

H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

Roundtable Review 15-1

Christopher Goscha. *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780691180168 (hardcover, \$35.00)

5 September 2023 | PDF: <https://issforum.org/to/jrt15-1> | Website: rjissf.org

Editor: Diane Labrosse
Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux

Production Editor: Christopher Ball
Copy Editor: Bethany Keenan

Contents

Introduction by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon.....	2
Review by Martin Grossheim, Seoul National University	7
Review by Stein Tønnesson, Emeritus, Peace Research Institute Oslo	10
Review by Claire Thi Liên Tran, University Paris Cité.....	15
Review by Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, Texas Tech University.....	22
Response by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal.....	29

Introduction by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon

How was the Vietnamese Communist state formed? In Christopher Goscha's *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, that state was initially an "archipelago state" (1945–49)—"archipelago" in the sense of both its territorial shape and its coalitional politics—which then transformed into a "War Communist state" (since 1950), one that was dominated at the core by the Communist Party and was built specifically to fight the war against the French, the Associated States, and their supporters. While the story in the book ends with the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the War Communist state went on to take full control over North Vietnam, and two decades later, all of Vietnam after another, even more violent, war.

In early modern Western Europe, war made states, states made war, as Charles Tilly argued long ago.¹ Goscha shows how this happened specifically in the case of the Vietnamese Communist state. In the age of decolonization and amid a rising Cold War, the process was not driven by wars among ambitious monarchs, but instead was led by a revolutionary group motivated by a Communist vision, informed by Communist techniques, and aided by its Communist allies. The process produced a relatively cohesive yet highly coercive state, less by the mere logic of the survival of the fittest than by ideological commitments that paved the way for external assistance in revolutionary statecraft and modern weapons.

Regionally, the process unfolded as transnational revolutionary movements spread across nations, crossed physical borders, and conquered or repulsed counterrevolutionary states. The process generated a new form of identity that was built less on nationality than on membership in a global entity—the Communist camp. The process also did not produce states with centralized Weberian bureaucracies as in Europe; instead, its product was a centralized Church-like hierarchy that erased the boundaries between state and society, and that controlled the minds and bodies of people to an unprecedented extent (even if far from fully).

Nations whose borders were violated and whose identities were transcended during the process eventually reemerged as Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia, but it is important to avoid assuming they were more than what they were. Until recently, much scholarship (also as seen in Stein Tønnesson's comments in this roundtable) in fact paid attention only to nationalism, or tried to downplay the significance of Communism in the face of undeniable evidence.² Nationalism was assumed to be the prime moving force that had driven the Vietnamese for centuries and that continued to do so in the twentieth century. That assumption led scholars to neglect the role of Communist ideology, statecraft, and allies in the creation and maintenance of the formidable state of "Uncle Ho." Goscha shows that nationalism at best produced only an archipelago state, not only in Vietnam but elsewhere in other decolonizing contexts.

Goscha's book thus dispels the myth about the invincible power of Vietnamese nationalism. The long romanticized and cherished view about nationalism as a liberating force has not only obscured our understanding of the 1954 Dien Bien Phu battle, but also prevented a full reckoning of the costs and benefits of nationalism under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Nationalism in this case became a tool for more sinister desires. First, there is the staggering cost in terms of human lives and suffering. As Goscha writes:

¹ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, 990-1992* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, Inc, 1992), 67.

² An example is David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution, 1945-1946* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). For a review of scholarship on Vietnamese nationalism up to the early 2000s, see Tuong Vu, "Vietnamese Political Studies and Debates on Vietnamese Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2: 2 (August 2007), 175-230.

[T]he war Ho and his entourage led and the state they crafted to run it came at a high price for the Vietnamese people. The French, we know, inflicted terrible suffering on civilians during the Indochina War.... However, the Communists also worsened the plight of their own people, by conscripting males into the armed forces and members of both sexes into accompanying supply and work teams. They did so in the hundreds of thousands.... The Vietnamese president only made things worse for the majority peasant population when he asked them to give not only their sons and daughters, but also to produce more food to feed this hungry army and those supplying it. It was a vicious cycle (430-1).

Second, nationalism was mobilized simply in order for the elites to consolidate their domination. Riding on the crest of nationalism, Vietnamese Communist leaders unleashed class warfare to solidify their control of the countryside at horrendous costs to their class enemies, many of whom were in fact true patriots:

The Communists [went on] to execute several thousand Vietnamese [by] 1956. Cadres even practiced torture to obtain the confessions ..., while hundreds, perhaps thousands, committed suicide. By committing such acts of cruelty against innocent people whose only sin was to be of the wrong class (and that is highly debatable), Vietnamese Communists sowed civil war, deep hate, and unforgettable sorrow that would drive thousands of the country's people into the enemy's arms. To claim that the father of the nation, Ho Chi Minh, was somehow a stranger to all of this is dishonest (414).

Third, modern Vietnamese nationalism led by Communists eventually turned Vietnam into a dominant state on the entire Indochinese peninsula, liberating all from the French, but in the same process subjugating Laotians and Cambodians to Vietnamese rule for many years. Again, it is illuminating to quote Goscha here:

What Ho Chi Minh and his entourage did in Laos and Cambodia... was not a sideshow in the larger story of the wartime making of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Vietnamese War Communism was a larger Indochinese project too... (347)

Empires do not die easily. They often reconfigure themselves in new ways to carry on. This was true of the French colonial empire. It was also the case for their Vietnamese adversaries [having their own imperial past], well beyond the end of the Indochina War. Imperial dust is still to be found in Laos and Cambodia to this day—and not just the French kind (387-388).

Moving beyond nationalism, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* thus convincingly answers the question of why Vietnam, and Indochina as well, experienced perhaps the most violent and protracted path to decolonization in the “Third World.” Two forms of extreme violence became fused in this path, including most advanced revolutionary statecraft, parts of which included class struggle and sophisticated indoctrination (or mind-disciplinary) techniques; and a highly mechanized war in which some of the most destructive weapons (for example, French napalm; foreign artillery provided to the Vietnamese by the Chinese) were deployed. It was class warfare on top of a full-scale, modern, conventional war. The path involved a series of imperialist wars in which the self-proclaimed “anti-imperialist” camp (the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam) behaved very similarly to their ‘imperialist’ enemies (France, Japan, the US) and turned to fight among themselves after the latter had left. ‘War Communism’ thus bred militarism as much as imperialism did.

The participants in the roundtable are unanimous in their positive assessment of the work. Martin Grossheim praises *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* as having made “a major contribution to the study of modern Vietnam... and produced a solid foundation for further studies into specific aspects of the First Indochina War.” He continues, “[Goscha’s] study also significantly enhances our understanding of the rise of the single-party Communist state that is still in existence in present-day Vietnam.” Alex-Thai Dinh Vo writes, “Goscha, who is arguably the most prolific Western scholar of modern Vietnamese history, convincingly demonstrates that although nationalism was important, it was Communism and the application of Communist war institutions and practices that enabled the [Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV] to achieve the military success it did at Điện Biên Phủ on 7 May 1954.” Despite his substantial disagreement with the central argument of the book (more below), Stein Tønnesson declares that “Goscha’s *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* is the best academic book yet written about the First Indochina War.”

While all agree that Goscha’s book is outstanding, they emphasize its different aspects. Vo considers Goscha’s most important argument to be that Communist institutions and practices rather than nationalism led to the DRV’s victory at Dien Bien Phu. He asks why, if non-Communists were no less nationalistic than Communists, the latter succeeded? In the same vein, Grossheim argues that “Goscha’s emphasis on the creation of a one-party state as the main explanatory factor challenges the view that the Vietnamese Communists were victorious largely because they successfully made use of Vietnamese traditions such as the traditions of resistance against foreign aggressors and of Confucianism.” In contrast, Claire Thi Lien Tran notes that the “main contribution of the book is undoubtedly its consideration of this colonial war as a total war. Thanks to the use of numerous Vietnamese and French sources, Goscha provides a meticulous and systematic description of the war machine of the two forces engaged in a total war.” Of the four reviewers, Tønnesson appears to define the book’s contribution in narrowest terms by claiming that “Goscha provides what I would call a logistical explanation of the Communist victory in Vietnam.”

The reviewers raise several questions and criticisms. Tran and Grossheim both suggest that Goscha does not devote sufficient attention to non-Communists. According to Tran, “the nationalist actors appear only very little, and it is the Communists who are presented as the major Vietnamese actors who faced the French.” Grossheim points to the “contested nature” of the one-party state that Ho Chi Minh and his comrades established in 1951, and the “diversity of reactions to their attempt to impose a strict party line.” Goscha does discuss non-Communist nationalists such as Nguyen Cong Luan’s father, but he could have done more, in Grossheim’s opinion. Tran also takes issue with Goscha’s apparent neglect of the diplomatic struggle and the propaganda front in support of the war. She thinks more could have been said about the significant role of US aid to France that contributed to prolonging the war.

Tran does not quite accept Goscha’s grouping of Communist Vietnam together with other Asian Communist states in what he calls “a long Eurasian arc of Communist warfare” as if they were similar. She points out certain aspects that appeared specific to Vietnamese Communism, such as the French policy to eliminate other nationalist parties that allowed the Communists to dominate the movement; the Vietnamese tradition of confronting China; and the Communist policy of national union at least in the first phase of the war. Tønnesson questions Goscha’s argument that Communist techniques were essential to the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu: “I surmise that the ability of Vietnam’s ‘War Communists’ to mobilize the people during 1950-54 was not primarily due to imported Russian, Chinese and Korean techniques or from radical land reform, but rather to the popular legitimacy that the DRV and the person of Ho Chi Minh had gained in the coalition period.” Tønnesson thus disagrees with Goscha’s central argument in the book that other reviewers find convincing.

