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## The Role of the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang in the Medical and Epidemiological Network of Indochina (1895-1945)

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**ABSTRACT:** Founded in 1895 by Alexandre Yersin, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang played a pivotal role in the colonial medical and epidemiological network in Indochina. With its functions in microbiological research, vaccine production, and medical training, the Institute served not only scientific purposes but also operated as a soft power instrument of the French colonial administration. Drawing on the analysis of historical sources, this article elucidates the scientific, political, and social roles of the Institute, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the legacy and inherent contradictions of colonial medicine during the period from 1895 to 1945.

**KEYWORDS:** Pasteur Institute Nha Trang, medical network, Indochina, Alexandre Yersin

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the process of establishing and consolidating colonial power in Indochina, alongside the construction of administrative, military, and educational apparatuses, the French government placed particular emphasis on developing the healthcare system as a tool of governance. Since the late 19th century, public health was not only intended to support the wellbeing of both the indigenous population and French expatriates, but also functioned as a strategic institution showcasing scientific authority, epidemic control capabilities, and the modern organizational power of the colonial regime. As many scholars have argued, colonial healthcare was not merely about “care” but also about “control” - a dynamic that vividly reflects the dual nature of colonialism in the domains of science and humanitarianism (Arnold, 1993, p. 9).

A concrete embodiment of this medical strategy was the establishment of a network of Pasteur Institutes across Indochina, including in Saigon, Nha Trang, Hanoi, and Da Lat. This system of scientific and medical institutions was highly organized and directly supported by the Pasteur Institute in Paris and the French colonial administration. Among these, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang, founded in 1895 by Dr. Alexandre Yersin, stood out not only as the most advanced vaccine research and production facility in Indochina at the time but also as the first major medical center established outside the colonial capital of Saigon. Its founding clearly reflected the scientific-medical strategy that the French administration had envisioned for the coastal region of Central Vietnam.

From the French perspective, Nha Trang was a strategically significant location — a coastal area with a temperate and well-ventilated climate, relatively free from epidemics, located near international maritime routes, and well-positioned for transportation, the movement of biological materials, and scientific collaboration with other centers in the Far East such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Singapore (Noel Bernard, 1922, p. 12).

Under the leadership of Dr. Yersin and his colleagues, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang operated not only as a technical and scientific center for disease prevention, medical training, and the dissemination of modern medical knowledge, but also engaged in economic and experimental agricultural programs in areas such as Suoi Dau and Hon Ba.

Despite its vital role in the formation and development of experimental medicine in colonial Vietnam, the position and significance of the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang within the broader structure of Indochina’s colonial healthcare system have not been extensively studied. Investigating the medical and epidemiological activities of the Institute during the period from 1895 to 1945 allows for a more comprehensive reconstruction of its contributions, thereby shedding light on its historical value from a medical-technical perspective and its role within the cultural and scientific interactions between France and Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century.

### 2. HISTORY OF THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PASTEUR INSTITUTE IN NHA TRANG

Established in 1895, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang was closely linked to the French colonial health policy in Indochina and the broader network of Pasteur Institutes in tropical regions. This development occurred in the context of widespread infectious

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diseases that posed serious threats to both public health and colonial interests. By the late 19th century, the Indochinese authorities recognized that establishing an experimental medical system was essential to controlling the native population and protecting the expeditionary forces. This policy was implemented through the construction of a network of modern microbiological facilities modeled after the Pasteur Institute in Paris, founded by Louis Pasteur in 1887. On this basis, Pasteur Institutes in Indochina were successively established: in Saigon (1891), Nha Trang (1895), Hanoi (1925), and Da Lat (1936). Among them, the Nha Trang Institute assumed a central role in the research and production of serum—a core area of tropical medicine during the colonial era.

