

# The Haiphong Incident: How a Customs Dispute Sparked War

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The Haiphong Incident was a military action undertaken by French forces in the port city of Haiphong, Vietnam, in November 1946. This naval bombardment ended diplomatic efforts between France and the newly declared Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The incident is recognized by historians as the precursor to the First Indochina War, moving the conflict from localized skirmishes to a full-scale war for independence.

## The Political Context of 1946

The political landscape in 1946 was defined by the Franco-Vietnamese Accords signed on March 6, an agreement intended to manage the post-World War II power vacuum. The Accords, negotiated by Jean Sainteny and Ho Chi Minh, recognized the DRV as a “free state” with its own government, parliament, army, and finances, but required integration into the French Union and the Indochinese Federation. The agreement stipulated that French forces could remain in northern Vietnam for five years to replace the departing Chinese Nationalist troops. This arrangement generated mutual distrust, as French High Commissioner Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu and other hardliners worked to undermine the Accords.

Subsequent negotiations, including a conference at Fontainebleau, failed to resolve disagreements over Vietnamese independence and the status of the southern region of Cochinchina. France continued to act inconsistently with the idea of a truly free state, leading the Viet Minh General Staff to conclude by mid-October that a French attack was imminent. The failure of political dialogue and French concessions set the stage for a localized military confrontation to spiral into a wider conflict.

## The Customs Dispute and Initial Skirmishes

The immediate catalyst for French military action was a conflict over the control of customs and trade in the Haiphong harbor. Both French and Viet Minh authorities asserted the right to inspect arriving ships and collect import duties, an issue of sovereignty and financial control. The dispute escalated on November 20, 1946, when a French patrol vessel seized a Chinese junk attempting to smuggle gasoline into the port.

Vietnamese soldiers responded by firing on the French ship from the shore, leading to armed clashes and localized fighting on land. This initial skirmish resulted in approximately

29 French soldiers killed between November 20 and 23. The French commander in Haiphong, Colonel Debès, received orders from General Jean Étienne Valluy, commander of French forces in Indochina, to take control. Valluy instructed him to “give a severe lesson” and “make yourself complete master of Haiphong.”

### **The French Naval Bombardment of Haiphong**

The central military action occurred on November 23, 1946, when French forces executed a naval bombardment of the Vietnamese quarters of Haiphong. The order to use all available means to gain control came directly from General Valluy, acting on instructions from High Commissioner Admiral Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu. Colonel Debès issued a two-hour ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of Viet Minh forces from the Chinese and French sections of the city.

Upon the expiration of the ultimatum, French tanks and troops advanced, and naval forces commenced shelling the Vietnamese-controlled areas. The primary vessel involved was the French cruiser Suffren<sup>1</sup>, alongside several smaller avisos<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>and field artillery units. French naval cannons and field artillery systematically destroyed large portions of the city’s Vietnamese quarters in an attack that lasted through the afternoon. Vietnamese refugees fleeing the destruction were reportedly strafed by French aircraft as the military asserted dominance.

### **Immediate Casualties and International Reaction**

The human cost of the bombardment was immediate, with the vast majority of casualties being Vietnamese civilians. Estimates of the dead vary widely, reflecting the chaotic nature of the event and subsequent political narratives. French military sources cited figures as low as 300 Vietnamese fatalities, while Viet Minh claims ranged up to 20,000. Historical

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<sup>1</sup> [Vaisse, Maurice \(2000\). \*L'Armée française dans la guerre d'Indochine \(1946–1954\) : Adaptation ou inadaptation\*. p. 276.](#) [Vaisse asserts that Suffren “...was wrongly alleged to have participated in the shelling of the Vietnamese port of [Haiphong](#) on 23 November 1946, an event that caused over six thousand casualties and contributed to the start of the [First Indochina War](#); three [avisos](#) were the actual perpetrators.” See also [Jordan & Moulin, Chapter 12, \*The Cruisers in Indochina\*.](#)]

<sup>2</sup>The avisos of the 20th century were light, fast vessels mobilised for escorting convoys, coastal protection or anti-submarine combat. [https://archeologie.culture.gouv.fr/epaves-debarquement/en/node/6565 - aviso\\_6609](https://archeologie.culture.gouv.fr/epaves-debarquement/en/node/6565-aviso_6609)

<sup>3</sup> In World War II, [an avisos] had displacement 300-700 tons, speed 13-20 knots, main armament usually of two 100 mm guns, two 138 mm guns or four 100 mm guns. Colonial avisos, such as the [Bougainville class](#), intended for overseas service, were larger. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aviso>

research and accounts from observers, such as the United States consul, often cite figures between 2,000 and 6,000 Vietnamese killed during the attack.

The severity of the incident shocked political observers globally. American diplomats specifically expressed concern over the force used. For the Viet Minh, the incident finalized the failure of the March Accords and forced an immediate strategic response. The Viet Minh leadership, including Ho Chi Minh, was forced to withdraw from Hanoi and seek refuge in the remote mountainous areas.

### **The Escalation to Full War**

The Haiphong Incident extinguished hope for a peaceful political resolution and directly triggered the outbreak of the First Indochina War. Although Ho Chi Minh initially sought to contact the new French government in Paris to de-escalate, military hardliners had already decided on a path to total control. The bombardment was perceived as a clear signal that France had no intention of honoring the sovereignty of the DRV.

In response to French aggression, Ho Chi Minh ordered a shift from localized resistance to a full-scale national struggle against the French presence. This culminated on December 19, 1946, when Viet Minh forces launched a coordinated attack on French military positions and infrastructure in Hanoi. The attack, initiated by the detonation of explosives at the city's power plant, marked the official beginning of the protracted First Indochina War, which lasted until 1954.

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