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Spreading oil

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The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam

Christopher Goscha

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Empires end in a variety of ways. They dissolve from strategic blunders or loss of will. They are doomed from the start or give way to more tenacious loyalties. They are ravaged from the edges or rot from the core. They are weakened by guerrilla warfare or terrorist attacks. But occasionally empires collapse in a burst of revolutionary violence—a single battle so bloody and decisive that it marks the end of an era. This is what the Vietnamese accomplished at Dien Bien Phu. On 7 May 1954, after fifty-six days of bombardment and trench warfare that left a mountain valley looking like the blasted ruins of Verdun, the Vietnamese ended nearly a hundred years of French colonial rule in Indochina.

The French had built a heavily fortified garrison in Vietnam's western highlands. The fort failed to stop the flow of opium—the hard currency of the war—from Laos into Vietnam. It failed to stop the troops and arms that moved over the mountains. Dien Bien Phu was a sitting target, but the French, with their military superiority, their air force and arrogance, presumed they could repulse a main force attack. After being napalmed in their mountain burrows, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) would perish in a pile of incinerated corpses.

The French were outfoxed by Vo Nguyen Giap, the former history teacher, with degrees in philosophy and law, who commanded the PAVN forces. He broke his artillery into pieces and hauled it into the mountains with bicycles. He entrenched a professional army of seven armed divisions and wired the battlefield with communications teams and spies that stretched from inside the French fort, which included Vietnamese prostitutes, all the way back to the airfields that supplied the French Union forces. France had 12,000 troops versus Giap's 51,000. Giap imported Vietnamese miners to tunnel under the valley floor. His artillery destroyed Dien Bien Phu's airfield. Parachuting reinforcements were cut to ribbons. Air drops were halted, and after two months of withering firepower and night-time assaults, the battle ended with more than 10,000 French Union forces—a mix of legionnaires, paratroopers, Senegalese conscripts and German prisoners of war converted into French mercenaries—paraded on a 400-mile death march to prison camps on the coast. Three-fourths of these soldiers did not survive.

Fighting continued in the mountains after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, but when news of the great battle reached Europe, the conference of world powers meeting in Geneva was forced to redraw the map of Indochina. A Communist North Vietnam was separated at the seventeenth parallel from the former colony of Cochinchina, now called South Vietnam. When the elections meant to unify north and south were cancelled, it would take another twenty years of warfare before Vietnam emerged as the S-shaped empire of fifty-four ethnic groups that is known today—not without a degree of irony and linguistic imprecision—as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The subject of numerous books and movies, Dien Bien Phu is one of the great battles in world history. Graham Greene, who for three years reported on the war from colonial Vietnam, called Dien Bien Phu the *greatest* battle in world history. This was the first time that Asian troops had defeated a European colonial army in fixed battle. ‘Dien Bien Phu was more than a defeat for the French Army,’ Greene wrote in *Ways of Escape*. ‘The battle marked virtually the end of any hope that Western Powers might have entertained that they could dominate the East ... That young Americans were still to die in Vietnam only shows that it takes time for the echoes even of total defeat to circle the globe.’

Christopher Goscha, in his book on Dien Bien Phu, writes of the battle: ‘When the guns fell silent on May 7, 1954, the French Army had suffered its greatest colonial defeat since losing Quebec in 1759, and the Vietnamese Communists had proved that they could fight conventional battles—and win. No other 20th-century war of decolonization produced a Dien Bien Phu.’

In *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, Goscha tries to answer the question posed by Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquais psychiatrist who supported anti-colonial revolutions in Algeria and other parts of the world. ‘What must we do to realize a Dien Bien Phu? How do we go about doing it?’ Goscha details the recipe in a book of more than 500 pages—a recipe not duplicated in North Africa or any anti-colonial struggle outside Asia. ‘All wars of decolonization are not alike and it is time we stop treating them as if they were,’ he writes. ‘To my knowledge, not one of our “French specialists” even asked the question that struck Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* as his book went to press in 1961: What kind of state had allowed the Vietnamese to execute a “Dien Bien Phu” and win? What combination of forces had the Vietnamese been able to harness in order to generate and then deploy such massive revolutionary violence?’

