

DIEN BIEN PHU: THIRTY YEARS AFTER

by

JANOS RADVANYI

Thirty-one years ago, on 6 May 1954, hell broke loose over the valley of Dien Bien Phu. General Vo Nguyen Giap's sappers had placed their Chinese-made explosives, transported by elephants through the jungles, at the end of a tunnel dug from the Vietminh's outpost to the center of the French camp. A series of explosions blasted bunkers and French Foreign Legion paratroopers in the air. Soon thereafter the newly arrived Soviet-built mobile multiple rocket launchers, the Katyushas, a special gift of Soviet Defense Minister Radion Y. Malinovsky to Giap, pounded systematically every square foot of Dien Bien Phu. The rockets which had been used so effectively by the Red Army against the *Wehrmacht* at the Eastern Front in World War II now filled the air with terrifying whistling and tremors, destroying the remaining field fortifications. At the fall of the day, carefully coordinated Vietminh shock troops of General Giap stormed in human waves the beleaguered and exhausted Frenchmen from every direction. In 24 hours, after bitter and heroic resistance, the long siege of 36 days ended. Giap won the battle, one of the most decisive in French colonial history.

Understandably, the 30th anniversary of this occasion gave ample opportunity for the victors to celebrate. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as other cities and villages in Vietnam, Laos, and occupied Cambodia, were decorated with red banners and flowers. Victory celebrations were held everywhere. Speakers at mass meetings reminded the population of the growing danger of "neo-colonialism and Chinese aggression" and

urged them to work harder to build "the glorious future of socialism" in the spirit of Dien Bien Phu.

But the anniversary also brought back sad memories to victors and vanquished alike. The estimated 60,000 attacking Vietminh troops had lost at least 8000 men and suffered 15,000 casualties, while the French had lost 3200 and suffered 4800 casualties. Moreover, of the 10,000 French POWs taken by the troops of Giap, only 3900 returned to France. Many of the rest perished from torture and disease in mosquito-infested jungle prison camps.¹

Before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, as the storm clouds had gathered over the besieged fortress, the French government had made a last-minute, desperate plea to Washington for an emergency American air and naval assistance operation. The request triggered a heated debate in the highest circles in the nation's capital. In spite of the United States' doctrinal opposition to any form of colonialism, the policy of containment of communist expansion had led Washington to be sympathetic to the request for aid from Paris. First and foremost, Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles seemed to be in favor of helping the French militarily. On the same wavelength, Admiral Arthur W. Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, went one step further. In his contingency plan, Admiral Radford suggested the use of three tactical atomic bombs to destroy the Vietminh's positions surrounding the bunkers of Dien Bien Phu. General Matthew B. Ridgway, former commander of the United Nations

troops in Korea and the Army Chief of Staff at the time of the battle at Dien Bien Phu, made an eloquent protest against US involvement in Vietnam in general, and against the Radford plan in particular. His arguments convincingly took the relevance of the situation into account by pointing out that the use of the tactical atomic weapons would not reduce the number of ground forces required to achieve victory. US intervention with air and naval forces would not bring victory, he added, nor was intervention with combat forces in Indochina militarily desirable.²

In the midst of diverse plans, advice, and reports, the wearied President Eisenhower remained uncommitted. His only consent was to the initiation of negotiations with the allies for a "United Action Plan" to rescue the French. This move, in turn, ended in fiasco; the British simply were absolutely not interested. Prime Minister Winston Churchill bluntly told Admiral Radford that if his countrymen had not been willing to fight to save India for themselves, why expect them to be willing to fight to save Indochina for France?

Even the French themselves turned a cold shoulder to the "United Action Plan." Indeed, they were seeking quick military assistance to avoid imminent defeat and humiliation at Dien Bien Phu, not some kind of collective defense that could lead in the long run to the internationalization of the war, and result in their loss of control of the war.

Then, with the fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, this diplomatic crisis came to an abrupt end, and the "United Action Plan" was laid to rest in the archives. Both official London and official Washington were relieved.³

As was the custom, President Eisenhower sent a message to the President of France, René Coty, and to the Chief of State of Vietnam, Bao Dai, praising the valiant French and Vietnamese defenders of the fortress of Dien Bien Phu and repeating the free world's determination to remain "faithful to the cause for which they fought."⁴ But as expected, the message did

not make the French forget the American President's indecision. Nor could they forgive the British callousness. Thus, understandably, once France capitulated at Dien Bien Phu and the conflict shifted to the Geneva Conference, relations between France and the United States were at low ebb. Differences between the United States and the United Kingdom also became acute, since Washington considered London to have been the prime obstacle to its much-heralded "United Action Plan." In addition, there was a complete Western misreading of communist intentions, and of Ho Chi Minh's real strength and power base, as well as of the extent to which the Soviets and Chinese were interested in assisting the Vietminh.