In 1896, following its success in combating the plague in China, the institute began to expand, adding laboratories, administrative offices, an ice factory, horse vaccination stables, and an integrated technical system—forming what was considered the most advanced biomedical complex in Indochina at the time (Noel Bernard, 1922, p. 13). The institute's initial objective was to produce anti-plague serum and establish a local model for serum production. From its inception, the Nha Trang laboratory embraced a distinct mission. A division of responsibilities was established between the institutes: the Calmette Institute in Saigon, founded in 1891, would focus on human infectious diseases; the Nha Trang Institute would handle research on infectious diseases in animals, their prevention and treatment; and the Pasteur Institute in Paris would be responsible for preparing anti-plague serum, a sufficient quantity of which would be shipped to Nha Trang (Trâm, 1991, p. 3).

In 1905, the Pasteur Institutes of Nha Trang and Saigon were merged under the name "Pasteur Institute of Indochina," overseen by the representative of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. Two thirty-year contracts—signed in September 1904 for Nha Trang and in July 1905 for Saigon—formalized the institutional relationships between the Pasteur Institute in Paris and the Government of Indochina (Noel Bernard, 1922, p. 17).

During this period, the Nha Trang Institute received batches of serum from Paris for use in Indochina and the broader Far East. In 1914, it began producing a vaccine against plague, followed by a cholera vaccine in 1917 (Noel Bernard, 1922, p. 41).

To support veterinary research and ensure a steady source of serum, Alexandre Yersin established the Suoi Dau Station in 1897. This facility was used to raise large livestock, cultivate grasses, and conduct agricultural experiments. It also served as a site for experimenting with industrial crops such as rubber, coffee, cocoa, and medicinal plants, as well as for conducting sericulture research under the direction of G. Vernet and A. Krempf between 1913 and 1918.

Over its first fifty years (1895–1945), the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang developed around three foundational pillars: serum production; medical and veterinary research; and training and technology transfer. With modern infrastructure, a tightly organized structure, and a high level of specialization, the institute served not only as the central medical hub of Central Vietnam but also as a critical influence on the health, scientific, and agricultural strategies across the entirety of French Indochina.

### **3. THE ROLE OF PASTEUR INSTITUTE NHA TRANG IN THE MEDICAL - EPIDEMIOLOGICAL NETWORK OF INDOCHINA**

#### **3.1. In disease prevention**

Since its establishment, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang played a pioneering role in the French epidemic prevention system in Indochina. Its foundation marked a significant advancement in applying modern medical science to the colonial territories, aiming not only to safeguard the health of the European community but also to control epidemics that threatened local public health and economic stability. In its early phase, the Institute focused on producing and supplying anti-plague serum, targeting a deadly disease that had ravaged East and Southeast Asia since the late 19th century.

During the severe plague outbreak in 1899 in Central Vietnam, the Nha Trang Pasteur Institute took the lead in identifying the pathogen, organizing mass vaccination programs, and conducting on-site bacteriological research. Two military veterinarians, Fraimbault and Carré, were seconded to the Institute to support epidemic control efforts. For their contributions, they were awarded the Silver Medal of Honor by the French government (*L'Avenir du Tonkin*, 1901).

From 1905 onward, the Institute became the main storage and distribution center for treatment serum across Indochina and the Far East. This role enhanced the colonial medical system's ability to respond swiftly to outbreaks through an effective medical logistics network. By 1914, the Institute began producing its own anti-plague vaccine locally, and in 1917, it successfully developed a cholera vaccine. According to 1921 statistics, the Institute produced 145,800 doses of anti-plague vaccine, 213,900 doses of anti-cholera vaccine, and thousands of doses for treating serious infectious diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus, sepsis, dysentery, meningitis, and pneumonia.

Another notable contribution of the Institute was the research and production of serum to prevent bovine plague—an infectious disease that severely impacted the livestock economy of the colony. As early as 1897, under the leadership of scientists Carré, Fraimbault, and Schein, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang identified the pathogen and developed an effective preventive serum. By 1922, due to surging demand for vaccination, the Institute had to consume 30 to 40 calves weekly to ensure the production of more than 80,000 serum doses, facilitating mass livestock vaccination campaigns throughout Indochina (*L'Éveil économique de l'Indochine*, 1923).

