Topic: A Colonial Army and Militia Force Without Purpose? Imperial Policing of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets in North-Central Annam, 1930-31

Abstract

Most accounts of the 'Revolutionary High tide' of 1930-31 in the two neighbouring provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh (known under their compound name as Nghe-Tinh) in north-central Annam analyse how (and to what extent) communists organized the Nghe-Tinh Soviets, what actually caused parts of the population to rise, and deal with the repression of this perhaps most serious challenge to imperial rule in French Indochina in a generation.

In contrast to looking at agency and motivation, this paper looks at an unlikely conjunction of facilitating medium-and short-term factors that substantially weakened the colonial state's tools of coercion in Annam. Structural and institutional weaknesses effectively led to a military and policing problem in Nghe-Tinh for the most part of 1930. Chief among them was, ever since pacification was declared over in the late 1890s, a tendency to garrison most colonial troops in Tonkin and Cochinchina rather than Annam. Moreover, following the Great War, the strength of militia guards in the region was considerably reduced. Coupled with insufficient intelligence forces (the feared Sûreté), and the arguably hybrid nature of the protectorate state in Annam, its coercive power was weak.

These medium-term factors alone, however, do not sufficiently explain why the French hesitated to send in more colonial troops from nearby Tonkin. In fact, a few months before the escalation of conflict in Annam, the nationalist-led Yen Bay mutiny of early February 1930 in northern Tonkin had seriously sapped French trust in their indigenous troops. A number of measures were taken that prevented the colonial authorities from deploying more troops to the restive parts of Annam. This weakness arguably led to an excessive use of force against demonstrators and insurgents, thus further fuelling unrest, but the underutilization of the indigenous colonial forces also raises questions regarding the costs and benefits of having such troops.

[The presentation builds on an unpublished paper – see attached – that mainly concerns itself with the Yen Bay mutiny and its effects on the French-Indochinese military.]
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