Vo wonders why the book ends in 1954, since the major thrust of Vietnamese Communists' land reform, a key policy of War Communism, took place after their victory at Dien Bien Phu. Once it began, the imperative of Communist state-building appeared to have outlasted the particular war that provided it with the initial rationale. Class warfare reached its peak after 1954 as the rural society was flattened to enable the rise of poor peasants who would forge the new roots of the Communist state extending to the villages. Violence was now directed against class enemies instead of the foreign power. Initially justified by war, Communism now had assumed a dynamic of its own, in peacetime, and in preparation for the next war (the Second Indochina War), and the following one (the Third Indochina War).

Christopher Goscha's earlier works fundamentally challenged simplistic and Orientalist concepts of Vietnamese national identity and nationalism.³ By focusing on the politics of Communist state-building during the First Indochina War, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* not only demystifies the outcome of Dien Bien Phu, but it also demythologizes Vietnamese nationalism. This book is a model of outstanding historical scholarship that brings an obscure process to life while delivering a convincing answer to a major historical question.

Participants:

Christopher Goscha is Professor of International Relations in the History Department at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He teaches International Relations and World History. He is currently working on a general history of the wars for Vietnam (Basic Books).

Tuong Vu is Professor and Department Head of the Department of Political Science, as well as director of the US-Vietnam Research Center at the University of Oregon. Vu is the author of *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge, 2017), and *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (Cambridge, 2010). His three most recent books, *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920-1963* (Hawaii, 2022, co-edited with Nu-Anh Tran), *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory* (Temple, 2023, co-edited with Linda Ho Peche and Alex-Thai D. Vo), and *The Dragon's Underbelly: Dynamics and Dilemmas in Vietnam's Economy and Politics* (ISEAS 2023, coedited with Nhu Truong), focus on Vietnamese republicanism, the Republic of Vietnam, the Vietnamese diaspora, and contemporary Vietnam.

Martin Grossheim is Associate Professor in Vietnamese History, Seoul National University. Selected publications include *Ho Chi Minh. Der geheimnisvolle Revolutionär. Leben und Legende [Ho Chi Minh. The Mysterious Revolutionary: Life and Legend]* (Munich: Beck, 2011); "The East German 'Stasi' and Vietnam: A Contribution to an Entangled History of the Cold War," *The International History Review*, 43:1 (2021): 136-152, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1666893>; "Celebrating the Socialist Past: The Vietnamese 'Memory Machine' at Work," *Journal of Humanities* 77:2 (2020): 327-356, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17326/jhsnu.77.2.202005.327>; "The Lao Động Party, Culture and the Campaign against 'Modern Revisionism': The Democratic Republic of Vietnam before the Second Indochina War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 9:1 (May 2013): 80-129, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2013.8.1.80>. Research interests: modern Vietnamese history, memory studies, and intelligence studies. His current project is titled "The Politics of History and Memory in Vietnam."

³ For example, Christopher E. Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2012).

Stein Tønnesson (born 1953) is Research Professor Emeritus at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). His doctoral thesis at the University of Oslo, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, was published by SAGE in 1991. His monograph, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (University of California Press, 2010), was translated into Vietnamese as *Việt Nam 1946: Chiến Tranh Bắt Đầu Như Thế Nào?* (Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2013). He is now engaged in writing an introduction to the Vietnam War, and a monograph on War and Peace in Indochina, in his native Norwegian language.

Claire Thi Liên Tran is Associate Professor at the University of Paris, teaching Contemporary Southeast Asia, and Researcher at the Cessma (Centre d'études en sciences sociales sur les mondes africains, américains et asiatiques). A specialist in Vietnam, her publications mainly focus on the Catholic minority and the relations between state and religions, but also on the elite-building, from a biographical perspective. Recently, she has co-edited a special issue on “Global Catholicism and Mobilities in Southeast Asia” (*SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 2020) and of the annual publication *Asie du Sud-Est, Bilan, enjeux et perspectives*, when she was the director of IRASEC, a French Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia based in Bangkok (2016-2021). At the moment, she is finalizing the edition of a book on Asians during the First World War (NUS Press). She also works on Spanish Dominicans in North Vietnam, and is preparing a biography of a Catholic family coming from Spanish vicariate over four generations,.

Alex-Thai Dinh Vo is Assistant Research Professor at the Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. He is a historian of modern Vietnam and East and Southeast Asia, specializing in Cold War politics and the Vietnam Wars. His works examine the social, cultural, political, and economic transformations in Vietnam, including issues such as the land reform, social-cultural control, reeducation, diaspora, and war legacies and memories. He holds a PhD in History from Cornell University. He is the co-editor of *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory* (Temple University Press, 2023).

 Review by Martin Grossheim, Seoul National University

In the last three decades, scholarship that makes wide use of Vietnamese language material has provided fascinating new insights into the history of the three Indochina Wars. There is still a heavy preponderance on studies on the Second Indochina War, although quite a few books on the war against France (1945-1954) and the initial stage of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) have been published.¹

The First Indochina War was in dire need of a detailed overall study. With his masterly book, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, Christopher Goscha now fills that void. It is based on many years of painstaking research in French archives and Vietnamese libraries and provides a complete reassessment of the history of one of the bloodiest anti-colonial wars after 1945.

In *Vietnam. Un État Né de la Guerre, 1945–1954* (2011),² Goscha had already offered a fresh approach to the understanding of the First Indochina War, emphasizing the close relationship between decolonization and the Cold War in Indochina, and presenting the DRV as a ‘state born of war.’ In his new book Goscha further develops the latter argument and systematically analyses in which way the DRV was a modern example of Charles Tilly’s famous adage that “war made the state, and the state made war.”³

Goscha analyzes the factors that allowed the DRV to achieve the historic victory at Điện Biên Phủ in May 1954. His findings fundamentally enhance our understanding of the war. He argues that President Hồ Chí Minh and his comrades defeated the French because they transformed a decentralized guerilla polity into a single-party state, established a modern professional army, created resources to finance the war, built up the necessary communication techniques, established national intelligence and security services, and mobilized the population. Goscha’s emphasis on the creation of a one-party state as the main explanatory factor challenges the view that the Vietnamese Communists were victorious largely because they successfully made use of Vietnamese traditions such as the tradition of resistance against foreign aggressors and of Confucianism. Such interpretations, which were first expounded by the French scholar Paul Mus and later popularized by John T. McAlister and Frances FitzGerald, are still influential in Vietnamese studies.⁴ The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) makes use of this argument as well,

¹ See, for example, François Guillemot, *Dai Viet: indépendance et révolution au Viet-Nam, l'échec de la troisième voie (1938–1955)* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2012); Bertrand de Hartingh, *Entre le peuple et la nation: La République démocratique du Viet Nam de 1953 à 1957* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extrême Orient, 2003); Alec Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020); Christian Lentz, *Contesting Territory: Dien Bien Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Brett Reilly, “The Origins of the Vietnamese Civil War and the State of Vietnam” (Ph.D. diss, University of Wisconsin at Madison, 2018); and Benoît de Tréglodé, *Héros et révolution au Vietnam* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2014), in English translation as *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2012).

² Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam. Un État Né de la Guerre, 1945-1954* (Paris: A. Colin, 2011).

³ Charles Tilly, “Reflections on the History of European State-making,” in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975): 3–89, here: 42.

⁴ Paul Mus, *Viet-Nam. Sociologie d'une guerre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952); John T. McAlister, Jr. and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and their Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake; the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, Little Brown, 1972).

presenting itself as the legitimate and only leader of Vietnamese nationalism and the inheritor of the “tradition of resistance against foreign aggressors.”⁵

Goscha instead claims that “nationalism, no matter how strong it was, conditioned outcomes, but it alone cannot explain how the French brought down the French at Dien Bien Phu.” (335). He explains that the VCP used the war to create a single-party state by making extensive use of the War Communism toolbox, such as mass mobilization techniques that were inspired by the Soviet and Chinese models. He shows that Hồ Chí Minh and others had known of these tools since the 1930s when they witnessed the Communist revolutions in the Soviet Union and/or China. In Goscha’s view, the rise of a single-party state in 1950/1951 constituted a “turning-point in the history of modern Vietnam.” In other words, the Party created the institutional prerequisites that made the victory in 1954 possible. Against this background the author’s claim that Điện Biên Phủ “was also the climax of Vietnamese War Communism” (390) makes perfect sense.

That said, it might also have made sense to have added a few paragraphs on the contested nature of the one-party state that Hồ Chí Minh, Secretary-General Trường Chinh, and others worked to establish in 1951, and on the diversity of reactions to their attempt to impose a strict party line. The author mentions the phenomenon of desertions, a topic that “still awaits an historian” (440), and analyses how the rectification campaign and mandatory self-criticism sessions spun out of control. For example, he cites the case of the DRV’s Army Officers’ School in Southern China, where some officer-cadre trainees could not stand the pressure of the rectification courses and committed suicide, and many others fabricated confessions (280). He further mentions the famous poet Xuân Diệu, who had a hard time during self-criticism sessions where he was indirectly criticized for his homosexuality (279).