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**Table: Number of serums provided by Nha Trang Pasteur Institute in three years: 1910, 1916 and 1921.**

Type of serum/vaccine	1910 (dose)	1916 (dose)	1921 (dose)
Antidiphtheria serum	402	1,000	1,566
-tetanus serum	925	1,513	3,990
Antistreptococcal serum	250	440	2,869
Antivenimeux serum (snake venom)	302	585	660
Anti-plague serum (human plague)	3,621	4,002	3,826
Antipest serum (bovine plague)	10,325	192,950	35,000 (1921); 99,706 (1920); >80,000 (1922)
<b>Total value (francs)</b>	97,856 fr.75	228,255 fr.50	No record

Source: Compiled from Institut Pasteur Nhatrang. [www.entreprises-coloniales.fr](http://www.entreprises-coloniales.fr)

With these contributions, the Nha Trang Pasteur Institute emerged as the most important center for animal disease control in the colonial system. It also played a key role in the diagnosis and classification of livestock diseases, thereby enhancing veterinary practice and agricultural management, particularly vital as plantation agriculture expanded rapidly in the early 20th century.

During the 1910s and 1920s, scientists such as Krempf, Schein, and Vernet continued to carry out pioneering research in agriculture, biology, and epidemiology. Their work ranged from studies of mosquito vectors and malaria, to Surra disease in cattle, to innovations in rubber tapping and crop improvement.

By 1941, the number of administered vaccine doses had risen by 207,405 compared to 1940, far exceeding the figures of 1939. Plague vaccines accounted for the majority of this increase, with an additional 183,232 doses over the previous year (Jacotot, 1942, p. 9).

With its advanced technical foundation in the research and production of medical biological products, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang held a central position in epidemic prevention efforts across Indochina, contributing to the protection of public health for both the local population and French expatriates. At the same time, the Institute served as a center for professional training and the testing of applied medical models, thereby supporting social stability, fostering economic development, and effectively serving the political and administrative objectives of the colonial government.

### 3.2. Center for coordinating and connecting the medical network of Indochina and the world

In the early 20th century, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang actively developed vaccines and serums to prevent dangerous diseases in humans and livestock such as plague, rabies, cholera, and swine and cattle epidemics. In 1910, the institute provided free of charge to medical facilities throughout Indochina more than 24,000 doses of serum, including anti-epidemic, nutritional, anti-diphtheria, toxin and anti-epidemic serums, with a total value of nearly 98,000 francs. In addition, the institute's products were also exported to the Philippines and the Malay Peninsula, contributing to affirming Nha Trang's role in the regional medical network.

During the period 1910-1913, the Pasteur Institute of Paris sent Dr. Noel Bernard to Hue to establish a bacteriology laboratory, with all equipment and funding provided by the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang. After 1913, this laboratory was merged into the Central Vietnam Health System, marking an important transition of the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang from research to supporting local medical and epidemiological management (Noel Bernard, 1922, p. 41).

During World War I (1914-1918), the demand for medicine increased dramatically, forcing the Institute to expand its network, sponsoring additional laboratories in Hue, Phnom Penh, Vientiane, and promoting the establishment of additional institutes in Hanoi and Da Lat (Tan, 2019, p.445).

In 1928, the Institute produced 132,000 doses of veterinary serum, of which 131,500 doses were distributed to key regions such as Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, Cambodia and Laos. At the same time, trials of a vaccine to treat surra disease in cattle using a combination of Fourneau 309 and sulfasenol showed remarkable effectiveness, contributing to the protection of livestock - a key factor in the colonial economy (*Les Annales coloniales*, 1930).

The Nha Trang Pasteur Institute also served as a vital knowledge transfer hub between colonial medical research and international public health institutions. In 1936, Dr. Morin, the Institute's director, undertook an extensive survey trip to microbiological research centers and public health systems in France, China, Japan, and the United States, and participated in the International Microbiological Congress held in London. In the same year, at the request of the Far Eastern Office of the League of Nations, Moreau organized a field trip for international students of the Malaria Training Course in Singapore to visit malaria prevention facilities in Indochina. In addition, engineer Guillerm of the Institute also guided the League of Nations Rural Sanitation Committee to directly survey the water supply, filtration and distribution system in Cochinchina - works bearing the mark of applying experimental medicine to community life (Institut Pasteur de Nha Trang, 1937).

