned officer was normally in command. In mid-1952 these units were grouped for administrative purposes under an organization initially called the Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aeroporte (Composite Airborne Commando Group); in December 1953 its name was changed to the Groupement Mixte d’Intervention. The overall commander was Major Roger Trinquier, who developed a reputation as one of France’s foremost experts on unconventional warfare.

The French eventually considered some of their Highlander troops capable of relatively high-intensity warfare. In the later years of the war the French high command began to establish mechanized formations known as Groupements Mobiles (GM), and two of these—GM-41 and GM-42—had predominantly Highland personnel. GM-42 was involved in very heavy fighting in the Central Highlands in the last few months of the war.31

During the First Indochina War, therefore, the French and Bao Dai made determined appeals for Highlander support, recruiting many into their armed forces and bringing a considerable number into their civil administration. It would be wrong to suppose, however, that all Highlanders rallied to them. The Viet Minh also directed propaganda at Highlanders and raised Highland troops.

Highlanders certainly had grievances that the Viet Minh could exploit. Many of these arose from the war itself. The corvée, sometimes known as the “leprosy” of the Highlands, had always been an unpopular aspect of French rule. This intensified in wartime, when Highland labor was used not only for road maintenance but also for cutting new trails through the forest, building emergency airstrips, and transporting supplies. Considerable numbers of Highlanders reportedly died during wartime corvée service, although there are no statistics available. As the British did in their counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya at the same time, and as the South Vietnamese and the Americans did later during the Second Indochina War, the French destroyed villages and displaced the inhabitants to control the population and deprive the enemy of resources. This was often intensely unpopular with Highlanders, especially
when it involved the loss of rice stocks and animals and the abandonment of ancestral tombs.\textsuperscript{32}

In the early 1950s the Viet Minh recruited a number of Highland units in Kontum Province, north of the provincial capital, and the French found them to be dangerous enemies.\textsuperscript{33} By early 1953, however, the Viet Minh were shifting toward more conventional high-intensity operations even in the Central Highlands, and for these they placed little reliance on Highland troops. In mid-January of that year, using battalions brought in from Quang Ngai Province on the coastal plain, they feinted toward the town of Pleiku and then carried out a major attack toward An Khe, on the eastern edge of the Highlands on the road between Pleiku and the coast. Much of the 4th Division was sent to counter this threat. The French command, however, soon realized that this division could not cope on its own and rushed paratrooper, artillery, and air elements to support it. This prevented the 4th Division from disintegrating and, for the time being, contained the threat.\textsuperscript{34}

By late 1953 the French found themselves stretched very thin across Indochina. At the same time they were concentrating a substantial proportion of their best-equipped forces at Dien Bien Phu, in a valley of the Thai highlands of western Tonkin, on the Laotian border. This was a somewhat desperate gambit designed to tempt the Viet Minh to commit its “regular” divisions to a large-scale battle in which the French, with their superior firepower and airpower, hoped to win an impressive victory and alter the course of the war. In early December 1953, therefore, the French high command began stripping forces out of the Central Highlands. This presented the Viet Minh with opportunities.

In January 1954 the Viet Minh mounted an offensive designed to take control of the northern part of the Central Highlands. The main effort was initially in the Kontum sector. The small town of Dak To, north of the town of Kontum, the provincial capital, fell to the Viet Minh on 1 February. The French soon realized they could not hold the provincial capital of Kontum and abandoned it on 7 February. Although the French organized the evacuation of all French civilians and Vietnamese civil servants, they did not make adequate provision for their Highland civil servants. According to testimony later given by one of these Highlanders, Philippe Yuk, to American anthropologist Gerald Hickey, panic gripped the town. Civil servants, schoolteachers, and their families, together with Catholic missionaries and priests, fled into the forest.

There were apparently few Highlanders in the Viet Minh force that occupied Kontum. Perhaps aware of the potential problems of using an overwhelmingly Vietnamese army of occupation to control a predominantly Highland population, the Viet Minh sent one of their ablest converts, Nay Der, a talented Jarai schoolteacher from Cheo Reo, to Kontum. In April 1954 Nay Der stayed for three days in the house of a Bahnar leader who had died in 1945.
According to Hickey: “He invited all the local highland leaders to attend a pig sacrifice in the front yard of the house. There, under the watchful eye of the Viet Minh guards, Nay Der extolled the virtues of the Viet Minh movement while all drank from the jars.”