Nobody in the West, apparently, was aware of the fact that by the early spring of 1954, the Vietminh had already made contingency plans and preparations to retreat to the Chinese border, as Mao Tse-tung had done during the Long March to northern China in the 1930s. Probably nobody in the West knew that Ho and his Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, were asking desperately for Chinese military intervention against the French forces in Vietnam at the preparatory meeting in Moscow before the Geneva Conference.⁵

Dr. Janos Radvanyi is Director of the Center for International Security and Strategic Studies and Professor of History at Mississippi State University, where he has taught since 1971. From 1948 to 1967 he was a member of the Hungarian Diplomatic Service, his assignments including service in Turkey, France, Switzerland, and Syria. He rose to the position of Chief of Mission in the United States in 1962, and in that capacity was personally involved in the wartime negotiations between the US and North Vietnam, particularly in 1965-66. For political reasons, he asked and received political asylum in the United States in 1967. He subsequently earned a Ph.D. in history at Stanford University and was a Research Associate at the Hoover Institute. Dr. Radvanyi is the author of the books *Hungary and the Super Powers* (1972) and *Delusion and Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes and Diplomatic One-Upmanship in Vietnam* (1978). Presently he is working on a study "The Changing Patterns of Soviet Diplomacy," supported by an Earhart Foundation grant.



Neither Paris nor Washington realized that the losses of the People's Liberation Army in the Korean War were so heavy that China was simply not in a position to start a new venture in Indochina.⁶ Washington and Paris truly expected that the Korean truce agreement of 1953 would release Chinese troops to attack French Indochina, and that Chinese intervention was imminent. As a sacred myth, the West strongly believed that fierce nationalism could drive the Vietminh to make appalling sacrifices under any circumstances for their cause. And the misconceptions of the situation held by the West went on and on.

Meanwhile, all three interested parties on the communist side, Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi, were concerned about possible American intervention in Vietnam or a Korean-type united action by the Western powers. Khrushchev, Mao Tse-tung, and Ho Chi Minh probably remembered that President Eisenhower had used the nuclear threat at the end of the Korean conflict to achieve the long-delayed armistice.⁷ The probability of this and other conventional types of American military actions surfaced at the worst possible time, since the post-Stalin leadership in the Soviet Union was preoccupied with grave internal problems at home and for tactical reasons embraced a policy of peaceful coexistence abroad.

And China, while rejecting the Vietminh's request for military intervention, had turned to more pressing domestic issues and had declared a policy of detente in Asia. Thus it became evident that if Ho Chi Minh were to be rescued, a temporary cease-fire or preferably a negotiated political settlement was necessary. This rather clear-cut position on the part of the communists, however, did not preclude their determination to strengthen their bargaining position in Geneva.⁸

The crucial decision as to where and when to strike and whether to withdraw and regroup was entirely a Vietnamese decision. The independent-minded Ho Chi Minh and his Lao Dong (Vietnamese Workers' Party) Politburo seldom asked advice in strategic matters from Peking, and never from Moscow. Thus the decision to strike the

French expeditionary forces at Dien Bien Phu had come as a surprise to everyone in the Kremlin, where the Soviets were preoccupied with pressing the Vietnamese for negotiations.⁹ Meanwhile, the Chinese were in a better position to learn about the actual military planning of Giap, since Chinese military advisers had been stationed at the military headquarters of the Vietminh.

In the spring of 1959, I visited Hanoi as a member of a Hungarian party and government delegation, at which time I had the opportunity to get some firsthand information on the decision. It was there that I learned also the dramatic story of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, as retold by the general who conceived and masterminded the plan, Vo Nguyen Giap.

During that visit our delegation toured the Museum of the Revolution in Hanoi, with General Giap as our guide. Giap led us through the 30 halls of the museum, drawing our attention to photographs and memorabilia that dramatized the long efforts of Ho Chi Minh and his close collaborators, Pham Van Dong, Le Duan, and Giap himself.

