In *Des vietnamiens dans la Grande Guerre*, Mireille Le Van Ho makes use of the corpus of available materials deposited in French military and national archives to provide insight into France’s decision to mobilize nearly fifty thousand Vietnamese to serve in France as workers during World War I, and how such a decision affected both France and Indochina during and after the war. When the decision was made, it triggered debates in France among military and government leaders. There was opposition not only from the leaders of the French socialist party and the trade unions but also from the colonists in Indochina, where the nationalist movement exploited the mobilization to stir up revolts. When the war was over, although the mobilization of laborers from Indochina had remedied the urgent shortage of manpower in factories producing weapons and munitions for growing war needs, its impact on both France and Indochina was long lasting: it rattled not only the French colonial enterprise in Indochina but also the centuries-old social order of Vietnamese society.

According to the author, to carry out the mobilization in Indochina the French depended on “corrupt notables and mandarins” to round up peasants and force them to sign up. Peasants in Cochinchina resisted by fleeing to the hinterlands or deserting their military units, while only a few in Tonkin and Annam resisted such attempts at forced recruitment. As a result, the majority of the Vietnamese recruits that went to France consisted of conscripted/forced labor from Tonkin and Annam. The author
provides two reasons for such a difference. First, since Cochinchinese peasants could earn good wages, they were not attracted to the terms of the recruiting campaign. Because northern peasants were poor and had faced natural disasters for several years, they were attracted to what the French had to offer. Second, using an analogy of what happened to Cambodian village chiefs [mekhum], the author argues that, like Cambodia, Cochinchina had been under direct French rule for several decades, so its village leaders, like the mekhum, no longer had the same power and authority as that of their counterparts in Tonkin and Annam (where France governed indirectly through the imperial court system) to force peasants to sign up. Therefore, the author argues, the ruling elites in northern villages were able to coerce peasants into signing up using the corvée system, where the peasants had to perform “chores” in the villages such as repairing roads and maintaining dikes for free.

Once in France, Le Van Ho points out, besides learning of new ideas such as democracy, liberty, and freedom of association that did not exist in Indochina, the Vietnamese also experienced exploitation, racial discrimination, and prejudice that eventually changed their perceptions about France and its people and their attitudes toward the established order and the colonial enterprise in Indochina. This transformation was behind their desire for social change when they returned to Indochina. Seeing that Indochina was resistant to change, they united to challenge both traditional and colonial authorities, and to demand equal treatment and the right to participate in the governing of their country.

The author concludes that the war and the “forced displacement” (224) of the peasants brought irreversible changes in Indochina; such changes challenged the established order in the country. To deal with those challenges, the colonial regime used violence. These two contradicting forces played against each other and triggered conflicts in Indochina.

*Des vietnamiens dans la Grande Guerre* has revived the story of Vietnamese participation in World War I, which “has been ignored while the participation of (other French colonies such as) Algeria, Morocco, and Senegal has been well known” (7) (all translations by the reviewer unless otherwise noted). The book has probably enabled those who claim Vietnamese heritage and those whose ancestors were recruits from Indochina in
France during World War I to discover a missing piece of their heritage. For researchers who want to further explore the history of French Indo-china, this book also contains rich archival information and a lengthy bibliography to mine information.

Despite the book’s importance and usefulness, the author does not break any new ground in asserting that peasants, especially those in Tonkin and Annam, were “forced” to go to France. Nguyên Ái Quốc, alias Hồ Chí Minh, claimed that peasants “were taken in chains...confined to school grounds....Most of them will never again see their country.”¹ Later historians following on this theme include Martin J. Murray, who claimed “the recruitment was ostensibly voluntary,” and Joseph Buttinger, who expanded on Nguyên Ái Quốc’s claim by saying that they were “forcibly recruited” and that “many preferred self-multilation to being shipped to France.”² The author’s claim that peasants were powerless against abuses and exploitation by mandarins, wealthy landowners, and village leaders, however, could not be further from the truth. This view overlooks the fact that while the peasants were the victims of a system that was designed to exploit them, they also benefited from that system. In that system, the peasants depended on village leaders to maintain law and social order, to serve as judges, and to protect their interests against the ruler’s exploitation; not all were corrupt and oppressive. The corvée system, which Le Van Ho claims was used by village leaders to conscript laborers for the French campaign, was in fact designed to divide tasks among villagers: guard and patrol duties, dike maintenance, road repairs, and so on. If those chores were not done, the peasants would suffer from social and economic disasters, such as dike breaks, leading to a loss of harvests or invasion of villages by bandits.

It was also the wealthy landowners and the villagers that the peasants turned to in times of financial hardship to tide them over until the next harvest. This is not to say that the peasants were not exploited, only that for centuries the system had worked for the benefit of both groups. Moreover, the wealthy villagers and the village elites then were no different from rich and powerful people in today’s world who use their money and influence to avoid doing manual labor jobs and performing their public duties. The peasants of Vietnam also had always lived in poverty, which existed long
before the French arrived; therefore, they had always made choices and compromised in dire circumstances in order to get what was best for themselves and their families.