In this context one could have dwelt in more detail on the reaction of some Vietnamese who had initially supported the anti-French resistance, which was nurtured by nationalist and anti-colonialist feelings, but decided to leave the revolution for French-controlled cities when the VCP switched from its moderate united-front policy to Maoist class struggle in 1951. The composer Phạm Duy, who left for Hanoi with his wife and after the war migrated to South Vietnam, offers a good example for this movement (*dinh tề*).⁶ He stands in stark contrast to other intellectuals, such as Trần Đức Thảo, who gave up his academic career in France, returned to Vietnam in 1951, and joined the resistance in the Việt Bắc area. He fully “reinvented” himself and, like many others, enthusiastically welcomed the mandatory rectification courses and self-criticism sessions.⁷ A few remarks on the role of intellectuals in the DRV and the cultural

⁵ See Tuong Vu, “The Party v. the People: Anti-China Nationalism in Contemporary Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 9:4 (Dec. 2014): 33-66; 33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2014.9.4.33>, and also Martin Grossheim, “Nationalism and Historiography in Socialist Vietnam,” *H-Soz-Kult*, 13 Sept. 2021, www.hsozkult.de/debate/id/diskussionen-5257. In the 1970s the influential Vietnamese intellectual Nguyễn Khắc Viện argued that Confucianism and Marxism shared certain elements and that the VCP had successfully tapped Vietnamese traditions. See Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Indochina Resource Center, 1974).

⁶ Phạm Duy’s decision to leave the revolution was partly motivated by personal reasons. For more details on Phạm Duy see Eric Henry: “Phạm Duy and Modern Vietnamese History;” A paper presented at the Southeastern Conference, Association for Asian Studies Lexington, Kentucky, January 15, 2005 <http://tannhactheky20.com/Articles/index.htm>; and John Schafer. “The curious memoirs of the Vietnamese composer Phạm Duy,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43:1 (2012): 77-110, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000671>.

⁷ Though in the beginning Trần Đức Thảo embraced the new Maoist-inspired class line, in 1956 he criticized the party in two articles in the newspaper *Nhân Văn* and as a result was forced to leave public life and to live under very difficult living conditions. For details see Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946–1993,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61: 1 (2002): 7-31, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700187>.

policy of the party that after 1948 increasingly followed Marxist lines would also have fitted nicely here, even if a detailed analysis of this aspect is certainly beyond the scope of Goscha's book.⁸

One of the strengths of *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* is its emphasis on the wider context in which the Vietnamese and the French were operating during the First Indochina War. First, Goscha presents the creation of a one-party Marxist state as part of a connected history of Asian Communism. As mentioned above, he shows how the VCP made use of a number of tactics that originated from the Soviet and Chinese revolution. In the same vein, he describes the Chinese and Southeast Asian networks that the DRV built up in order to have access to weapons and all other kinds of items necessary to wage a revolutionary war (chapter 3). Similarly, he stresses that the First Indochina War must also be understood against the background of the Korean War, and that especially in the view of the US administration, both Asian theatres of war were closely interconnected (296).

What also makes Goscha's book an important contribution to the field of modern Vietnamese studies in general, and the Indochina wars in particular, is the fact that it highlights the importance of historical actors who often remain anonymous, but who played important roles during the French colonial period and the First Indochina War. Thus, he provides fascinating details on the role of well-known and also less well-known French and Vietnamese, such as the colonial spy chief Léon Louis Sogny; Trần Quốc Hoàn, the DRV's first and long-term Minister of Public Security; Trần Đăng Ninh, the chief of the party's internal security services; the famous surgeon Dr. Tôn Thất Tùng, who joined the resistance and played an enormously important role in the medical services during the battle of Điện Biên Phủ; and the engineer Trần Đại Nghĩa, who had studied and worked in France and Germany during World War II and used his expertise to help the DRV in the war against superior French firepower.

Goscha also offers new insights into the increased level of violence unleashed by the French, especially after the internationalization of the conflict in 1950/51, such as the use of napalm against the Vietnamese soldiers (290). He shows how Vietnamese civilians as well became victims of French violence, for example during the infamous massacre in My Trach in 1947 (46). Interestingly, this violent form of warfare by the French army in Indochina still awaits a detailed study. This once more shows that in contrast to the Second Indochina War, the war between the French and the DRV still remains an understudied topic.

Goscha also makes clear that in contrast to celebratory commemoration of the First Indochina War and the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in Vietnam, the Vietnamese People's Army under General Võ Nguyên Giáp only achieved its victory against the French at a high cost in human lives, and that the horribly high mortality rate that Giáp's troops suffered during the first two waves of their attack led to a loss of morale and to cases of insubordination (419-20). The state of war that the party had built up after 1950 allowed the DRV to bring down the French army, but after Điện Biên Phủ the leaders also "recognized that their War Communism had exhausted the 'people'" (434). According to Goscha, this partly explains that the DRV made concessions at the Geneva Conference in summer 1954 (433).

With *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* Christopher Goscha has made a major contribution to the study of modern Vietnam, and has produced a solid foundation for further studies into specific aspects of the First Indochina War. It will remain a standard reference work on the First Indochina War for years to come. His study also significantly enhances our understanding of the rise of the single-party Communist state that is still in existence in present day Vietnam.

⁸ On the party's cultural policy see Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh. *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

An all-out attack on the French fortress at Dien Bien Phu was planned for 26 January 1954, following the model of “human waves” used by Chinese forces in Korea. The French defenders knew it would be coming and remained confident that they could repulse the attack with overwhelming firepower. In the days before the attack, the commander of the People’s Liberation Army of Vietnam (PLAF), General Vo Nguyen Giap, hesitated. He did not feel a hundred per cent sure of victory. He called off the attack, and used six more weeks to obtain further reinforcements of ammunition, heavy artillery, and anti-aircraft guns carried on Chinese trucks and bicycles by thousands of porters. Giap also revised his strategy for the battle. On 13 March, when he finally struck, he focused on his attack on two bastions at the outer perimeter. In the following days, he damaged the French airstrip sufficiently to prevent landings. The French could now only be supplied by parachutes. Two more attack waves followed, leading to total victory on 7 May.

Christopher Goscha’s approach to the communist victory at Dien Bien Phu mirrors Giap’s methodical, piecemeal, multi-directional approach. Instead of providing an all-out chronological account, he asks two key questions and then explores waves of arguments one by one to answer the questions of how the Vietnamese Communists generated their remarkable level of force by 1954, and what concretely went into their epic military victory. This approach is unique. Unlike most Dien Bien Phu battle narratives, which focus on the French experience and the US non-intervention,¹ this book provides only a very short account of the battle itself. The book is about Vietnam and what made it possible for the Vietnamese Communists to fight and win a conventional combat. Moreover, unlike most accounts of the Vietnamese revolution and the First Indochina War,² this one does not concentrate on events, decisions, politics, or ideology, but on the tedious work by the Vietnamese Communists to systematically build a coercive warring state. In so doing, Goscha accomplishes some of the same on the Vietnamese side as Hugues Tertrais has done even more systematically on the French side.³

Building on his earlier writings, notably the 2011 *Vietnam: Un état né de la guerre 1945–1954*,⁴ Goscha provides what I would call a logistical explanation of the Communist victory in Vietnam. The book is about 1954, but a similar book could and should be written about 1975. Goscha did some of this work in his *Vietnam: A New History*.⁵

The title of his new book is slightly misleading. It is not about one road to Dien Bien Phu, but multiple roads, which are explored one by one and made into concrete arguments. I will discuss some of them here.

¹ Three of the most captivating Dien Bien Phu battle narratives are Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1966; reprinted by Da Capo Press, 1985, 2002); Ted Morgan, *Valley of Death: The Tragedy at Dien Bien Phu that Led America into the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 2010); and Pierre Journoud, *Dien Bien Phu: La fin d’un monde* (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2019).

² Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1996); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2010); Fred Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York NY: Random House, 2012); Tuong Vu, *The Vietnamese Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³ Hugues Tertrais, *Le piastre et le fusil: Le coût de la guerre d’Indochine 1945-1954* (Paris, Ministère de l’Économie, des Finances et de l’Industrie, 2012).

⁴ Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: Un état né de la guerre 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011).

⁵ Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York NY: Basic Books, 2016).

Above all, 1950 was the most important turning point in the Indochina War. Until then, the war of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) had been a guerrilla war, one which was waged for survival with no prospect of a military victory. The DRV was a weak ‘archipelago state’ controlling five big geographic enclaves with no DRV-controlled corridors between them. They all depended economically on the French-controlled cities and coastal zones. Goscha develops in much detail how the DRV managed to survive economically in spite of the fact that its currency (dong) could not compete with the Indochinese piaster, even in DRV-controlled areas. One chapter deals with the underground presence of Communists in the French-controlled cities, another with the role of the DRV’s intelligence services, a third with the ‘Asian routes of war.’ The use of trans-national Asian networks in support of the DRV is a favorite theme in Goscha’s earlier writings.⁶ Ho Chi Minh and his comrades were transnational Communists and Asian revolutionaries, not just Vietnamese nationalists.

What changed in 1950 came as the effect of the Communist victory in China’s civil war. Until then, the DRV had managed to keep just one division in the northern highlands. Now, with Chinese weapons and training, it built six additional ones, won a big victory at Cao Bang in October 1950, and chased the French from almost the whole of the northern border region. The northern-most enclave in the archipelago state became a China-supported Viet Bac territorial zone. From then, the Indochina War was primarily conventional, with a full-blown army operating from the north. In the southern part of Vietnam, Nguyen Binh’s guerrillas were crushed in 1951 when they pretended to be a real army and launched a doomed ‘general offensive.’

Goscha’s elucidation of the strategic interplay in 1951–1953 between the French (Generals Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, Raoul Salan, and Henri Navarre) and the Vietnamese (General Vo Nguyen Giap and his Chinese advisors) is exemplary in its attention to Vietnam’s geography, as shown in the beginning of the book with a set of excellent maps. Giap mainly wanted to take the Red River delta. The French defeated his attacks. Giap’s loss of men was horrendous. He then sought to establish an inland corridor through Hoa Binh down south to the huge enclave controlled by the DRV in Central Vietnam. Again, the French stopped him. The only remaining option for his China-supplied divisions was to move west into Laos. He failed to defeat the French at their strongpoint of Na San, but learned from his mistakes and succeeded at Dien Bien Phu.