In the central hall of the museum was a papier-mâché model of the Dien Bien Phu battlefield. When we arrived at this display, General Giap stepped to a lectern on one side of the model, bade the Hungarians be seated on wooden benches facing him, and like a university professor, launched into a lecture with the aid of a long bamboo pointer. The battle of Dien Bien Phu, he told us, was the last desperate exertion of the Vietminh army. Its forces were on the verge of complete exhaustion. Their supply of rice was running out. Apathy had spread among the populace to such an extent that it was difficult to draft new fighters. Years of jungle warfare had sent morale in the fighting units plunging to the depths.

On this note, the Supreme War Council met, remained in session for several days, and finally came to the decision that the impossible must be attempted: a surprise assault, a decisive battle. The mountain-girded valley of Dien Bien Phu was chosen as the scene of the battle on the assumption that

General Henri Eugene Navarre, the commander of the French expeditionary forces, would consider that well-fortified stronghold an unlikely target of attack. This decision revealed that Giap and his colleagues knew something of the strategic thinking of the French military school. As Giap explained to us, they knew the French very well and were convinced that the postwar French military leadership had not drawn a lesson from its defeat at that other "impregnable" fortress, the Maginot Line. The calculations proved correct, said the general.

The French did not foresee the move because it was doubtless impossible for them to imagine how units and materiel could be brought to the scene through the dense surrounding jungles in the numbers and strength necessary to wage a battle. It was indeed a difficult undertaking, said Giap. First, a detailed reconnoitering of the terrain had to be effected in a relatively short time; second, the transportation of the forces had to be organized. The first objective was carried out by soldiers on bicycles and on foot who carried no load; to each soldier was assigned one coolie to carry ammunition and rice rations for both. The problem of transporting artillery batteries was solved with elephants and buffaloes. The general even gave the elephants military grades of rank, he told us.

When his forces had reached the target area, Giap had ordered a general rest of three days. During this period political officers circulated among the troops, trying to raise morale. "The French are not gods," the men were told time and again. The agitation was sorely needed, Giap observed, because the soldiers were truly terrified.

The first phase of the battle was conducted in typical guerrilla warfare fashion. The Vietminh attacked by night, each time blowing up one or two pillboxes reached via tunnels dug during the day. At first Giap even permitted the French resupply transport aircraft to come and go undisturbed, and the French command concluded that the pillbox demolitions were just another series of partisan attacks. It was only later that the Vietminh brought up artillery and kept the

only runway on the Dien Bien Phu airfield under constant fire. At this juncture the French tried to resupply their base by parachute drops, but the parachuted packages were captured. Meanwhile, the Vietminh batteries moved frequently, so that by the time the French artillery registered their old positions they were concentrated elsewhere. Giap's forces increased their pressure systematically until they were attacking the base day and night from all sides. Cut off from the outside world, and without supplies, the French military command recognized the hopelessness of its situation and surrendered.

What Giap had highlighted to us had not been incorporated in his book, *Dien Bien Phu*; neither was it reported in Western accounts following the battle. Only Soviet party leader Khrushchev revealed in his memoirs how desperate Ho Chi Minh's situation had been before the battle.¹⁰ It is equally important to remember that Giap did not acknowledge in his book the substantial Chinese aid, especially the heavy artillery pieces that were instrumental in breaking the French defense line. On the other hand, he did not blame the Russians for failing to give all-out military support to the Vietminh in its life and death struggle.

But at the time, we were deeply impressed by the general's presentation.

The rest is well known. One day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, on 8 May 1954, an international conference convened in Geneva, chaired by the USSR and the United Kingdom, with France, Vietnam, the Vietminh, the United States, and the Chinese People's Republic participating. Cambodia and Laos were also represented. A major military victory behind them, the communists started to negotiate from a position of strength. Yet three months' behind-the-scene bargaining was needed until the parties were able to work out a solution of the eight-year-old Franco-Vietminh war, an accord which provided for the temporary division of Vietnam into two parts, North and South, with a common boundary along the 17th parallel, and with a demilitarized zone on

each side of the parallel. All parties agreed that Vietnam would be reunited by national plebiscite in two years. The French agreed to remove their troops from the North, now controlled entirely by Ho Chi Minh, within 300 days; Ho promised to withdraw his Vietminh units from the South. Finally, all parties consented to the creation of an International Control Commission, comprised of contingents from Canada, India, and Poland, to supervise the movement of all armed forces and the release of prisoners of war, and to oversee control of the frontiers, ports, and airfields. Separate agreements were reached on the cessation of hostilities in Cambodia and in Laos.¹¹

With the signing of the Geneva Accord, real peace was still a far cry away. For Ho Chi Minh, Giap, and their comrades in the Lao Dong Politburo, diplomatic negotiation and agreements were considered as part of a process for preparing for further fighting. The Vietminh influence in the South was to be preserved, and additional southern cadres in North Vietnam were to be trained. By 1960 Ho Chi Minh spoke openly of the formation of a "united front" for the "liberation" of South Vietnam. In a matter of months Ho's united front grew into the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF); in the same period the nucleus of the Liberation Army of South Vietnam appeared on the scene.

