



The International Commission for Supervision and Control and Peace Movements in South Vietnam (1954-1956)

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) in relation to peace movements in South Vietnam during the critical period from 1954 to 1956. Established under the Geneva Accords of July 1954, the ICSC - composed of representatives from India, Canada, and Poland - was tasked with supervising the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, which temporarily divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel and mandated nationwide elections for reunification by July 1956. The research focuses on analyzing interactions between the ICSC and prominent peace movements, especially the Peace Movement in Saigon - Cholon, highlighting how these movements sought international intervention against repressive measures implemented by Ngo Dinh Diem's Regime. Utilizing archival records and existing scholarship, this paper demonstrates that despite significant efforts, the ICSC faced severe internal and external limitations, including internal ideological differences among its member states, lack of enforcement authority, and obstruction from the South Vietnamese government backed by the United States. Ultimately, the limited capacity of the ICSC significantly constrained its effectiveness in safeguarding democratic freedoms and ensuring compliance with the Geneva Accords, reflecting broader geopolitical tensions characteristic of Cold War-era international oversight mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

The Geneva Accords on Indochina, signed in July 1954, marked a significant turning point in Vietnamese history, formally ending French military presence and paving the way for peaceful reunification. The agreement stipulated a temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel and mandated nationwide elections for reunification by July 1956. To ensure compliance with the terms of the agreement, the Geneva Conference established an international supervisory mechanism - the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) - consisting of three countries: India (chair), Poland, and Canada.

However, the implementation of the Geneva Accords in South Vietnam quickly faced substantial obstacles. The Ngo Dinh Diem regime, backed politically and militarily by the United States, rejected the election provisions and suppressed numerous peace movements advocating for compliance with the Geneva Accords and the holding of consultative elections for national reunification. The ICSC, as the only neutral international body on-site, was expected to intervene to protect both the accords' provisions and civil rights under threat.

This article analyzes the role of the ICSC concerning peace movements in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1956. Based on available documentation, it identifies challenges encountered by the ICSC, thereby assessing the Commission's effectiveness in safeguarding basic freedoms and promoting the implementation of the Geneva Accords within South Vietnam's complex political environment.

Research Methods

This article employs a historical-critical methodology to analyze the role of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) with respect to the peace movements in Southern Vietnam during the period 1954–1956. The research is based primarily on the systematic collection and critical examination of both primary and secondary sources, including archival materials from the National Archives Center II (Ho Chi Minh City), official government reports, and contemporary scholarly literature in both Vietnamese and international contexts. The author applies the principles of dialectical materialism and historical materialism, combining qualitative methods such as source analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and historical comparison. By triangulating information from diverse sources, the study seeks to reconstruct the political and social context of post-Geneva Southern Vietnam, objectively assess the effectiveness and limitations of the ICSC, and provide a nuanced understanding of its interaction with the local peace movements. Logical reasoning and critical evaluation are also used to address the complex and often conflicting interpretations of the period, ensuring a comprehensive and scientific approach to the research problem.

Results and Discussion

The Geneva Accords and the Establishment of the ICSC

The 1954 Geneva Accords resulted from a lengthy and complicated conference aimed at ending the wars in the three Indochinese countries. In the context of the Cold War, the major powers - France, the UK, the USSR, China, and the US - together with direct stakeholders (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the State of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), reached an agreement on a ceasefire and political solutions for the region. For Vietnam, the Geneva provisions were designed to create stability after war and prepare for a long-term political solution.

Article 1 of the Accords clearly stated: “A provisional military demarcation line shall be established, on either side of which, after withdrawal, the forces of the two parties shall be regrouped: the People's Army of Vietnam to the north of this line, and the French Union forces to the south” (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1975, p. 174). This demarcation line, precisely marked on the attached map, was not intended as a permanent political or territorial boundary, but only as a temporary military separation.

Article 2 stipulated a 300-day period for the complete regroupment of forces. Articles 16 and 17 prohibited military reinforcement and establishment of foreign bases, as well as the importation of military personnel, weapons, or equipment into Vietnam: “From the date this Accords enters into force, it is forbidden to bring into Vietnam any reinforcements of armed forces, military personnel, weapons, ammunition, or other war materials, such as combat aircraft, marine units, artillery, armored equipment, etc” (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1975, p. 180). These provisions aimed to prevent external intervention and maintain military balance.

A crucial provision was that “free general elections shall be held in Vietnam in July 1956” to reunify the country, showing that division was temporary and a unified Vietnamese state would be established democratically. This provision generated great hope among Vietnamese people for a peaceful and unified future.

To supervise the implementation of the ceasefire and support the peace process, the Geneva Conference established the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The ICSC included representatives from India (Chair), Canada, and Poland - demonstrating an effort to form a neutral body, with India as a non-aligned nation, Canada representing the capitalist bloc, and Poland the socialist bloc.