Goscha’s treatment of economic warfare is equally impressive. Access to rice and salt was crucial. The French bombed dikes and canals in areas under DRV control to starve the population and prevent Giap’s troops from being fed. Truong Chinh, the secretary general of the Vietnamese Workers Party (the new name of the Indochinese Communist Party from 1951) warned his compatriots that the most important general in the war was General Rice.

Goscha’s book includes a chilling section about the Vietnamese Communists’ shift from moderate to radical land reform. The shift took place in November 1953, shortly before the French built their fortress at Dien Bien Phu. Radical land reform was part of the war, Goscha argues, just as it had been in Russia and China. The main purpose, Goscha claims, was not to show the Chinese and Soviets that the Vietnamese were true Communists. Truong Chinh and Ho Chi Minh believed themselves in radical land reform as a means to revolutionize Vietnam’s villages, establish party power on the local level, produce more rice, and reward landless patriotic soldiers with plots of land. After the Geneva agreement and the

⁶ Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954* (Copenhagen: NIAS Report, No. 28, 1995) ; *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999) ; *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012); and (with Benoît de Tréglodé), *Naissance d’un État-Parti : Le Viêt Nam depuis 1945* (Paris: les Indes savantes, 2004).

partitioning of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, the land reform produced so much murder and misery in North Vietnam that Ho had to apologize, and Truong Chinh stepped down as general secretary in 1956.

The book includes well-informed chapters about building military force and on radio communications, policing, intelligence, and ‘trickle economics’ in the archipelago state: currency, revenues, routes, and transportation. These are unique contributions, and are not to be found in any previous studies except Goscha’s own. The only other contribution I know that is similarly unique, although in a different way, is Christian C. Lentz’s *Contested Territory*, which draws our attention away from the Franco-Vietnamese drama and looks at what it meant for the ethnic minorities living in and around Dien Bien Phu.⁷ Goscha’s logistical competence and attention to detail is remarkable. Yet he never loses himself in factual detail. Every fact is part of an argument.

He also includes a chapter about the Indochinese dimension of the Vietnamese revolution. The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was never able to recruit members among the ethnic Lao and Khmer. In Cambodia and Laos, it could only recruit among the Vietnamese minority, mainly workers and government officials, not peasants. Goscha describes how the Vietnamese Communists overcame their propensity to conceive of an all-Indochinese revolution and adapted themselves to the existence of three parallel national revolutions. Hence, they encouraged and supported two new national independence movements (the Pathet Lao and Khmer Issarak) as a way to gain military access to neighboring territories.

Let me add that the French went through the same process of recognizing three distinct nation states. The war between France and the Vietnamese Communists increased the need for both sides to seek support from the Lao and Khmer monarchs, princes, and public opinion. This induced both the French colonialists and the Vietnamese Communists to abandon their federal outlook and recognize Laos and Cambodia as separate nation states. The three states were associated with France through separate treaties in 1949, not with each other, as had been the idea in Charles de Gaulle’s French federal plan from March 1945. I disagree slightly with Goscha’s portrayal of the short-lived system of Associated States during 1949–1954 as merely a continuation of the French colonial federation.⁸ Goscha is right that the Associated States were neither de facto independent nor sovereign, given that the French High Commissioner in Saigon continued to wield authority in all French Indochina. The premise for the British and American diplomatic recognition of the Associated States was built on a false pretense that they had become independent. Yet their status as Associated States allowed Cambodia, Laos, and the State of Vietnam to develop independent politics and set up the institutions that underpinned their independence when it was certified in connection with the 1954 Geneva agreement.

Let me return to Goscha’s key question, taken from Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*: “What must we do in order to realize a Dien Bien Phu? How do we go about doing it?” Goscha rightly claims in his conclusion that the standard answer from the liberal left is ‘nationalism’ and from the right ‘Chinese support.’ Goscha does not refute these answers, but neither does he engage with them. He leaves them aside and provides his own answer, which is “War Communism” (3, 11, 427-428).

In his book, Goscha rightly perceives a huge difference between the DRV in the 1945–1949 period and the party state that was created during 1950–54. He argues that the earlier period was characterized by “coalition politics.” At the time, the Communists had not yet built a party state, but co-operated with non-Communist patriots in the Viet Minh and Lien Viet fronts. For a short while, Ho Chi Minh even led a

⁷ Christian C. Lentz, *Contested Territory: Dien Biên Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* (New Haven NY: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁸ He writes: “The State of Vietnam as well as the Cambodian and Laotian ones remained part of a de facto Indochinese colonial federation” (298).

coalition government with members of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) and Dong Minh Hoi nationalist parties. They were, however, repressed or driven into exile in July 1946. Emperor Bao Dai was still then nominally a supreme advisor in Ho Chi Minh's government, but had left on a mission to China. He only returned in 1949, after signing a treaty with France. During 1947–1949, the Vietnamese Communists maintained their emphasis on front organizations, although they fell out with the religious sects in southern Vietnam and murdered the Hoa Hao leader. The construction of the party state only really took off from 1949–1950. On this point, I agree completely with Goscha.

What does “War Communism” mean? Goscha derives his concept from Communist behavior in the Russian, Chinese and Korean civil wars and provides the following definition of its specific meaning in a Vietnamese context:

“War Communism” refers to a process which started in 1950 when the Vietnamese communists used Soviet and Chinese communist advice, support, and models to intensify the war in conventional ways and, through the massive mobilization this required, expand their control over the preexisting coalition state to the detriment of their noncommunist allies in their own ranks (4).

From Goscha's exposition of War Communism in several of the book's chapters, we can see that it denotes the combination of war and land reform as a means of class struggle and elimination of internal enemies, systematic use of the state machinery to mobilize the whole people for the war (*levée en masse* as it was called under Napoléon), worship and emulation of exemplary heroes, and rectification techniques to ensure total party discipline. I would add the principle that the party controls the gun. According to Goscha, these characteristics are not found in other wars of decolonization, like in Algeria or Indonesia.⁹

Then comes the question of whether the critical causal factors behind the victory at Dien Bien Phu were put in place during the period of War Communism (1950–54) or whether they existed already during the period of Viet Minh coalition politics (1945–1949). If we look only at the battle as such, the necessary causes were Chinese material support and advice, the total mobilization of the people in DRV-controlled areas for provisioning seven divisions, the installation of heavy artillery in tunnels under the hills around the Dien Bien Phu plain, and the strategic genius of Vo Nguyen Giap. I find it hard to argue that the other characteristics of War Communism (hero worship, rectification, even land reform) were necessary causes.

If, on the other hand, we lift our gaze and ask why the DRV not only won at Dien Bien Phu but also came out as the winner of the First Indochina War, forcing French withdrawal from Vietnam's northern half, then it is not certain that all of the necessary conditions were put in place after 1949. The war would probably have ended with an agreement to divide Vietnam, even without Dien Bien Phu.¹⁰ The successful mobilization of the Vietnamese masses in the struggle against France may have been due not only to War Communism, but also to developments in the period of coalition politics: the popular legitimacy gained by Ho Chi Minh as DRV president from August 1945, his ability to stay in power through the coalition politics during the nationalist Chinese occupation from September 1945 to October 1946, the elections held in January 1946, his 6 March 1946 agreement with France, where Vietnam was recognized as a “free state,” his invitation to France as a statesman from May to September 1946, the DRV's ability to offer staunch resistance in Hanoi, Hue and Nam Dinh in early 1947, and its ability to survive the period of

⁹ He writes, “Algerian nationalists were not alone in their inability to transition to conventional warfare. In fact, no other twentieth-century war of decolonization ever reproduced a ‘PAVN’ (People's Army of Vietnam) or a ‘Dien Bien Phu’” (5). He does not mention Mozambique or Angola.

¹⁰ This is a counter-factual argument. Goscha admirably avoids engaging in counter-factual speculation.

“dirty war” from 1947 to 1949, thus maintaining control of the “archipelago state.” What could Bao Dai offer to outbid Ho, apart from his royal ancestry, an empty French use of the word “independence,” and solid French, British, and American support?

I surmise that the ability of Vietnam’s “War Communists” to mobilize the people during 1950-54 was not primarily due to imported Russian, Chinese, and Korean techniques or from radical land reform, but rather to the popular legitimacy that the DRV and the person of Ho Chi Minh had gained in the coalition period.

Before concluding, let me mention that David Marr’s monumental study of state-building in Vietnam during 1945-46 deals basically, although less explicitly, with the same question as that of Fanon and Goscha. His last chapter discusses mass mobilization. Yet, where Goscha speaks of mobilization from above, Marr writes primarily about mobilization from below. And where Goscha sees coercive mobilization as a key explanation for the Vietnamese victory in 1954, Marr remarks in his epilogue that the militarization of the Vietnamese revolution and the DRV state in the 1950s led growing numbers of government employees and Viet Minh activists to leave the liberated zones in favor of French-controlled cities and towns: “The exodus of creative writers, artists, and musicians was particularly telling.”¹¹ I realize, however, that by 1954, it was not artists and musicians but poor peasant soldiers that needed to be motivated. To make them risk their lives, a mix of coercion and promise of land may have been more effective than appeals to patriotic feelings.

Regardless of where we stand on the question of what explains the mass mobilization that allowed Chinese support to make the victory at Dien Bien Phu possible - nationalism, coercion, or both - I do not hesitate to conclude this review by declaring that Goscha’s *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* is the best academic book yet written about the First Indochina War. It cannot compete with already existing accounts in terms of narrative entertainment,¹² but I know of no other work that provides a similarly concise analysis of the multiple roads that led to the French debacle at Dien Bien Phu.

