

# French Archives in Indochina

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THE BIRTH of French archival administration in Indochina came in the year 1868, when Admiral de la Grandière, the French governor of Cochinchina, gave precise orders for the collection and classification of dossiers. Succeeding governors continued the practice with varying degrees of emphasis, as the expansion of French interests in the Indochinese Peninsula brought European administrators to the central plain, to the northern delta, and into the hinterland.

The government of Cochinchina, continuing to maintain its initiative in matters archival, reorganized its archives in 1902. The colonial council, on September 29, 1902, adopted the following report:

The disorder of the documents, of which a great number doubtless will be of inestimable value to the history of the colony, renders all research impossible; moreover, time has gradually destroyed them in the neglected bundles which have been exposed to the humidity of the climate of Cochinchina; and thus, if we are not careful, nothing of the information which they contain will be left.

The Administration has thought that it is time to make a serious examination of these documents, to destroy those among them that would be without interest, to protect the others from threatened destruction, and to classify them, following a rational method that will allow them to be consulted and to be used as much as possible. In a word, it has thought that it is time to create an archives service.

The council then voted 35,000 piasters for the construction of a special 2-floor building to house the archives and the colonial library. Metal boxes were decided on as a precautionary measure for the preservation of the dossiers in the extreme humidity of the colony.

This decision was amplified by the regulation of April 26, 1909, which prescribed further examination and screening of documents and which fixed conditions for the archives' relationship to branches of the administration and to individual researchers.

Meanwhile, in Tonkin, intermittent efforts were being made to organize the collection of dossiers. In 1907 a fine circular on this

subject was promulgated in Hanoi, but with little effect. No rule at all was followed in the provinces of the North; and each used its own system, if any. On occasion a determined effort was made; but the records were generally kept in an alphabetical order, which was impractical due to the difficulty of inserting new documents in boxes already full. In the face of the afflux of papers and the impossibility of keeping them in alphabetical order, bundles were left in dark corridors or on the tops of office furniture; sometimes a frustrated clerk would burn the papers without even reading them!

A similar situation prevailed in Annam, where the archives service, established along European lines in 1897, had failed to keep up with its task and had lost control over its documents.

Due to the inconsistency and inadequacy of archival practices then in effect in Indochina, a new start was deemed necessary. Governor General Roume, acting on the suggestion of the Director of L'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, sent to France for a graduate of L'École Nationale des Chartes to study and reorganize the archives of Indochina. However, nothing was done until 1917, when Roume's successor, Albert Sarraut, renewed the request. Finally, in June of that year, an archivist-paleographer arrived in Indochina. This man was Paul Boudet, who for the next 30 years was to be the body and soul of the organization and development of Indochina's archives.

Boudet began his labors by making a detailed inspection of records at the Gouvernement-General and the Résidence Supérieure in Tonkin. His report and its conclusions led to the publication of the regulations of November 29, 1917, and December 26, 1918, which laid the basis for the rational organization of Indochina's archives.

The regulation of November 29, 1917, fixed the conditions for the recruiting and training of personnel for the archives and libraries.<sup>1</sup> The Director was to be chosen from candidates holding the archivist-paleographer diploma, and his immediate assistants were required to have either the same diploma or the degree in arts (*licence es-lettres*). The regulation further defined the role of the archives at Hanoi, which was to constitute the headquarters of the service. A higher supervisory commission (Commission Supérieure de Surveillance) was to be established to assist the Director in his duties and especially to pass on the destruction of documents. The regulation also obliged the secretaries of the local services, charged with maintaining dossiers, to take a course at the Office (Direction)

<sup>1</sup> *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine*, Dec. 29, 1917, pp. 1941-1943.

of Archives and Libraries in order to familiarize themselves with methods of classification. This was the beginning of the training of Indochinese archivist-librarians, although a thorough training program along these lines was not undertaken until 1930.

The regulation of December 26, 1918, was devoted entirely to the organization and administration of the archives.<sup>2</sup> It provided for the establishment of five archives depositories and determined their holdings. The five depositories were the central depository at Hanoi, the depository of the Cochinchinese government at Saigon, the depository of the Résidence Supérieure of Annam at the Imperial City of Hué, the depository of the Résidence Supérieure of Cambodia at Phnom penh, and the depository of the Résidence Supérieure of Laos at Vientiane.

Within 2 years the archival establishment of Indochina took on a new form. The central depot at Hanoi was housed in a new building<sup>3</sup> and the first acquisitions amounted to 180,000 inventoried dossiers, 35,000 bundles still to be opened, and 26,000 registers. Another depository was built near the Royal Palace grounds in Pnompenh. And the archives of Cochinchina and Annam were thoroughly reorganized. Only the administration in Laos failed to carry out some reorganization or development program at this time.

The new regulations required that all administrative records over 20 years old at the colony (or protectorate) level, and all such records over 10 years old at the provincial level, be deposited with the archival establishment. All noncurrent records over 5 years old were likewise to be deposited.

On October 25, 1930, the training of Indochinese archivist-librarians was formalized with the promulgation of two new regulations,<sup>4</sup> one providing for a cadre of archivist-librarians, the other establishing courses for their education in the required techniques. These courses were opened to qualified candidates in 1931 and were successful in making available to the various government services Indochinese youths capable of keeping and classifying records and of maintaining an orderly library. As an aid in the training program, the first manual for Indochina's archivists was written and published in Hanoi in 1934.

Some twenty-odd young assistant archivists were graduated from this training annually, making a significant contribution to the ad-

<sup>2</sup> *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine*, Jan. 1, 1919, pp. 29-40.

<sup>3</sup> The Central Library was also housed in this building, at 31 Rue Borgnis-Desbordes.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal Officiel de l'Indochine*, Oct. 29, 1930, pp. 3869-3872.

ministrative services in the colonial regime. A few of these men subsequently won scholarships for further study in France, and many of them later assumed important roles in both the central and provincial archives establishments.

The outbreak of World War II and the Japanese invasion of Indochina put an end to this training. It also frustrated other developments of archival services in Indochina. The withdrawal of a large percentage of the professional French personnel and the shortage of paper for record keeping were important factors. In many instances Japanese, French, and Indochinese officials found it necessary to keep their records on the backs of papers already used, throwing record keeping into complete confusion. Local manufacture of a "rice paper" alleviated the paper shortage for the moment, but it was soon found that this paper cracked easily and was unsuitable for records.

The Japanese occupation also had its effect on institutional records. Much of the documentation of the Oceanographic Institute at Nhatrang on the Annam coast was destroyed, and Japanese troops were barracked on the premises of the Pasteur Institute in Saigon, disrupting normal operations and upsetting what had been — and again became, after World War II — an exceedingly well-kept library and archives.

Since the beginning of hostilities with the Viet Minh in 1947, the archival situation has further deteriorated. For reasons of security the French administration ordered the removal of thousands of dossiers from the regular archives buildings to safer refuges within guarded military compounds.

But, although the French have thus protected the main body of the documentation of their presence in Indochina, provincial and local records have often fallen to the Viet Minh. Especially damaging in this regard is the destruction by the Communists of land registers seized in the cadastral offices of several Tonkin provinces. The resultant disorder will cast a shadow over rural Tonkin for many years to come.

In July 1954, when the terms of the Indochinese truce were decided, plans were made for the evacuation of records from certain regions about to be transferred to the Viet Minh. In all likelihood the next move will be the shipment of the most important colonial records to the safety of Metropolitan France.