By 1937, the Nha Trang Pasteur Institute had developed into the leading center for vaccine production and coordination in Indochina. In this year, the institute provided 459,625 doses of antipestique vaccine (against cattle cholera), 60,050 doses of

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antipestique serum, nearly 9,000 doses of rabies vaccine, and tens of thousands of doses of other livestock vaccines such as antibarbone, anticharbon, and vaccines against diseases in pigs and chickens. The widespread application of these biological products contributed to significantly reducing epidemics in livestock herds, thereby stabilizing food supplies and maintaining trade and export activities in the region.

In addition to its production activities, the Institute also undertakes the role of technical inspection, directly conducting periodic inspections of bacteriological laboratories in Hue, Phnom Penh and Vientiane. The results of its monitoring and professional recommendations are forwarded to local authorities and the Indochina Health Inspectorate, demonstrating the central position of the Institute in the health system of the whole Federation.

It can be affirmed that the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang was not only an applied scientific facility in the colonial system, but also a strategic link in establishing a modern medical model based on microbiology and epidemiology. The Institute made an important contribution to improving the capacity to prevent epidemics and ensure social stability in Indochina under French rule.

### **3.3. Training of Local and International Medical Personnel**

In addition to its functions of researching and producing vaccines and serums, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang also played an important role in the professional training of veterinary medicine and the prevention of infectious diseases in animals in Indochina. Since 1899, the French authorities in Tonkin and Annam began sending local young people who could speak French to the Institute to be trained as vaccination staff. This model was later expanded to Cochinchina and Cambodia in the period of 1918-1921. Trainees, mainly local people who had completed primary school, would participate in a formal training course directly supervised by Dr. H. Schein. At the same time, young French veterinarians newly appointed to the field of veterinary epidemiology in the colonies were also required to undergo an internship at the Institute. Thus, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang became an important center for practical training and professional transfer in the medical and veterinary system throughout Indochina.

Since 1899, the French protectorate government in Annam and Tonkin had proactively sent local young people who were able to use French to the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang to train in vaccination techniques for animals with infectious diseases. This was considered an important first step in forming a team of specialized local medical staff. Students in Cochinchina and Cambodia, after completing the French-Vietnamese primary school program, underwent a thorough selection process and were also sent to the Pasteur Institute. They were trained thoroughly under the direct guidance of experts such as Dr. H. Schein. In addition, young French veterinarians, before officially taking up their duties in Indochina, were also required to undergo an internship at the Institute to approach the actual conditions of epidemiology in the colony. The internship program usually lasted from 3 to 6 months (Henry, 1934, p.64).

In 1920, the Institute welcomed two French scientists for training and research: Félix d'Hérelle conducted a one-year research program on bacteriophages, opening up a new approach to the study of infectious diseases in humans and animals; meanwhile, Lagrange participated in a one-year advanced training course on tropical microbiology and parasitology (Noel Bernard, 1922, p.55). In its role as a leading center of microbiological medicine in Indochina, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang not only limited its functions to vaccine research and production, but also actively participated in the training of local medical personnel and the dissemination of modern medical methods.

Since the 1930s, Pasteur Nha Trang has played a key role in assisting the colonial government in building a team of highly qualified indigenous medical professionals, especially in the fields of veterinary medicine and disease prevention. In 1935, four vaccination assistants - former seasonal workers from several colonies in the Indochinese Federation - completed their professional training at the Pasteur Institute Nha Trang (Bulletin Économique de L'Indochine, 1936, p.553).