¹¹ David G. Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2013). See also David G. Marr, “Creating Defense Capacity in Vietnam, 1945-1947,” in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds. *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 74-104.

¹² Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*; Morgan, *Valley of Death*; Logevall, *Embers of War*; among others.

After his book on the contemporary history of Vietnam in 2016, Christopher Goscha follows with a book on the French Indochina War, a subject he knows well and that he has already treated extensively in the regional space as well as over time.¹ Is it just another synthesis or does this book of more than 500 pages, *The Road to Điện Biên Phủ: A History of the First War for Vietnam*, bring new perspectives on this war of decolonization?

Before getting into the heart of the book, let us explore the title, which echoes that of the memoirs of the winner of Điện Biên Phủ.² By focusing on the famous battle, Goscha seeks to highlight the process that led to the “triumph of a small independent movement over a Western military giant” (2). The subtitle contains neither the common expression “French Indochina war”³ (Goscha still questioned the very concept of Indochina in a previous publication⁴), nor the other standard expression, “The First Vietnam War,” which refers to the American war that followed,⁵ but “A History of the First War for Vietnam.” This offers a way to put at the centre of the book the Vietnamese and what these eight long years of war represented for them on the field.

In the book’s introduction, Goscha starts with the “parable” used by President Hồ Chí Minh in an interview with the American war reporter David Schoenbrun in September 1946, before the outbreak of the war: that of the Vietnamese tiger able to beat the French elephant thanks to the “powerful weapon of Vietnamese nationalism” (1), an image that was often taken up during the American war. He also mentions Franz Fanon, the Martiniquais intellectual, member of the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), and his fascination by what the Vietnamese achieved at Điện Biên Phủ, as expressed in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).⁶ Goscha’s aim is to understand “the complexity of the Vietnamese revolutionary war” beyond the simplistic explanation of the “tiger and the elephant,” to go beyond the myth of the Vietnamese Nation-in-arms,⁷ without denying the importance of “nationalism,” (6) and to offer “an alternative narrative capable of explaining in more historical and less polemical ways the making of the modern Vietnam and the nature of the wars fought over it during the second half of the 20th century” (13). For him, the victory of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) at Điện Biên Phủ and

¹ Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War: An International and Interdisciplinary Approach (1945–1954)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011); Goscha, *Vietnam: Un Etat né de la guerre, 1945–1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011); Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution (1885–1954)* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999); Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Connecting Histories. Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945–1962* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Goscha and Karine Laplante, eds., *L’échec de la paix en Indochine, 1954–1962/The failure of peace in Indochina, 1954–1962* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2010).

² Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Đường tới Điện Biên Phủ [The Road to Điện Biên Phủ]* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân, 1999).

³ The Vietnamese historiography also uses the term “Indochina war” or “first Indochina war” (*Chiến tranh Đông Dương* or *Chiến tranh Đông Dương lần thứ nhất*) but also “Resistance war against French colonialism” (*Kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp*).

⁴ Goscha, *Going Indochinese: Contesting Concepts of Space and Place in French Indochina, 1885–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press/Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2022).

⁵ Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre [The Wretched of the Earth]* (Paris: Maspero, 1961).

⁷ Greg Lockart, *Nation in Arms: Origins of the People’s Army of Vietnam*, Asian Studies Association of Australia (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989).

its ability to move from a guerrilla to a conventional warfare are unique in the history of decolonization in Asia, and in Africa. According to Goscha, Vietnam's undeniable nationalism alone cannot explain Điện Biên Phủ. It is the “dual nature” of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the “archipelago state” and the “one-party state” based on “Vietnamese War Communism” that allowed the Vietnamese guerrilla army to transform itself into a “formidable fighting machine” (5).

Goscha does not undertake an additional military history. Although he describes some battles, the purpose is not to relate the different stages of the war through a chronological account (the book does not provide any chronology). The only key date that appears as a turning point in the course of the narrative is the year 1950, during which the PAVN defeated the French army at Cao Bang and Lang Son in a conventional battle, the first one of which was thanks to the providential support of the neighbouring Chinese Communists, who had just come to power at the end of 1949. The author aims instead to undertake a comprehensive history of what he presents as a “total war” with a level of violence never before seen in a war of independence.⁸ In fact, it seems to me that no one before Goscha has studied this conflict as a total war, an expression mainly used to characterize the First World War: “With Korea, [Vietnam] is the deadliest battlefield of the Cold War and the single most destructive war of decolonization of the twentieth century” (299).

Based on the systematic cross-referencing of numerous Vietnamese and French sources and publications, Goscha sheds light in 12 chapters on various aspects of this total war which involved the entire Vietnamese society. He first evokes the space of the war through the description of an “archipelago state” connected with the cities reoccupied by the French as well as with regional networks. He calls this first state, which was born in September 1945, an “archipelago state” (chapter 1), a “contingent, fragmented and decentralized” guerrilla state in the countryside which continued to expand as shown by the red dots covering the military staff maps called “smallpox” (323). Furthermore, he highlights “the city at war” (chapter 4): cities controlled for nearly a year and a half by the DRV thanks to the power vacuum left by the Japanese under the supervision of the Nationalist Chinese until September 1946 to the outbreak of war in November 1946. He also shows how the archipelago state, with its leaders on the run in the mountains, managed to preserve clandestine networks in the cities, ensuring the supply of some essential products such as rice, paper/ink/typewriters and medicines. Breaking with a colonial history which only presents the Indochinese space within its relations with the metropolis, he emphasizes the importance of the Asian routes of war which he described in his doctoral thesis⁹ and which ensured a precious supply of weapons and medicines (chapter 3). In addition to the decisive contribution of China from 1950 onwards, the leaders exploited old networks in the cities of Bangkok, Hong Kong and Singapore to ensure the supply of the archipelago state, while developing new land routes and abandoning maritime routes which had been envisaged for a time (via the island of Hainan).

Goscha then describes the structures built by the DRV which, thanks to a decentralized guerrilla policy, allowed it to go from a state on the run at the end of 1946, to a state which he describes as an archipelago capable of surviving the first years of the war in the Viet Bac zone, while harassing the French army during its attempted reconquest. The first pillar of the DRV was the building of a military force (chapter 2) composed of regular force and guerrilla units in charge of logistics, intelligence and communications. The founders of the PAVN, brilliant officers, some trained in France, others in the Huangpu Military Academy in China, were able to build a modern military force and use the heavy artillery and anti-craft guns coming from China from 1950. The second pillar of the archipelago state involved a wiring war (chapter 5), through an efficient communication and liaison service, via the technical skills of former

⁸ Goscha, “A ‘Total War’ of Decolonization? Social Mobilization and State-Building in Communist Vietnam (1949–54)” *War & Society* 31:2 (2012): 136–162.

⁹ Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian. Networks of the Vietnamese. Revolution, 1885-1954* (London: Curzon, 1999).

colonial administration officials and a propaganda policy, such as Radio Bach Mai. The third pillar was the policing war (chapter 6), which was implemented thanks to a police force and a network of informers spread throughout the territory, in the villages as well as in the cities controlled by the French. Finally, Goscha discusses the “trickle economics” (chapter 7), a “patchwork economy” that was characterized until 1950 by a pragmatic decentralization of small-scale cottage industries producing small arms, acids, paper, and a self-sufficient agriculture producing rice, salt, fish, and poultry, and by networks of exchanges with colonial cities and Asians ones.

Five chapters that describe the transformation of the archipelago state into a party state and the evolution of a guerrilla warfare into a conventional one follow. The coming in power of the Chinese Communists on the one hand, and the massive support of the Americans on the other, led to a radicalization of the two camps. In 1950, the DRV added 500,000 fighter-labourers (*chiến sĩ dân công*), the vast majority of whom were women, to the “*levée en masse*.” He evokes the establishment of War Communism (chapter 8) and the rise of the single-party Communist state with Sino-Vietnamese mass mobilization technics (patriotic emulation campaigns, cult of personality, promotion of heroes, rectification retreats, land reform in the controlled areas from 1953). Goscha also describes the stakes of rice in the war (chapter 9) and the transformation of a “patchwork economy” into a “war economy” in the controlled zones, illustrated by a map by a sickle connecting the North to the South (Map 10: The DRV’s “sickle shape” (1950–54))

On the French side, thanks to a mass mobilization by the Associated States in 1951 and above all by an increase of American arms deliveries from 1950-51, the war became still more brutal, particularly with the use of napalm initiated by General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny (Goscha speaks of a “Franco-American inferno,” 290), aggravating the asymmetry between the two belligerents, since the DRV had neither an air force nor an anti-air defence system. The implementation of a systematic “economic war” or “rice war” aimed to destroy the economy in the Viet Minh (VM) zones, and by an economic and commercial blockade, “to bring the enemy to his knees” (306). Chapter 10, “The Road to Điện Biên Phủ” describes on the one hand the illusion of victory by the French in Hòa Bình and Na San, and on the other hand the reinforcement of War Communism, enemy campaigns against non-Communists, and the consolidation of security services.

The two last chapters enlarge the scene on the regional and international level. Chapter 11, “Imperial Dust: Ho Chi Minh’s Associated States of Indochina,” is dedicated to the role of DRV in the Communist reconfiguration in Cambodia and Laos and shows the adaptation of Communist statecraft to the “sister states” (378, 381), which involved no land reform, no mass mobilisation, and no patriotic emulation. The final chapter considers Điện Biên Phủ not only as the French defeat, but also as the climax of Vietnamese War Communism with the choice by the DRV to launch a land reform and to reward the peasant class, so that it could be mobilized for the future great counter offensive.

