



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

by Christopher Goscha.

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The Battle of Dien Bien Phu remains a *sui generis* event in the history of the twentieth century. Never before, and never since, had a colonized people defeated a former colonizer in a set piece battle. It instantly became an international symbol, its meaning transgressing more than a military action in a remote area of Northwest Vietnam. “What must we do in order to realize Dien Bien Phu?” asked Frantz Fanon, the Algerian National Liberation Front writer and militant.¹ He did not mean a military victory per se; he meant liberation and independence from colonial oppression.

Though Fanon and his Algerian brethren did eventually achieve independence, neither they, nor any of the other Asian and African countries who struggled for independence in the years after the Second World War—including the Congo, Angola, and Laos—realized a Dien Bien Phu. Historian David Schoenbaum,² among others, speculated that fervent nationalism was the “secret weapon” of Ho Chi Minh and his cadre of North Vietnamese leaders (3). Yet the national pride of a typical Algerian or Cambodian was likely the same as a Vietnamese. The right question, the question Christopher Goscha contends no one was asked, was “what kind of *state*” allowed the Vietnamese to execute and win a victory at Dien Bien Phu (435)?

This question serves as the thesis of Goscha’s magisterial work, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*. Goscha, a professor of international relations at the University of Quebec and author of *Vietnam: A New History*, utilizes a trove of research from Vietnam, France, and the United States in his 514-page tome. A significantly scholarly achievement, the book features lucid and accessible, if sometimes professorial, prose. It comprises twelve chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. It includes maps and photographs, as well as sixty pages of helpful endnotes; its bibliography is available only online.

Goscha describes the dual nature of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), first as a decentralized polity struggling to survive in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and then, after 1950, as a communist-driven single party state backed by China. The fledgling original entity, which Goscha artfully describes as an “archipelago,” was foundationally and operationally sound, but territorially incomplete. Though the state that Ho Chi Minh and his DRV colleagues brought to Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was very different from the democratic republicanism he espoused at its creation in 1945, this binary nature was not contradictory. The communist state did not replace its earlier version, but rather arose from it in a “slow burning coup d’état of historic proportions” (11).

To explain this phenomenon, Goscha eschews a chronological narrative in favor of topical chapters on the core components of the state, including the building of an army and police force,

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (NY: Grove, 1961) 70.

2. In *Vietnam: How We Got in, How to Get Out* (NY: Atheneum Pr, 1968).

the importance of technology, and economic development. Ho and his brethren were successful because they understood implicitly the need for bureaucratic continuity in the aftermath of the French and Japanese occupation during World War II. As the Japanese left the country after their defeat, the Chinese, under Chiang Kai Shek, managed the transition in the North, while the British managed the South. The French, eager to rebuild their empire after their humiliation in the war, were permitted access to South Vietnam, while, ironically, the Chinese blocked them in the North, allowing Ho to coopt a still operative administrative system. The clerk, the administrator, the lowly civil servant were just as or even more important to the ultimate success of the DRV as the soldier. “Pragmaticism trumped radical revolution” (48).

Goscha also reveals that the mythological figure of “Uncle Ho,” clad in his simple tunic and sandals was in reality a “tech geek” who used advanced communications to connect the disparate islands in his archipelago (164). The use of radios ensured an otherwise impossible coherence of the bureaucracy. And neither the sophisticated French nor, later, the media savvy Americans won the war of the international press, but rather the primitive communists in North Vietnam.

Goscha contends that the transformation of the state, though gradual, had a definitive pivot point. That occurred when the newly formed People’s Republic of China recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (18 Jan. 1950). Up to this point, Goscha argues, ideological and political differences among the many Vietnamese factions were eschewed by Ho in the unified purpose of defeating the common French enemy. In order to both defeat the French and yield effective government control, anticolonial republicans and noncommunist nationalists were no longer welcomed; the earlier assurances given to them were meaningless. Of those promises, Goscha provocatively posits, “the communists were lying (266).”

As shown by the author’s portrayal of the mendacious communists, this is no hagiography of Ho and his cadre. Goscha outlines the manipulation, coercion, and targeted violence they used in their rise to power. There was pushback by the populace, long ignored in communist state histories, against conscription and other heavy handed methods. These were protests met with overwhelming violence. The nascent police force hunted Vietnamese anticommunists with as much vigor as they did in combating the French. On the battlefield, Vietnamese deserters and reluctant combatants were summarily executed; Goscha points out the hypocrisy of Ho and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, neither of whom ever experienced the hellish warfare they themselves implemented.

In the tradition of sociologist Charles Tilly,³ who theorized that “war made the state, and the state made the war,” Goscha theorizes that the communists needed the war in order to build the state. But Goscha’s study reveals a more complex example than Tilly’s examination of early modern Europe, mostly because the communists lacked territorial integrity. Ho used the war to unify the Vietnamese in a common cause, but also to justify the oppression and brutality of his own people. Regardless of the state propaganda, the underlying reason for forced conscription, radical land reform, and class warfare in the years after 1950 was not to further communist ideals or Vietnamese nationalism or even to defeat the French, but to control the population and gain power. In the end, Ho and the communist leadership packaged communism, nationalism, and war-making into a vital force.

Though Goscha competently explains the war and the building of the state, he admits that its complexity is “mind-boggling” (299). Just as the battle for the administrative state was as important as the military one, the battle for food—“General Rice”—was as important as the battle of arms. The war was an anticolonial war, but it was also a civil war, as well as an international one.

3. See his *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

Goscha avers that for the Americans, there was not two wars in Korea and Indochina, but only one war, an Indo-Korean conflict (a topic that he should have explored further). Though the domino theory is generally derided as a wrongheaded American foreign policy, Goscha shows from the start that Ho had designs on Laos and Cambodia as part of a larger Indochinese communist project.

Though Goscha coherently describes the transition from “archipelago state” to a “war communist” state, for the most part he omits a large island out of his account: South Vietnam, or the Associated States of Vietnam, later the Republic of Vietnam. He avoids the use of “archipelago” after his January 1950 inflection point. But, using his metaphor, Vietnam remained an archipelago until 1975.

The author starts his book with Ho’s parable of the elephant and the tiger. This is an inspiring tale. But as he brilliantly shows, it was just that—a fiction. By the time the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, the DRV was an elephant.

Goscha’s work, along with Sean McHale’s *The First Vietnam War*,⁴ fills a considerable void in the anglophone historiography of the First Indochina War from the perspective of the Vietnamese. It is a magnificent scholarly effort that will remain the standard text on its subject for years to come.

4. Subtitle, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2021). McHale places the transition point from archipelago to communism not in 1950, but in 1947–48.