12.2

The Vietnam War: How It Began

An Event that Divided the World

Australian soldiers, including conscripts (young men forced to join the armed services) were sent to fight in Vietnam, a small, poor Asian country west of the Philippines, from 1965 to 1972. They fought on the side of a superpower, the United States of America, against a much poorer, badly equipped enemy. But it turned out to be a war the superpower and its allies could not win. For many reasons it divided the people of most Western nations, including the Australian people, more than any other event of this century.

In this section we will investigate the question: Why did Australia become involved in the Vietnam War?

The Australian Government’s Official Reason

The Australian government claimed to be sending Australian soldiers to Vietnam, because a small, free country, South Vietnam, was being invaded by a communist country, North Vietnam. The government’s propaganda (advertising to persuade people to act or think a certain way) told people that the Vietnam War was a simple struggle between freedom and communism, and that the free nations had to get involved to stop communism taking over and spreading to other countries. Many Western people at the time were opposed to the war, though, and most now regard it as a terrible tragedy.

The Historical Background

In the late nineteenth century, France took over Vietnam and the nearby countries of Laos and Cambodia. It called them French Indochina, made them colonies of its empire and crushed those who tried to resist French rule.

In 1950 Ho Chi Minh formed the Indochinese Communist Party, and during the Second World War, he formed an independence movement called the Vietminh. It united many communists and nationalists in a struggle to free Vietnam from the Japanese, who had occupied it in 1940–5, and from French rule. His guerrilla forces helped the Americans to fight against the Japanese.

When the Second World War ended, the Vietminh declared Vietnam’s independence, but the French, helped by the

Source A

...the military demarcation line (the 17th parallel, 17 degrees north of the equator, dividing north and south)... should not in any way be interpreted as... a political or territorial boundary...

The Conference declares that... general elections shall be held in July 1956.

From the Geneva Accords of 1954.

Source B

The War that Can’t Be Won

The Menzies Government has made a declaration to Vietnam which this nation may live to regret. It has decided to send Australian soldiers into a savage, revolutionary war... so that America may have a tiny part of her embarrassment.

Searching for friends, America has turned to her Anzus and Seato associates in the Western Pacific... It is wrong because it deliberately... runs counter to the mounting wave of international anxiety about the shape of the Vietnam war.

From the Australian, 30 April 1965.

Source C

Our objective should be... to achieve such... closeness of relations with the United States... that in our time of need... the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want.

Advice given to the Australian government by the Australian Embassy in the United States on 11 May 1964, in support of American requests to Australia for aid in Vietnam.

British, came back to try to rule their old colony. This caused a war between France and the Vietminh, which ended with French defeat in 1954.

At the end of the war, the Vietminh controlled the north of the country. In the south there was an unpopular government set up by the French with its capital in Saigon. An international conference was held at Geneva in Switzerland and it made a list of agreements called the Geneva Accords to settle the conflict.

One of the agreements was that Vietnam would be divided into two parts for two years. Then elections would be held to reunite the country under leaders supported by the people. However, in the south a new leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, took power with American support. He would not discuss elections to reunite the country and so a civil war began.

The civil war was not just between the north and south. In both parts of the country there were people who supported the government of the other part. In December 1960 the National Liberation Front (NLF) was formed in the south. It formed a fighting organisation that became known as the Vietcong to fight against the government of the south.

The United States had supported the French and from the start it helped the government in the south. By 1961 the USA was sending troops to fight for the Saigon government in the south, and its allies like Australia were about to do the same.