An American born in Kansas and educated in France who now teaches history at a French university in Montreal, Goscha is the author of a dozen books on Vietnam. The leading scholar working today on Southeast Asia, he is a masterful synthesiser of materials stretching from colonial archives to first-person accounts written by Vietnamese soldiers. He quotes CIA reports on opium tonnage shipped from Laos to Vietnam. He tells us that the importation of bicycles into Vietnam ‘jumped from 594 in 1952 to 7,212 in 1953’. We even learn that Ho Chi Minh was a tech geek whose ‘most cherished possession short of national independence’ was a state-of-the-art Hermes Featherweight typewriter.

The Vietnamese Communists combined two key ingredients to win their war, Goscha says. The French had conquered Southeast Asia through what they called the ‘oil spot strategy’. ‘[A]dministrative control was spread with military power from village to village.’ This network of fortified areas was then amalgamated into a colonial state. The Vietnamese Communists worked this strategy in reverse, connecting disparate villages into liberated zones. ‘During the Indochina War, state building cut both ways,’ Goscha writes.

During the nine years they fought the French during the First Indochina War, from 1945 to 1954, the Vietnamese built an ‘archipelago’ of liberated zones connected through a network of spies, like the great Pham Xuan An, and supply lines run by sampans cruising the coastal rivers and bicycles, elephants and soldiers coursing down the Annamite cordillera. ‘[T]hese island-like domains were in a constant state of competitive flux,’ Goscha writes. ‘Each bumped up against the other, expanding and contracting like sponges being squeezed in and out as their soldiers, security officials, and civil servants moved into an area while their adversaries pulled back—and vice versa.’ Most of the one million Vietnamese who died in the First Indochina War perished at

the edge of the empire, working to connect ‘oil spots’. Another three million would die in the Second Indochina War.

Mopping up oil spots is the stuff of counter-insurgency warfare. Expanding them is the work of revolutionary cadres. But this strategy of connecting islands into a postcolonial stream was not sufficient to produce a Communist victory at Dien Bien Phu. For that, one requires a strategy working in the opposite direction, a strategy capable of mounting and supporting a standing army. According to Goscha, the second key to Ho Chi Minh’s success was communism. He took his lessons from the Russian Revolution, added Mao’s precepts for total war among the people and consolidated what Goscha calls a ‘Communist War State’, including universal conscription and all the propaganda, military, intelligence and police functions required for waging total war.

‘The process of War Communism generated during the second half of the conflict what was, in effect, a slow-burning coup d’etat of historic proportions, largely imperceptible to outsiders at the time, but from which the Vietnam we know today first emerged, a communist Vietnam with nationalist characteristics,’ Goscha writes. While the Vietnamese were running a decentralised guerilla polity—connecting island archipelagos into liberated zones—they were moving in the opposite direction, creating a Communist-driven, single-party state, backed by China and the Soviet Union. This state was ruthless in eliminating any forces—even anti-colonial forces—that were not Communist.

Like any great work of history, Christopher Goscha’s book resonates with connections to the present. The text ends with a cautionary note: ‘[C]ontrary to what counterinsurgency specialists keep preaching in military academies to this day, the wars the Americans and their allies have been fighting in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War’ are not like those fought in China, North Korea or Vietnam. Here the ‘oil spots’ were connected by Communist parties. ‘Even Vladimir Putin’s Russia is dusting off the communist instruments Lenin first developed in the Soviet Union,’ Goscha writes. ‘Those in charge of these Eurasian states now run them on high levels of nationalism, but the mechanisms themselves derive from a specific kind of warfare, a communist one.’

What does it take to organise a Dien Bien Phu? Now we know the answer to Fanon’s question. But great battles are never fought twice. Dien Bien Phu will not be repeated, even if its lessons are there to be learned.



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