

EAR-OLD COUNTRY

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE 40th ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONWIDE WAR OF RESISTANCE (DECEMBER 19, 1946 — DECEMBER 19, 1986).

Hist Vietnam
FILE SUM
DATE BUREAU
1986

WE WOULD RATHER SACRIFICE EVERYTHING

Only twenty days after President Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence giving birth to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam), French troops occupied Saigon and the Mekong delta provinces. The following year they seized key points in the whole country, resolved as they were to « make France's presence felt in Indochina » as Admiral d'Argenlieu (1) had told the press before he flew to Indochina to assume the post of high-commissioner.

Having no alternative, the Vietnamese were compelled to fight a 9-year war of resistance.

Following are excerpts from Vo Nguyen Giap's memoirs relating this historic period in Hanoi 40 years ago.

(...) From mid-December, French armed provocations in Hanoi took a new turn.

On December 15, they fired at our policemen in Hang Dau Park, threw grenades wounding two of our national guards in Ham Long street, staged provocations against members of our self-defence corps in Tran Quoc Toan street, and seized a rickshaw and took it to the Don Thuy military hospital.

On December 17, French spotters circled over Hanoi the whole day.

At 10 a.m. French armoured cars demolished our fortifications in Lo Duc street and moved away their wooden poles. When our men in the Liaison mission protested, they said they did on order from their superiors.

Meanwhile, in Hang Bun street, a detachment of the French Foreign Legion jumped on earthworks from a military truck and cut down our people with gunfire.

At the riposte of our self-defence men, more French troops arrived, broke into civilian houses and massacred women and children. Dozens of them were killed or wounded, some having their throats cut. A number of women were carried away. Later on, French legionaries made a house-to-house search, causing more civilian casualties.

At noon, the French deployed their forces from the Citadel to Long Bien bridge and beleaguered the police station in Precinct 2.

At the Yen Phu electric power plant which was guarded by a mixed Vietnamese and French team set up barely a few days ago, a French soldier suddenly opened fire and killed his Vietnamese counterpart. The workers staged a big demonstration against this perfidious act of the French.

In the afternoon, the French pounded Hang Bun street with mortar shells, and groups of French moved along the street, breaking the window panes of many houses.

Strictly obeying the orders of their superiors, our soldiers and homeguards did not fire a shot. They strengthened their fortifications and calmly watched the enemy's moves.

Later, we came to know that on the 17th, from Saigon, Valluy (2) flew to Haiphong to meet with Dehès (3) and Morlière (4) who were joined by Sainteny (5) coming from Hanoi to receive new instructions.

The city was outwardly calm in the whole morning of the 18th. Our men in the Liaison mission were not disturbed by urgent telephone calls as in the previous days. At the end of the morning Captain Chantillon, head of the French Liaison mission suddenly handed to our side a letter reading:



● December 1946: Hanoi homeguards ready to destroy enemy armoured vehicles.

« The French Command will be obliged to take necessary measures to ensure the security of its army and French and foreign residents. That is why it will post its troops at the Service of Finance (now the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the residence of the director of communications and transport in Pasquier road (now Dien Bien Phu street). Anything that obstructs its troops movement should be demolished. Otherwise the French army would take up the matter in hand. »

This was the first ultimatum issued by the French in Hanoi.

Two hours later, escorted by tanks and armoured cars, French military trucks roared the streets near the Citadel, besieging the Hong Ha and Cua Dong quarters and the Hang Chieu street. Armoured cars destroyed our fortifications in Hang But street.

Late in the afternoon, the French Liaison mission handed us a second ultimatum saying:

« On December 18, 1946, the Hanoi police failed to discharge its duty. If this situation is not improved, the French army will itself take charge of security affairs in Hanoi, at the latest on the morning of December 20, 1946. »

Our Liaison mission replied forthwith:

« The excuse that the Vietnamese police is not up to its duty is an out-and-out lie. The French army cannot use this pretext to infringe upon our security right, the supreme right of free Vietnam. »

On the same day, while French spotters circled over Hanoi, at a village near a small river in Ha Dong (now Ha Son Binh) the central committee of our Party met to assess the situation and set forward a new program of action. (...) Early on the 19th, the French Command sent another ultimatum, the 3rd in two days, demanding that our self-defence forces in Hanoi be disarmed, that all preparations for the resistance be stopped and that security work in Hanoi be handed over to the French army.

So the French did make a step further: to disarm our self-defence forces. What had occurred in Haiphong at the end of November was being repeated here. In Haiphong, the French had raised many conditions which they knew, were unacceptable to us, before they launched their attack to occupy the city.

In a short letter to Sainteny, President Ho Chi Minh wrote: « *In the last few days, the situation has grown tense. This is very regrettable. Pending a decision from Paris, I hope you will join Mr. Hoang Minh Giam in seeking a solution likely to improve the present situation.* »

The bearer of the letter was Hoang Minh Giam. Our Liaison mission informed its French counterpart that Mr. Hoang Minh Giam wanted to meet the delegate of the French Republic right that afternoon. But Sainteny rejected this proposal, saying that we should wait until the next day.

The following day, December 20, was the time limit set by Morlière who declared that the French troops would take action should the right to reestablish order and security not be handed over to them. Did this mean that the French wanted to refuse all settlements. In an article carried later by the Paris — Saigon paper, Sainteny was quoted as having declared that France was in a position of strength and would calmly wait from this position. In the previous fortnight, except for those assigned with carrying out acts of sabotage and provocation, all French troops were confined to barracks. When were they going to start the hostilities, we did not know.

On the 19th, in the afternoon, Tran Quoc Hoan, Vuong Thua Vu and I visited our soldiers and people in their combat preparedness.

In O Cho Dua street, all doors were closed, and tramcars continued their service, but with few passengers in the direction of Hanoi. Old people and children left the capital in rickshaws. The evacuees never thought that it would take them long years before they could see their beloved capital again. With shot-guns hanging on their shoulders or hand-grenades at their sides, the homeguards moved about checking the holes dug into tree trunks for dynamite laying.

(...) We visited the fire-nests and talked to the homeguards who told us: « At noon, a French half-track moved in. Seeing our overturned earthen pots in front of our fortifications its driver immediately turned tail.

The boys and girls who were making preparations for the fight were still alien to warfare. But through our conversation with them, we noted that they were very optimistic. They did not know what would become of them, but we were sure they would surmount all trials.

Night fell rapidly. The streets were deserted. It was cold and dry. The houses were bathed in a yellowish light.

Outwardly, the city seemed to be harmed by the icy cold weather, and slept early. But inwardly a seething atmosphere prevailed. All combatants were present at their fortifications. It was reported that all the French troops had left the cafés and restaurants and enemy armoured cars had moved towards the crossroads.

On the evening of December 20, the « Voice of Vietnam » radio, temporarily installed in a locality near Hanoi, broadcast President Ho Chi Minh's appeal to the nation:

« Fellow countrymen throughout the country,
We want peace, so we made concessions. But the more concessions we made,
the further the French inched forward, as they are resolved to occupy our
country once again.

No, we would rather sacrifice everything than lose our country and be enslaved »

The nation-wide war of resistance broke out.

(1) Admiral D'argenlieu, High commissioner of France in Indochina.

(2) General Valluy, commander-in-chief of the French Expeditionary corps in Indochina (1946).

(3) Colonel Debès, commander of the French Forces in Haiphong port city.

(4) General Morlière, commander-in-chief of the French Forces in Indochina (before Valluy).

(5) Jean Sainteny, Envoy of Admiral D'argenlieu, High commissioner of France in Indochina (1946).

VN 12186