While the Viet Minh occupied Kontum, the French concentrated their most powerful and mobile forces in the Highlands in and around the town of Pleiku. Among them were GM-11, which was predominantly Vietnamese; GM-42, which consisted mainly of Highland troops; and GM-100, a racially mixed force that included French troops who had fought in the Korean War. During the last few weeks of the First Indochina War, GM-100 would fight a series of bloody and desperate battles. Owing to the writings of journalist and historian Bernard Fall, the harrowing saga of GM-100 would become one of the better-known episodes of this war among educated American officers. By May 1954 elements of GM-100 had already experienced some hard and bloody combat in the Highlands. But it seems particularly tragic that its grimmest wartime episodes occurred after the decisive battle of the First Indochina War was over. On 7 May 1954 the last French troops still resisting at Dien Bien Phu surrendered to the Viet Minh. While the French and the Viet Minh negotiated at Geneva, however, the war in the Highlands continued.
In late June the crisis point in the Highlands became the town of An Khe, on Route 19 between Pleiku and the coast, which was under threat from two Viet Minh regiments. The French decided to evacuate the town and pull back along the road to Pleiku, although they realized this would be a difficult operation. Between 24 June, when the evacuation commenced, and 28 June there was almost continuous fighting along Route 19, with GM-100 as well as the predominantly Highland GM-42 in the thick of it. Elements of the Viet Minh’s 803d and 108th Regiments, the latter reinforced by the elite 30th Independent Battalion, mounted a series of fierce ambushes.

GM-100 suffered grievous casualties in a devastating ambush on 24 June but was not completely destroyed. Surviving elements linked up with GM-42 and other French forces retreating from An Khe. The last major ambush during the withdrawal to Pleiku occurred on 28 June 1954, at a point 30 km from Pleiku, where the jungle gave way to an open plain. The Viet Minh’s 108th Regiment
and 30th Independent Battalion were caught in the open by French B-26 fighter-bombers flying from bases in the coastal town of Nha Trang. Napalm strikes and strafing ripped through the Viet Minh forces, obliging them to abandon their attack and run for cover in the jungle. When the remnants of GM-100 limped into Pleiku on 29 June, however, the group had lost the bulk of its vehicles and heavy equipment and much of its personnel.

Even the retreat from An Khe, occurring a month and a half after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, was not the end of the ordeal. Some elements of GM-100, including the 1st Korea Battalion (a French unit that had fought in the Korean War before coming to Indochina), along with survivors of GM-42, formed a task force to clear Route 14 between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot, an operation code-named Myosotis. The task force set off on 14 July. On 17 July the Viet Minh ambushed it at Chu Dreh Pass, inflicting especially heavy casualties on the luckless 1st Korea, which ceased to exist as a fighting unit. The final session of the Geneva conference was held on 21 July, the day the First Indochina War officially ended.37

By the end of the war the Viet Minh had conquered a substantial part of the northern Central Highlands, including the towns of Kontum and An Khe. The towns of Pleiku, Cheo Reo, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat, however, were still occupied by French Union forces. Much of the rest of the region was a no-man’s-land.

The Allegiance of Highlanders after the First Indochina War

The Viet Minh had adherents among the Highlanders and had raised some Highland military units but apparently did not rely on them heavily. In the most serious fighting that occurred in the Highlands, in the 1954 operations around Kontum and An Khe and in their campaign to destroy the forces retreating from An Khe to Pleiku, they used units of ethnic Vietnamese from outside the region. The French and the Bao Dai regime raised substantially larger Highland forces than did the Viet Minh and relied on them more heavily during the intense fighting of the last weeks of the war. Considerable numbers of Highlanders also served the anti-Communist regime in a civil capacity.

The Geneva Accords, which split Vietnam, at least temporarily, at the seventeenth parallel, left the Central Highlands in the South. Some Highlanders who had started their military or civil careers on the anti-Communist side preferred to stick with that side and continue their careers, although they would often find employment by the fiercely nationalistic and rather ethnocentric Vietnamese regime of Ngo Dinh Diem less congenial than working for the French.
The outcome of the First Indochina War, however, gave everyone good reason to believe that the Vietnamese Communists would eventually emerge as masters of the region. Regardless of whether Marxism-Leninism had an intrinsic appeal to them, some Highlanders thought it made sense to throw in their lot with the winning side. In the post-1954 period, moreover, the Communists initially appeared to be much more sensitive and respectful in their handling of the Highlanders than was the South Vietnamese regime. They certainly made bigger promises; however duplicitous these may have been, they probably gained some credence.

A third group of educated Highlanders, angry at Vietnamese colonization of their lands and at the loss of Highland life in Vietnamese quarrels, would call for a plague on both Vietnamese houses. Prepared to embrace Highlanders of all tribes as brothers, they would demand autonomy for their region and would be prepared to fight for it.38

Whatever their political views, all Highlanders and all Vietnamese living in the Highlands faced a grim future. They were cursed by strategic geography. The Central Highlands, a relative backwater for most of the First Indochina War, would become a major battleground in the second.