The main contribution of the book is undoubtedly its consideration of this colonial war as a total war. Thanks to the use of numerous Vietnamese and French sources,¹⁰ Goscha provides a meticulous and systematic description of the war machine of the two forces engaged in a total war (300). The responsibility of France is grounded in its refusal, until the end, to grant true, immediate, and total independence to the Vietnamese, whether Communists or Nationalists: French leaders “wanted to keep Vietnam French in the French Union, and this straight through until Geneva conference... it was no accident that the French went to war in Algeria a few months after Điện Biên Phủ fell in May 1954. It was not to stop communists” (xi). He also shows France’s refusal to create a real Vietnamese army: “Communist or not, the Vietnamese could not be trusted to run an army of their own on the French

¹⁰ With more than 60 pages of notes, the book would have profited from a bibliography and a list of sources used.

watch” (294). According to him, this obstinacy was unique in the history of decolonization¹¹, since France undertook two long wars of eight years each (“a process that would repeat itself in Algeria, as the French army came to play an increasingly political role in France’s long “Indo-Algerian War of decolonization” (1945–1962),” 132), something which is well illustrated by the quotation of General de Lattre: “It’s in Tonkin that we are defending our position in Africa. Everything must be subordinated to this imperative” (297). To lose Indochina would jeopardize the Empire and the greatness of France. Goscha rightly remarks how through this war, “paradoxically the French colonialists helped the Vietnamese Communists to consolidate the party’s hold over Vietnam” (268).

Goscha describes the violence of the colonial repression machine, which had been well-rehearsed since the conquest, and which was displayed from the outbreak of the war in the port of Haiphong in November 1946, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths (125). He interestingly compares the recapture of the “casbah” of Hanoi with the battle of Algiers (122), and vividly describes the total war waged from the defeats of Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn in 1950 and the ruthlessness of economic warfare, as summed up by Lionel Max Chassin, Commander-in-Chief of the French Air Force in the early 1950s: “Total war was the only solution for winning a colonial war, and economic warfare was vital to its success: One must starve people to death” (311). The French “systematic economic war” (306) involved the evacuation of more than 100,000 people; an economic blockade throughout Indochina; the mobilization of the navy and air force to systematically bomb the DRV’s infrastructure (roads, dams, canals, dykes, granaries, markets) industrial capacity, agriculture, livestock, and the irrigation system; and also the use of napalm. The result was the reduction of two-thirds of the pre-war agricultural production (309). Goscha evokes the impressive French “buffaloes operation” from 1952 to 1954, which led to the death of ten thousand buffaloes (3594 buffaloes only for the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, 359). For Goscha: “By blocking the economy and trade, bombing Ho’s agricultural infrastructure, and targeting animals, the French extended the war deeper into the Vietnamese population and collapsed the line of demarcation between combatants and civilians and between home and the battlefield” (310). This French policy drove thousands of Vietnamese into Ho’s camp.

On the DRV side, the book describes the determination of the Communist leaders to preserve the independence proclaimed after the defeat of the Japanese occupiers. It shows the ingenuity of the new revolutionary state elites and how the DRV transformed itself into a single Party state. Although the author intends to recount the history of the Vietnamese in the civil war and their competing quest for power, the nationalist actors appear only very little, and it is the Communists who are presented as the major Vietnamese actors who faced the French. While colonial history evokes the great French military leaders (de Lattre, Raoul Salan, Henri Navarre) as determining the war’s agenda, Goscha highlights in parallel not only the great Communist leaders such as Hồ Chí Minh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Lê Đức Thọ, and Lê Duẩn, but also lesser-known yet key actors who contributed to the victory thanks to their ability to adapt and innovate, each in their own field, such as the creator of the a national communications service and director of the first military academy Hoàng Đạo Thúy, the former head of the scouting movement; the head of the Bureau of Armaments production Trần Đại Nghĩa, who graduated from the most prestigious engineering school in Paris; the expert in logistics Trần Đăng Ninh; the architect of the national security service Trần Quốc Hoàn; and the head of the Health service Dr Tôn Thất Tùng.

But while recognizing the strength of their nationalism (333), Goscha tells the other side of this independence movement with the establishment of the ‘War Communism’ that was adapted on the Soviet model. He seems to be the first historian to use this term, which was created *a posteriori* to describe the

¹¹ He writes, “The level of violence that spread through the Red River plains and the rest of upper Vietnam from January in 1951 until the guns finally went silent in mid-1954 had no equivalent in the history of twentieth century wars of decolonization” (290).

economic policy carried out by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War (1918–1921), to describe the Vietnamese case. Although the term “*Cộng sản thời chiến*” is only used by the Vietnamese for the Russian “War Communism,” the two policies have commonalities such as strict centralized management and state monopoly of the economy, disciplined mobilization of soldiers and workers, confiscation of agricultural surpluses, centralized distribution of food, and “food-paying” (317-318). What Goscha calls “War Communism” was less an economic policy than a set of measures aimed at winning the war.

Goscha’s argument focuses on the conflict on the battlefield, but surprisingly ignores the diplomatic part and the role of the Vietnamese and French actors in the 6th March agreements (1946), the Dalat conference (April-May 1946), the Fontainebleau conference (July 1946) and later the Geneva Conference (April-July 1954). On the French side, many personalities worked to create a dialogue with the Viet Minh leaders, whom they respected. The most famous are General Leclerc and the Gaullist Jean Sainteny. On the Vietnamese side, the VM leaders excelled in their ability to engage in dialogue, through negotiations at the national level not only with the French but also with certain highland minorities, with the Catholics, (with the bishop of Phát Diệm Lê Hữu Từ at the border with Zone IV until 1949) and at the international level. Although these negotiations at one point failed, they nevertheless existed.

Furthermore, the propaganda policy (arts, literature, theater, posters, photographs, films of reconstitution) and the role of journalists, artists, dancers and musicians who played for the wounded or soldiers on the front line deserved a more substantial engagement. Indeed, the war was won not only on the battlefield but on the front of communication, by presenting themselves first as nationalists, open to negotiation. Any state at war does everything possible to convince its youth to agree to die for the idea of the nation.¹² A more detailed study of propaganda in the VM zone, in the cities controlled by the French, and also in France, would have helped to evaluate their effectiveness in mobilizing. It should be noted that among the Western colonial powers, only France had such an influential Communist Party that contributed to the very origin of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and actively campaigned in France against the war.¹³ It thus appears that the VM propaganda that was directed to French troops (mainly composed of colonized Africans) and to French public opinion, was successful in terms of the words of Franz Fanon, as well as the popular use of the fable of the tiger and the elephant.¹⁴

In addition, while the impact of Chinese aid is presented in great detail, American aid from the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) is mentioned (76, 297), but the names of important figures as General Thomas Trapnell or General Mike O'Daniel are not mentioned, nor is the total amount of American aid. In fact, the Americans financed a large part of the French war from 1947 onwards via the Marshall Plan, and then granted additional and significant aid after General de Lattre's visit to the United States in 1951 (bombs, napalm, tanks, amphibious landing crafts, aviation). This increased the materiel superiority of the French army. Thus, since April 1953, the United States had remedied the deficiencies of the French air force by secretly providing airmen from the Civil Air Transport (CAT), a front company for their clandestine service, who were assigned to transport flights in combat zones such as the air bridge to Diên Biên Phủ. The significant US contribution to the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, both in personnel and supplies (B-26 fighter-bombers with 200 Air Force mechanics and C-119 transport planes to dump napalm around Điện Biên Phủ) should be mentioned.¹⁵ This despite the fact that American leaders

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991) (7).

¹³ Alain Ruscio, *Les communistes français et la guerre d'Indochine, 1944-1954* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985).

¹⁴ The VM propaganda had its limits regarding the large exodus from the North to the South after the Geneva Conference in 1954-55.

¹⁵ Laurent Cesari, *La France, les États-Unis et l'Indochine, 1945-1957* (PhD dissertation, 1991); and Ronald H. Spector, *The U.S. Army in Vietnam: Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1945-1960* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1985).

rejected General Navarre's desperate request for an air strike to extricate the French troops (Operation Vautour), and President Dwight Eisenhower's proposal to launch nuclear bombs was finally rejected by the French. It was not only Chinese aid that contributed to the total war from 1950 onwards, but also (and significantly) American aid. Without this aid, France would not have been able to continue the war due to a lack of manpower, funding, and public support for a distant war waged by an army mainly composed of auxiliaries from Africa.

Moreover, when the author speaks about “a long Eurasian arc of communist warfare” gathering Vietnamese, North Korean, and Chinese Communists (436-437), it seems to me that these three communisms are very different. Even if there is an undeniable common point with the grafting of Communism on Confucianism, the specificity of the VCP's nationalism cannot be explained only by the ‘nature’ of Communism based upon the Russian and Chinese models, but must include other factors such as the elimination by the French of the other nationalist parties in the inter-war period leading to their durable weakening and the supremacy of the Communists. Moreover, the Vietnamese resilience relied on a powerful nationalism that was forged after a *longue durée* experience of confrontation with a great power, China. Through the anchoring of Communism in Vietnam, the VCP was the only party founded by Vietnamese and not, as in many Southeast Asian countries, by members of the Chinese diaspora (Malaysia, Indonesia). Finally, with a certain pragmatism (48, 238), the “small” VCP did not only take over as it was, the Chinese model of revolution by the peasantry or the Soviet model of war communism, but carried out a policy of national union (almost in the propaganda discourse) which lasted during the two Vietnam wars. Another example of its pragmatism was the non-imposition of War Communism in Cambodia and Laos (384). Basically, the Vietnamese nationalists who converted to Communism found this ideology to be the only one committed in the fight against imperialism, providing international networks, a method of survival in clandestinity, and a model of military and political organization. All these reasons also led the Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat Sen to send his officers to be trained in USSR.