In 1937, in the context of the Indochina government resuming the recruitment of educated civil servants, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang received 24 Indochinese veterinarians, divided into three batches, to undertake a mandatory three-month practical course to perfect their professional skills. At the same time, five Annamese staff members of the Animal Disease Prevention Department also participated in a six-month training course for vaccination assistants, to standardize techniques and improve the effectiveness of local epidemic prevention work. This was an important step, demonstrating the policy of gradually "localizing" the medical-veterinary personnel system under the supervision and professional guidance of the Pasteur Institute facilities.

In 1941, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang organized a specialized training course for 16 vaccination officers, including one student sent by the Lao Veterinary Department and 15 from the Annam Veterinary Department. Notably, six of the students came from the Central Highlands provinces of Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku and Kontum, indicating that the scope of training had been extended to remote areas. Although three of this group could not complete the program, the remaining three students completed the course with positive results, one with an excellent grade and two with a fair grade.

In addition to the vaccination staff, five nurses from the Medical Support Service also participated in and completed a basic course in food safety inspection, thereby qualifying them to supervise slaughtering activities in rural slaughterhouses. The success of this training course reflected the compatibility between the content taught at the institute and the general education level that the trainees had previously been equipped with. At the same time, with increasingly high standards in the admission exams, the

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professional quality of the vaccination assistants trained at the Pasteur Institute Nha Trang was constantly improved, demonstrated by the expansion of the scope of knowledge as well as the depth of expertise in the field of preventive medicine (Jacotot, 1942, p.6).

Thus, through domestic training programs and international academic exchange activities, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang contributed decisively to the formation of a standardized class of indigenous medical professionals, while consolidating the role of Indochina as a “tropical medical laboratory” in the French colonial medical network in the early 20th century (Institut Pasteur de Nha Trang, 1937).

### **3.4. Agricultural research and experimental economics**

In addition to research and production of vaccines, serums, as well as human resource training, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang also expands its applied research capacity through experimental stations, typically the Suoi Dau Station. This station plays an important role in the Institute's research system, conducting experimental research on agriculture and veterinary medicine, contributing significantly to the economic and scientific development of Indochina.

Suoi Dau Station specialized in providing calves and cows for the production of anti-plague serum and vaccine, the Institute's main product during the 1930s. In addition to providing animals for production, the station also received animals used in experiments, serving long-term research on animal pathology. As a breeding farm and pathology research center, Suoi Dau Station carried out breeding and selection programs for livestock breeds, aiming to improve the quality of native breeds, thereby increasing livestock productivity and contributing to the colonial agricultural development strategy.

By the end of 1936, the total livestock at the station reached more than 1,600, including 855 cattle of various types (including serum-producing cattle, calves, cows and heifers), 719 sheep and 103 goats. This scale shows the importance and significant investment of the Nha Trang Pasteur Institute in veterinary medicine and experimental microbiology research (Institut Pasteur de Nha Trang, 1937).

In 1940, the Suoi Dau Station operated on 1,200 hectares of cultivated land, including over 300 hectares of rubber trees tapped for latex. Regarding livestock, in addition to horses and cattle used in the production of serum and vaccines, the station raised more than two thousand animals for meat and breeding purposes, including goats, sheep, buffaloes, cows, and horses (Tân, 2019, p. 447).

To have more financial resources for the activities of the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang, Yersin introduced rubber and cinchona trees for experimental planting in Khanh Hoa province. During the survey, he discovered that the Hon Ba area - about 40 km from Nha Trang, at an altitude of 1,578 m, has a temperate, fresh climate similar to Da Lat, and is also an area with high biodiversity, very suitable for agricultural and ecological research (Khanh Hoa Provincial People's Committee, 2003, p. 358). Since 1918, the Hon Ba station has carried out the task of researching plant physiology, developing crops of economic value, and conducting meteorological observations and atmospheric research.

With initial successes in agricultural research, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang demonstrated the close connection between scientific research and economic exploitation. For example, in 1908, the Institute successfully produced 9,000 kg of high-quality rubber at Suoi Dau and sold it to Michelin, demonstrating the combination of scientific research and economic application (Annuaire général de l'Indochine française, 1908, p.500).