Basically following the Vietminh tactic of appealing to Vietnamese nationalism, the NLF guerrillas soon made significant political and military advances. Moreover, now learning from the experiences of the Franco-Vietminh war, the Ho Chi Minh leadership made great effort to assure substantial military and economic aid from both the Soviet bloc countries and China.

As the ground war in Vietnam expanded with American involvement, not only Washington, but Moscow and Peking allowed themselves to become chained to the fortune of small and relatively insignificant powers in Southeast Asia. And the war grew even worse. The bombings intensified as American planes hit new targets in the North.

The ground war in the South heightened as both sides increased their forces and expanded their range of action. Interestingly enough, the "spirit of Dien Bien Phu" still was with Ho Chi Minh and General Giap. In 1968, to put all bets on one horse as they had done in 1954, the master strategist Giap dared to guarantee that the important American Marine base and airstrip at Khe Sanh, on the road linking the Vietnamese coast to Laos, would become another Dien Bien Phu. Militarily, however, the battle of Khe Sanh and the rest of the Tet Offensive turned out to be a near disaster for Hanoi.¹²

As negotiation for a peaceful solution came to the fore, the North Vietnamese emphasized, as they had before the Geneva Conference, the strategy of "fighting while talking." And the final Paris settlement of 1973, "An Agreement Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam," was violated by Ho Chi Minh's successor, Le Duan, the same as the Geneva Agreement had been. His "silent partner," Soviet Party Chief and President Brezhnev, a guarantor of the Paris Agreement, was even sending the Kremlin's best military mind, General Victor Kulikov, to assist Giap and his protégé, General Van Tien Dung, in the final invasion and conquest of South Vietnam.

Today, more than 30 years after Dien Bien Phu, the 72-year-old, gray-haired Giap is no longer the *nui la*, the volcano under the snow, as once his countrymen called him. Virtually retired from public life, he surfaced again as historical necessity dictated. But his appearance should remind us that as staunch Marxist-Leninists, the Hanoi leadership considers diplomacy only a preparatory stage for fighting and believes that "war is simply a continuation of politics by other means."¹³

NOTES

1. For details of French and Vietminh losses, see Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1967), pp. 483-87.

2. Army position paper to the National Security Council, *Pentagon Papers*, The Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), I, 92.

3. For a first hand account of the 1954 crisis in Indochina, see Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1978), pp. 150-55.

4. *Pentagon Papers*, I, 106.
5. N. S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 481.
6. *Ibid*, p. 482. See also David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. 461, appendix C. According to a UN release (10/23/53) it was estimated that the casualties of the Chinese communist forces during the Korean War totaled 900,000 while the North Korean casualties were about 520,000.
7. Janos Radvanyi, *Hungary and the Super Powers* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1972), p. 11.
8. For details of the Soviet position concerning the Geneva peace talks see Janos Radvanyi, *Delusion and Reality* (South Bend, Ind.: Gateway Editions, 1978), pp. 6-7; for details of the Chinese position, George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dell, 1969), pp. 271-72.
9. As early as the Spring of 1959, Soviet-Vietnamese relations cooled off, and Khrushchev often complained in private that Ho Chi Minh was uninterested in seeking Moscow's advice in military matters. He maintained that the decision to strike the French at Dien Bien Phu surprised him and the rest of the Soviet Politburo. Personal recollection.
10. Khrushchev, p. 482.
11. For details of the Geneva Conference, see *The Pentagon Papers*, I., 108-78; for the text of the Geneva Agreements, see Kahin and Lewis, pp. 422-50.
12. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 332-33; and Radvanyi, *Delusions and Reality*, pp. 241-43.
13. V. I. Lenin, *The Collected Works of Lenin* (New York: International Publishers, 1919), XXIX, 219. It is well known that Lenin was a keen student of Clausewitz.