The main tasks of the ICSC, as stipulated in the Accords, were: “to supervise, observe, verify, and investigate all matters concerning the implementation of the ceasefire, specifically: a) Supervise the movement of armed forces of both sides, within the regroupment plan; b) Supervise the demarcation line, regroupment areas, and the demilitarized zone; c) Supervise the release of prisoners of war and civilian detainees; d) Supervise, at ports, airports, and land borders, the introduction of armed forces, military personnel, weapons, ammunition, and war materials into Vietnam” (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1975, p. 185). The ICSC also had a key role in supervising the exercise of democratic freedoms, especially freedom of movement and residence for those wishing to relocate between zones.

However, from its inception, the ICSC faced significant internal and external challenges. Internally, the ICSC was inherently divided by deep differences in perspective and strategy among its three members, each representing major political blocs of the Cold War era. This led to frequent disagreements over the interpretation and implementation of the Geneva Accords. Canada, as a NATO member and US ally, often interpreted the Agreement in favor of the Southern regime and the West. Conversely, Poland, as a Warsaw Pact member, tended to support the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: “Poland’s position in the ICSC froze into a rigid support of the North Vietnamese case only after the date for elections had passed without even the consultative process being initiated” (Thakur, 1980, p. 133). India, as the chair and a non-aligned country, tried to maintain neutrality but often faced pressure from both sides: “The Indian position . . . as chairman of the International Control Commissions . . . was more than that of a disinterested catalyst, peacemaker, mediator or negotiator. India’s “tilting” in her crucial role during the period could have upset the balance: in that sense, India acted as a balancer” (Ross, 1982, p. 197). As a result, the ICSC often fell into deadlock, unable to issue unanimous conclusions on violations.

Externally, the ICSC lacked enforcement power, possessing only supervisory and reporting authority. Its effectiveness depended heavily on the cooperation of the parties involved, especially the State of Vietnam (later the Republic of Vietnam in the South) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In the South, the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, backed by the US, openly rejected the main provisions of the Geneva Accords, especially those regarding general elections, and viewed the ICSC as an interfering body, frequently hindering its operations and investigations. This significantly weakened the ICSC’s ability to fulfill its mandate, especially in protecting democratic freedoms and preventing repression.

Peace Movements in Southern Vietnam (1954–1956)

Following the Geneva Accords, Southern Vietnam entered a turbulent period. The Ngo Dinh Diem regime, strongly supported by the US, quickly consolidated power, established a new administration, and sought to eliminate political

opposition - including supporters of the Geneva Accords and those advocating for peace and reunification. In this context, several peace and national unification movements emerged, most notably the Peace Movement in Saigon-Cholon. This was a broad socio-political movement, attracting various social strata - intellectuals, workers, students, and patriots - demanding strict implementation of the Geneva Accords, especially the holding of general elections for reunification. The Saigon-Cholon Peace Movement was officially established on August 1, 1954, with the participation and leadership of prominent intellectuals such as pharmacist Tran Kim Quan (Chair), lawyer Nguyen Huu Tho (Vice-Chair), along with other notable members like engineer Luu Van Lang, lawyer Trinh Dinh Thao, and professor Pham Huy Thong. The movement had a well-organized structure and operated openly, publishing newsletters, disseminating the Geneva Accords's content, advocating peace, demanding the release of political prisoners, and calling for consultations to organize general elections for reunification. A notable activity was its engagement with the ICSC, providing information on violations and requesting supervision of the Accords's implementation. The movement also collected signatures to send to international bodies, expressing the popular desire for reunification through general elections.

The activities of the Peace Movement alarmed the Ngo Dinh Diem government, which adopted an anti-communist stance and staunchly opposed reunification elections. By late 1954, the Saigon government had already launched severe repression: arresting movement leaders, confiscating documents, disbanding local organizations, and forcibly relocating members to Hai Phong and then Tuy Hoa (Phu Yen). The movement faced charges such as "establishing illegal associations," "publishing uncensored documents," and "endangering national security." In this context, the ICSC became a crucial channel for the movement to seek intervention and support.

Despite repression, the Peace Movement received widespread support from Southern society, particularly from intellectuals, students, and progressive media. Some foreign newspapers also criticized the Saigon regime for violating the Geneva Accords and suppressing political and peace movements. Although heavily repressed, the peace movements of 1954–1956 left a significant mark. The movement spread from Saigon-Cholon to other Southern provinces. According to a report by the Central Intelligence Bureau in December 1954, "despite the arrest of many intellectuals, the Saigon-Cholon Peace Movement continues to operate covertly, most actively in My Tho and Thu Dau Mot provinces, drawing students into violent protests" (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1975, p. 11). This reflected the Southern people's aspiration for peace, independence, and reunification after the Geneva Accords.