The development of agricultural and veterinary research stations at the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang not only served the purpose of scientific research, but was also closely linked to the strategy of developing the colonial agricultural economy, helping to improve production quality and ensure public health. This research continued to contribute to the exploitation and economic development of the region, and was also a testament to the importance of applied research during the colonial period.

## **4. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS**

During its operation from 1895 to 1945, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang not only achieved many important achievements in the fields of medicine and epidemiology, but also faced a series of challenges in terms of organization, technology, finance and relations with the colonial government - factors that directly affected the effectiveness of disease prevention in Indochina.

*First of all*, the response and technical capacity in the early years were still limited. Although assigned to produce serum against dangerous diseases such as plague or cholera, the institute could not meet urgent demands in the field. A typical case was in 1901, when a cattle epidemic broke out in Tonkin, the institute could not supply serum in time, leading to harsh criticism from newspapers such as *L'Avenir du Tonkin*. The fact that only one doctor was sent to survey instead of taking specific epidemic prevention actions showed that the capacity to produce and store serum was still heavily dependent on technology and raw materials from France.

*Second*, dependence on technical assistance from the mother country was a major obstacle. The institute often had to seek guidance from French scientists such as Koch or Ellington in preparing serums, showing a lack of independence in research and medical response. Some serum products tested in Nha Trang were not even highly effective in epidemic areas such as Bombay or Amoy.

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*Third*, budget and personnel limitations were also constant problems. Despite its autonomous administration, the institute received only an annual allowance from the Indochina government without transparency in spending, leading to shortages of supplies and disruptions in research. Many key scientists such as Henri Schein and Pesas died early, leaving a large void in professional work.

*Finally*, under the Japanese occupation (1940-1945), the Institute suffered heavy losses in terms of facilities and research data. Alexandre Yersin's documents were burned, the public health program was almost paralyzed due to the policy of prioritizing service to the Japanese army, causing the Institute to lose its coordinating role and influence in the Indochina health system.

### 5. CONCLUSION

From the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang played a central role in the formation, development and coordination of medical and epidemiological activities in Indochina. Not only a microbiological research facility, the institute also undertook the functions of producing vaccines, testing treatment methods, and implementing large-scale disease prevention, especially for diseases such as plague, cholera, rabies and malaria. Under the leadership of Alexandre Yersin and his colleagues, the institute became an institution that was both scientific and played an important political and social role in the French colonial strategy.

Compared to other medical institutions of the same period in Indochina, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang had many outstanding advantages. In terms of establishment time, this was one of the first institutes in the Pasteur system in Indochina (1895), before the institutes in Hanoi (1925) and Da Lat (1936), affirming its pioneering role in modeling colonial medicine in the French direction.

In terms of function, the institute integrated research, production, field deployment, and training of medical personnel - something that civilian hospitals, military hospitals, or dispensaries could not undertake. This integrated medical model was especially rare in the colonial context, where health care was often divided according to administrative or military objectives.

In terms of scope of influence, the institute's products and techniques not only serve Central Vietnam but also extend to the whole of Indochina and part of the French Far East. The transportation of serum and vaccines via sea and rail routes has contributed to the formation of a flexible and effective medical and epidemiological network.

Scientifically, the institute gathered French and Vietnamese microbiologists, becoming a center for research and application of experimental medicine in the tropics. The institute was also a point of receiving and adjusting advanced medical knowledge from Europe, in order to adapt to the socio-ecological conditions of Indochina, one of the major challenges for the French colonial government.

Since then, the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang has not only been a branch of the Pasteur Institute in Paris, but also a strategic center for demonstrating the "soft power" of French science. The Institute plays an intermediary role between the central (Paris, Saigon) and the border region (Central Vietnam), between the preventive medical model and the public health policy serving the goal of population control.

In conclusion, the Pasteur Institute of Nha Trang is a unique medical institution in the history of Indochina. Its role is reflected not only in its production or treatment figures, but also in its long-term influence on the modern medical structure in Vietnam. Research on the institute contributes to clarifying the process of localization of the colonial medical model and its legacy in the post-colonial period.

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