In the context of World War I, many peasants were not forcibly conscripted but, for various reasons, chose to volunteer, as was the case of those from Tonkin and Annam, who formed an overwhelming majority, or seven-eighths, of the men from Indochina who went to France.³ Before modern technology enabled humankind to take steps to prevent and remedy havoc caused by natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and famines, the life of peasants was precarious. Famines caused by natural disasters were common in provinces in the Red River Delta in today’s northern and north central Vietnam. When famine struck, inhabitants left their villages and wandered to beg for food.⁴ Between 1902 and 1918, floods occurred every year. In 1913, for example, ninety-four thousand hectares of rice fields were submerged under water, and only one-third of that area was cultivable; the rest remained inundated two decades later. Pierre Gourou (1900–1999), a French geographer specializing in rural Indochina, wrote that after the flood of 1915, right at the outbreak of World War I, 25 percent of cultivable land in the Tonkin Delta was submerged under six meters of water. After the flood, “the land became deserted. There was no sign of centuries of Man’s labor. Everything was level, no tomb, no tree, no sign of life.”⁵ In such dire circumstances, it is no wonder that thousands of men would sign up for military service in France as a means to escape misery and poverty and provide for their loved ones, knowing full well the kind of danger they would face. One poor peasant stated that he joined the colonial army so that he would “no longer be regarded as a coolie.”⁶

However, Nguyễn Ái Quốc’s claim that “peasants were taken in chains” and “were confined to school grounds” did bear some truth. In Cochin-china, for example, when the colonial government announced the recruiting campaign, about seven hundred indigenous soldiers in the colonial army deserted their posts, and 33 percent of reservists declared themselves unfit for duty or did not register. To fill the quota, local leaders, French and native alike, in thirteen provinces such as Mỹ Tho, Tây Ninh, Sa Đéc, Gò Công, and Gia Định, resorted to rounding up peasants and forcing them to sign up. Some of them were even put in chains. Peasants, however, did not
take such abuses lying down. While some fled to the hinterland, others reacted violently, using sticks, sickles, and scythes to chase village notables. The Governor of Cochinchina took steps to demote and remove natives and French officials from their posts. In Tonkin, when a village leader forced a man to sign up, the man’s wife filed a complaint with General Pherivong, the inspector general and commander of Lombard Division in Tonkin. As a result, her husband was released and returned to his family. Peasants of Vietnam, in these cases, demonstrated they did not take abuses and oppression lightly.

In volunteering to go to France during the war, the peasants had calculated the risks and the benefits before deciding to sign up: facing dire circumstances, they chose to go to France in the hope of building a better life for themselves and for their loved ones once the war was over. Their family members, on the other hand, agreed to let their loved ones—husbands or sons—go to France, knowing full well that it was a risky decision, because the recruits might never return. But it was a risk that the whole family had to take before they could hope for a better future. As in the past, when peasants traveled in small groups in search of temporary work and their leaders bargained for their wages, the men about to sign up to serve in France did not simply accept the terms offered by the recruiting agents; instead, they demanded a better price for their services. The campaign offered a 25-franc bonus; they demanded 53 francs, plus a cash advance to be paid to their families before they departed for France. The French government gave in and issued a decree to increase the volunteering bonus to 20 piasters, or about 53 francs at the time. Records also show that some factory worker groups were able to save millions of francs in total by putting money in saving accounts and buying (French) national war bonds and money orders to send to their families in Indochina. For example, by 1918 a group of 36,715 workers was able to save 5,943,933 francs in savings bonds, cash in savings accounts in banks, and money orders sent to their families in Vietnam. Sadly, inflation and the depreciation of the franc during and after the war reduced their wealth; many even fell right back into poverty. When they signed up, the rate of exchange stipulated in their contract was 2.5 francs per piaster. By 1919 it was 5 francs per piaster, and by 1920 it was 16 francs per piaster.
Of course, one could argue, as Hồ Chí Minh did, that since the recruits were kept in isolation and prohibited from having any contact with anyone outside the staging areas and since their families were wailing because they were prevented from seeing the recruits, the recruits were conscripted labor.¹² Such a conclusion lacks insight into the contemporary circumstances and human emotions. There was a cholera epidemic in the country, all recruits were kept in isolation, and all ships were quarantined for seventy-two hours to avoid infection; therefore, their family members were not allowed to make physical contact with them to prevent the spread of cholera to the staging areas and to the ships. This prohibition caused family members further grief, besides the sorrow of having to part with their loved ones.¹³

In summary, to say that the Vietnamese peasants were “forced” to go to France is to say that they were incapable of making decisions that they believed were best for their lives and, in saying so, to rob them of the noble intentions and the sacrifices they had chosen to make for the betterment of their families. Although the French government acted in bad faith by not fulfilling some of the promises it made during the recruiting campaign, it can be said that the Vietnamese recruits were not conscripted labor because they made their decision to go to France with a goal in mind, even though in the end they did not get what they had bargained for.

In her book, Le Van Ho has brought to light a story that was buried in the chain of events in between the two world wars that caused the downfall of French colonialism in Indochina. However, the author has failed to do justice to the Vietnamese recruits in World War I by portraying them as victims of others and by overlooking their ability to make decisions and take risks in order to rise above their desperate circumstances.

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Notes

3. 9 PA 13/3 (Papiers d’Albert Sarraut in Archives Nationale d’Outre Mer or ANOM), Memo from the Governor General of Indochina to the Governors of Cochin-China, Résident Supérieurs in Tonkin, Annam, and Cambodia, on the total numbers of soldiers and workers from Indochina who served in France during World War I and their repatriation to Indochina in postwar time, June 2, 1918.


6. 1 SLOTFOM 8, (Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires de la France d’Outre Mer in ANOM), Postal Control Report, March 1917.


10. NF 226 (Nouveau Fond in ANOM), report by agent of Control Services, May 24, 1918.