To me, the specificity of the Vietnamese case regarding the violence and duration of the conflict does not mainly reside in the Communist ‘nature’ of the regime, but can be also explained both by Vietnam's unique geography and its direct proximity to a major ally, the Chinese giant, and by the specific context of the Cold War in Asia. On the DRV side, its ability to hold out is explained by the large border with the Communist China (and also the disarmament by the Chinese nationalists, which delayed the return of the French colonizers and left the DRV to organize itself for almost a year) and then by the massive aid from the Communist bloc from 1950. On the French side, as mentioned, France's ability to pursue its colonial war, which it would not have had the means to do after the Second World War (for lack of budget and men), is explained by its capacity to sell its war to the United States as a war against Communism.

The coincidence of Communist leader Mao Zedong's victory and the Korean War gave reason to the domino theory, and led to the significant American military support to the French to stop the spread of Communism in Vietnam, while the Americans were fighting in Korea. No such strategic stakes justified the Americans to fund the French in Algeria, the Dutch in Indonesia, or the British in Kenya, nor the Communist great powers to massively help Algeria, Kenya or Indonesia to build a modern army like the PAVN (5). A fruitful comparison can be made with the case of Malaysia, with the strong Communist guerrilla movement that continued into the 1980s, and the war that mobilized the British empire with some American support. To me, one of the reasons why the movement remained a guerrilla war and did not turn into a conventional war is that the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) mobilized among the

Chinese minority much more than the Malays¹⁶ and that the country does not shared a common border with China.

At the end, to the question “did the Vietnamese state that defeated the French army in battle at Điện Biên Phủ in May 1954 win the war?” Goscha answers no, because the DRV did not recover all of the territory of Vietnam (431). Despite the division of the country imposed by the Great Powers in Geneva, the DRV was victorious. Its victory undoubtedly carried a national and international impact and made it possible for the next fight to be carried out, especially in terms of international propaganda. To come back to the image of the Vietnamese tiger and the French elephant, it seems to me that it is possible to recognize both the reality of the tiger at the beginning of the conflict which managed to stand up against the French elephant in a first time, and then the ability to build a conventional army capable of repelling the French elephant in a second time, thanks to massive arms aid from the Communist bloc. The recent example of Ukraine is instructive. The ability of the Ukrainian army to resist the Russian bear, that surprised everyone, can be explained by the power of nationalism, a “*levée en masse*” and massive military aid from Western allies via a long western border.

While declaring that “nationalism alone cannot explain Điện Biên Phủ” (5), Goscha recognizes that “what makes the Indochina war so complicated yet, at the same time so utterly fascinating is how the Communist lined up behind Ho Chi Minh rolled nationalism, Communism and War into one vital force” (343). In fact, faced with the methods of total warfare of the French army, the VM leaders took up and adapted the war methods of the ideological bloc that supported them in building the PAVN and a Communist single party State.

By mostly limiting its descriptions to the battlefield, the book does not allow us to fully understand the complexity of Vietnamese nationalism, as the non-Communist actors do not appear enough. As much as few observers could imagine that the DRV would be able to win this war, fewer still thought that South Vietnam would be viable after the victory of Điện Biên Phủ. A diversity of nationalist actors emerged during this first Vietnam war and played a significant role in the building of an alternative state in the South for the next twenty years.

To conclude, Christopher Goscha’s *Road to Điện Biên Phủ* meaningfully contributes to our understanding of the specificity of the decolonization war in Vietnam, combined with strong Cold War stakes (both “an Indo-Algerian war,” [132] and “an Indo-Korean conflict” [296]). With his innovative use of concepts of “total war,” “archipelago state,” and “War Communis for the Vietnamese case, Goscha offers new perspectives on this complex conflict, which can no longer be considered “a simple war of decolonization.”

¹⁶ See Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975); Peng Chin, Karl Hack. eds., *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New Light on the Malayan Communist Party* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2004).

I can remember that when I was about six or seven, my mother would prepare a lot of rice every day, at least once every day. When she was done, she would wait for my father to get signals from within the bamboo rampart located between the edge of our family's courtyard and the river that still runs in front of our house in Quảng Ngãi. The bamboo rampart is no longer there today, but in the 1940s it was very dense, a forest of bamboo covered in green leaves. Once he got the signals, my father stealthily took the food out to the bamboo rampart and placed it at the foot of a large bamboo tree. He would cover it with some dry leaves and then quietly return inside the house. Several hours later, we would hear several knocking sounds against the bamboo culms, and that was when my father went and gathered the pots and bowls.

I did not really know what was going on, but the feeling was spooky. My father later told me that camping inside the bamboo rampart were Phạm Văn Đồng's men. They were Việt Minh, Vietnamese nationalists that my parents sheltered and supported because they were fighting for national liberation. What my parents did was a daily routine that lasted several years, until the men had all left.

However, by the mid-1950s, when land reform began to affect our commune, Việt Minh forces deemed my father a reactionary for secretly feeding a starving landlord who was locked up in the village's temple just outside the vicinity of our house. They never trusted him after that, and also because his name was Võ Tịnh Kháng, which they interpreted to be "Võ, the Silent Resister."

My father was supportive of the national liberation movement, but the experience left him with a distaste for the Communists who led the Việt Minh, and he never trusted them again. In 1955, when my brother-in-law was pressured to leave my sister and their newborn to tập kết [regroup] north shortly after they had just started their family, my father protested and shielded him from being coerced to leave for the north. Had he left, he and I would have turned into enemies and our small family would have been divided.

-Võ Đình Tấn

My father often told this story to me and my siblings in order to keep the memory of our grandparents alive. At the same time, this story is also a glimpse into the complex history of the First Indochina War, and the effects of political changes and people's trust and allegiance that culminated in the Second Indochina War. The story also reflects the evolution of the relationship between the Việt Minh, spearheaded by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), and the people, specifically given the political transformations and actions taken over time and the divisive ideologies of nationalism and Communism.

Western scholarship on the first two Indochina Wars that has dominated western academia over the past 50 to 60 years, from the work of Paul Mus to recent Pulitzer-Prize winners Fredrik Logevall, tends to accept Vietnamese nationalism as the basis for their question of how the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), led by Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party, were able to defeat two military powers: first France, and then the United States. This explanation has its roots in the Western-centered critique of Western imperialism, while Vietnamese nationalism is a convenient contrast to that critique. As a result, scholars have tended to exaggerate and romanticize nationalism as the engine that drove the success of the Communist-led DRV. Some scholars have even uncritically adopted the official historical narrative put forth by the Vietnamese communist government, by using the successes of Hồ Chí Minh and

the Vietnamese Communist Party to emphasize that those successes reflected the VCP's true embodiment of Vietnamese nationalism. These perspectives neglect the importance of other non-Communist nationalist figures and groups and of the clear reality that Vietnam, for almost 50 years, has been ruled with the iron fist of Communist ideology and an oppressive governing apparatus established in the 1940s.¹

This emphasis and this premise have always troubled me, because they reserve the right to be a nationalist only to those who succeed politically and militarily, while erasing the role and contribution of other Vietnamese nationalists. They adopt narratives similar to the official historical narrative under the Vietnamese regime by caricaturing other Vietnamese nationalists as lackeys and puppets.² My fundamental question is that if nationalism is responsible for the successes of Hồ Chí Minh and his party-state, then why did it not have the same impact on other nationalists and nationalist groups, including Phan Bội Châu, Phan Châu Trinh, Nguyễn Tường Tam, and Ngô Đình Diệm, or political parties such as the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng or the Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng? They were no less nationalistic than Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh, Võ Nguyễn Giáp, or Lê Duẩn, but they failed. Thus, nationalism alone cannot explain the success of the Communist-led Vietnamese in their fight against France and later against the United States and its ally, the Republic of Vietnam. Hence, if nationalism is not the sole factor in the success of Hồ Chí Minh and the DRV in the fight against colonial France, then the answer is Communism, or War Communism, to be exact.

The Road to Dien Bien Phu: The History of the First War for Vietnam offers an extensive examination of the First Indochina War, as conducted by Hồ Chí Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In it, Christopher Goscha, who is arguably the most prolific western scholar of modern Vietnamese history, convincingly demonstrates that although nationalism was important, it was Communism, and the application of Communist war institutions and practices, that enabled the DRV to achieve the military success it did at Điện Biên Phủ on 7 May 1954. This argument is convincing, and is corroborated by recent scholarship that explores the Vietnamese communist's ideological development and policy implementations, particularly in Tuong Vu's *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* and Alec Holcombe's *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*. My own study of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 to 1960 also supports Goscha's argument.³

¹ Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution: Background and Significance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952); John McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2005); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2014); *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

² George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1986); Noam Chomsky, *At War with Asia: Essays on Indochina* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Gareth Porter, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

³ Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Alec Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020); Alex-Thai D. Vo, "Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2015 10 (1): 1-62; and Alex-Thai D. Vo, "From Anticolonialism to Mobilizing Socialist Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945-1960," PhD diss (Cornell University, 2019).