The Activities and Role of the ICSC Regarding Peace Movements (1954–1956)

The presence of the ICSC in Vietnam after the Geneva Accords provided support for the peace movements in the South. Although the ICSC's authority was limited, its existence carried significant weight for these movements, helping them appeal for international intervention against repression by the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. As Thakur (1980) observed, "The ICSC did perform valuable service, especially in the two years that it was expected to cover," and

"the Commission was largely successful in executing its mandate in the military sphere in the first year, with its political tasks never having been clearly specified." (p.147). One of the ICSC's most important roles for peace movements was to act as a bridge, a communication channel between repressed movements and the international community. The Geneva Accords clearly stipulated democratic freedoms, including freedom of movement and residence for citizens in both zones. When these rights were violated - especially freedom of expression and legal political activity - Southern citizens turned to the ICSC to file complaints.

By regulation, the ICSC was responsible for receiving complaints from any party regarding violations of the Accords. These complaints could concern violations of democratic freedoms, arrest and detention of peace activists, or obstruction of legitimate political activities. Upon receiving a complaint, the ICSC would investigate, gather information and evidence from relevant parties.

For the Peace Movement in Saigon-Cholon, on September 22, 1954, ICSC members arrived in Saigon, ushering in a new phase of supervision and promotion of the Geneva Accords's implementation. The Commission's headquarters at 138 Chasseloup Laubat Street (now Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street) became an important hub for peace efforts in the South. The Saigon-Cholon Peace Movement frequently contacted the ICSC to clarify its stance and demanded the release of prisoners in accordance with Article 21, Chapter IV of the ceasefire agreement. When leaders of the Peace Movement in Saigon-Cholon were arrested, their legal representatives also sent letters to the ICSC "requesting intervention in the arrests of intellectual leaders" (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1975, p. 11). This demonstrates that the peace movements recognized the ICSC's role in supervising the Geneva Accords and utilized this channel to report repression by the Saigon regime.

While the ICSC lacked enforcement authority, its receipt and processing of complaints created a certain degree of pressure on the Ngo Dinh Diem government. ICSC reports, if achieving consensus among its three members, were sent to the Geneva Conference co-chairs (the UK and the USSR), which could generate diplomatic pressure from the international community.

Nevertheless, the ICSC's ability to intervene in support of the peace movements was severely constrained by several factors:

First, the ICSC was not an enforcement agency with legal or military authority. Its main tasks were limited to supervision, investigation, and reporting. Thus, the ICSC could not directly prevent arrests, repression, or force the Southern regime to change its policies. Even when reports documented clear violations, they were only advisory in nature and dependent on the political will of the major powers for any concrete action. Thus, the ICSC functioned reactively, handling complaints rather than proactively investigating.

Second, the ICSC's operations were hampered by obstruction from the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, which did not recognize the Geneva Accords and imposed various measures to limit the ICSC's activities. The government often refused to provide information, denied access to certain areas or detainees, and even accused the ICSC of "interfering in internal affairs" when it tried to investigate violations of democratic freedoms. This lack of cooperation severely crippled the ICSC's ability to monitor and investigate.

Third, internal discord among ICSC members. Differences in political stance and ideology among Canada, India, and Poland were another major obstacle. Canada tended to side with the Southern regime and the US, Poland supported the North, and India tried to maintain neutrality. When complaints concerned violations - especially repression of peace movements - it was often difficult for all three members to reach consensus on findings and recommendations, resulting in slow, indecisive decision-making that failed to respond to urgent situations.

Despite these limitations, the ICSC's presence had certain impacts on the peace movements in Southern Vietnam. For activists, the ICSC was a venue to seek international intervention. Filing complaints and receiving responses, although not always immediately effective, provided a means to express their views and maintain morale amid heavy repression. Moreover, although the Ngo Dinh Diem government often ignored the ICSC, the existence of a continuous international supervisory body still exerted indirect pressure, as the regime had to consider international reaction and the response of its allies when undertaking repressive actions. ICSC reports, while limited in power, documented violations and could influence the regime's reputation internationally.

In essence, the ICSC's actual impact on preventing the repression of peace movements was extremely limited. It could not prevent arrests, detentions, or repression of those movements. Many complaints remained unresolved, and the basic democratic rights of Southern citizens continued to be violated. The failure to ensure general elections in 1956 was the clearest evidence of these limitations, leading to the collapse of the Geneva Accords and escalating war in Southern Vietnam.

Conclusion

The period from 1954 to 1956 was a pivotal juncture in modern Vietnamese history. The Geneva Accords was signed with the hope of establishing lasting peace and paving the way for national unification via general elections. However, these hopes were soon threatened by the complicated domestic political situation and intensifying great power rivalry in the Cold War context. Against this backdrop, the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) was established as a mechanism to oversee the implementation of the 1954 Geneva Accords - a significant international effort to end war and open a path to peaceful unification in Vietnam.

Although the ICSC faced immense internal and external challenges during its operation, its presence nonetheless had considerable significance. For peace movements in the South, the ICSC was an international platform to protect and legitimize their cause. Its existence also created indirect pressure on the Republic of Vietnam government, forcing it to act more cautiously, as repressive acts could be documented and exposed internationally. The lesson from the ICSC's experience is that international peacekeeping mechanisms require multiple conditions for effectiveness: geopolitical circumstances, the cooperation of stakeholders, and internal consensus within the supervisory body.

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