Goscha begins with a question posed in 1961 by Frantz Fanon, a Martiniquais intellectual and member of the Algerian *Front de libération nationale* (FLN): “What must we [the colonized people] do in order to realize Dien Bien Phu?” (3). The answer most often given is ‘nationalism,’ beginning with Hồ Chí Minh’s 11 September 1946 answer to American army reporter David Schoenbrun’s question of how Hồ could expect the Vietnamese to win against a professional Western army with modern arms such as that of France. Hồ replied by affirming that the powerful weapon that he had at his disposal was “Vietnamese nationalism.” (1). Despite that fact that his forces were underprepared, Hồ insisted that the DRV would fight the French elephant with the tenacity and guerilla tactics of a tiger: lurking, attacking, retreating, and then attacking again, until the French bled to death. That was the war Hồ Chí Minh envisioned in 1946. Although the French were defeated on 7 May 1954 at Điện Biên Phủ, this happened, as Goscha argues, not because of the nationalism and guerilla tactics that Hồ predicted, but because of the knockout punch from a “professional army of seven armed divisions, equipped with intelligence, communications, medical, and logistical services.” (4-5). Võ Nguyên Giáp’s cannons “rained down shells on the French camp for almost two months, turning the valley floor into a lunar landscape strangely reminiscent of the Western Front during the First World War. Meanwhile, Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns lit up the skies with flak not seen since the Second World War” (5). With this illustration, Goscha proclaimed that by 1954, “the Vietnamese tiger had [transformed and] fought like an elephant and won. Hồ Chí Minh’s parable was wrong” (5).

With Fanon’s question and Hồ Chí Minh’s parable as his starting point, Goscha’s next twelve chapters examine the developments that led to Điện Biên Phủ. These chapters answer Fanon’s question and refute Hồ’s parable by demonstrating that although nationalism was important, it alone was not the determinant of the war’s outcome in 1954. Instead, it was the transformation of the Vietnamese state, from an archipelago to a single-party Communist war state, that allowed the DRV to engineer the historic victory at Điện Biên Phủ. Goscha situates these developments within those two Vietnamese revolutionary states from September 1945 to May 1954.

Divided into themes, the first seven chapters of the book describe the development and operation of an archipelago state—a decentralized guerilla polity—during the first half of the war from 1945 to 1950. The first chapter focuses on the rise of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as “contingent, fragmented, and decentralized” (7). Like France, the DRV at this time was a territorially shifting political entity that had not secured “undisputed control over people, territory, and resources,” but was rather in constant competition with the French and the Associated State of Vietnam (ASV), created in 1949 and headed by the former emperor, Bảo Đại. This early period of competition saw the French and the ASV controlling large city centers such as Hanoi, Huế, and Saigon, and parts of the Mekong and Red River deltas, and the DRV commanding central Vietnam, the northern highlands, and isolated areas of the Mekong Delta. Nonetheless, these competing “[s]overeignities bumped up against each other and ‘intertwined’ as they expanded and contracted in their continual competition for people, territory, and resources” (40, 44).

With the next six chapters, Goscha examines: the building of a military force; the Asian land routes of the war; the role of Hanoi and Saigon; wiring and communications; the police and internal security forces; and economic factors. Goscha uses these topics to demonstrate how Hồ Chí Minh and the DRV “built an operational yet territorially incomplete guerilla state in the countryside that was strong enough to weather French attacks” until 1950, when the DRV began to receive aid from the Communist bloc that allowed it to transform from a tiger into an elephant. (7) He argues,

Working from their core “islands” in northern (Việt Bắc) and central Vietnam (Interzone III and IV) and pockets in the south, Hồ Chí Minh’s officials pushed their control out in streams from one craggy, atoll-like territory to another. Thanks to militias, security officers, and civil servants, they built up a sprawling national polity that expanded and

contracted like a sponge being squeezed as enemies pushed into it and then pulled out. Viewed from above, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam resembled an archipelago. It was a highly decentralized, vulnerable, and weak constellation of power concentrated around island cores. But it functioned. Radios connected its various parts through the air while messengers and itinerant traders did so on the ground, by foot, in boats, or on horseback (40).

The last five chapters of the book center on the transformation that led to the road to Điện Biên Phủ: the full-fledged adoption of the Eurasian Communist model of War Communism that began in 1950, following the success of the Chinese Communists in October 1949 and the Soviet Union's subsequent diplomatic recognition of the DRV. With the Soviet Union's recognition, and the recognition and support of the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC), Hồ Chí Minh gained access to what Goscha describes as a "unique communist toolkit" of statecraft that "included such things as rectification campaigns, emulation movements, new hero worship, the cult of the personality, the agricultural tax, the state trading office, and land reform" (429). These components of statecraft, Goscha argues, "allowed the Communist Party to increase its central management of the state, the armed forces, and the economy" (429), all of which were central to the victory at Điện Biên Phủ.

Playing a crucial role in the transformation from a fragmented and weak archipelago state to a War Communist state was the sustained support, in terms of both supplies and advice, from the Soviet Union and the PRC. The supplies included weapons, ammunition, food, and medicines "to keep the troops and their people-powered logistics up and running for what would likely be a drawn-out and bloody affair" (391). The advice came in the form of Chinese military and political advisors, who helped with the establishment of the People's Army of Vietnam and land reform. They arrived in 1950 and "remained deeply involved in strategic planning, up to and including the Battle of Dien Bien Phu" (391).

Arguably the most exemplary and consequential form of Chinese influence on the DRV's transformation into a war state was the adoption and application of the Chinese-model land reform from 1953 to 1956. As to why Hồ Chí Minh chose to "send thousands of cadres into villages to attack the established order at the very moment he was marching his troops to Dien Bien Phu for the biggest clash of the conflict," Goscha argues that despite the unsuitability of the Chinese land reform model, and despite the potential of causing a change of heaven and earth [*long trời lở đất*], Hồ Chí Minh and the DRV did so to push "through the bureaucratic revolution, taking over the village administration, and raising up the single-party communist state from its archipelagic foundation" (403). Here, Goscha demonstrates that land reform "was a weapon of war as well as an instrument of revolutionary statecraft," and thus that its implementation was necessary. Goscha affirms that "the battle against the 'French colonialists' at Dien Bien Phu and the one against 'Vietnamese feudalists' in the countryside were deeply entwined" (414-415).

Although this fact about the presence of foreign aid and advisory teams from the Soviet Union and especially the PRC, which helped with the transformation of the DRV, including the nationalist coalition that was the Việt Minh, into a War Communist state has been known for many years, it is still downplayed by some scholars in Western academia and is omitted from the official Vietnamese narrative.⁴ Hence, Goscha's focus on the significance of this transition is an important reminder of the key role played by the Soviet Union and the PRC in the success of the DRV during the First Indochina War. Moreover, it is also a reminder that nationalism alone cannot win wars, at least in Vietnam, and that that

⁴ William J. Middendorf, *Glitter and Ash: The Failure of Independent Intelligent* (New York: Random House, 1983); William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996); Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998).

war was won because of a combination of factors, including sustained support from outsiders. This fact remains true for the Second Indochina War. At the height of the war from 1968 to 1973, approximately 430,000 Chinese troops were stationed in Indochina, many reaching as far as the outskirts of Saigon and the Mekong Delta. Goscha's emphasis is well-argued and substantiated by work on China's impact on Vietnam by scholars like Qiang Zhai, Chen Jian, Cheng Guan Ang, Laura Calkins, and particularly Xiaobing Li's *Building Ho's Army: Chinese Military Assistance to North Vietnam* and *The Dragon in the Jungle: The Chinese Army in the Vietnam War*.⁵

Another consequential component of this transformation to War Communism, as Goscha demonstrates, rests with Hồ Chí Minh and his Communist Party's willingness to betray and to sacrifice to attain their goals at any cost, whether to win the decolonial war or to consolidate power in their hands alone. War Communism, at its most extreme, is another form of total war. The success at Điện Biên Phủ came not just at the great cost of military and civilian casualties on all sides, but also at the cost of terminating relations and dividing people, including those who had supported the nationalist cause. Goscha waits until the end of his examination of the DRV to discuss the execution of Nguyễn Thị Năm as the symbolic "end of the coalition state the communists had accepted at the start of the war" (414). However, for many, including Goscha, the coalition ended in 1950, when Hồ and his party accepted China's model of War Communism, and began turning Vietnamese against each other in order to expand their control over the coalition state. Discussing the relationship between the Communists and non-Communists following the arrival of Chinese advisors, Goscha writes, "On the one hand, Vietnamese communists continued to reassure their noncommunist allies that they had no intention of undermining the coalition government" (11). He continues, "on the other hand, the communists were lying....in effect, from early 1950, Ho's Communist Party lit a slow-burning coup d'état against the coalition government and constitution the communists had accepted in 1946" (266-67). Many non-Communists, like the famous composer Phạm Duy and village officials like my grandfather, left the resistance to join the French/Associated State of Vietnam.

The end of the coalition began in 1945 and 1946, with the betrayal and expulsion of the nationalists and nationalist organizations who had initially formed the united front that gave Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese Communists legitimacy and political control over Vietnam. In his description of the rise of the archipelago state, Goscha writes:

For those who could not countenance another front of communist design, most notably the triumvirate parties (including the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng), the Alliance Group (Đông Minh Hội), and the Greater Vietnam Party (Đại Việt)), the communists destroyed them during the civil war that followed the main Chinese withdrawal during the summer of 1946" (32-3). "By the end of the year, what was left of the VNQDD, Alliance, and Đại Việt parties were languishing in government prisons or had fled to southern China, gone into hiding, crossed over to the French, or joined the Liên Việt and kept their heads down. ...Continued communist-directed operations against them were such that on 8 November, the day the National Assembly voted to approve the constitution, only two members of the opposition were present out of the total number of 240 delegates there (35).

⁵ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Cheng Guan Ang, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012); Cheng, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Laura M. Calkin, *China and the First Vietnam War, 1947-54* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

The seed that germinated into the Second Indochina War was arguably planted by Hồ and his Party-state at the birth of the newly decolonized nation. This seed germinated in the early 1950s with the adoption of War Communism and the subsequent betrayal and eradication of the remaining nationalists, including both supportive non-Communists and Communists.

As much as I admire Goscha's accomplishments, I wonder why this book ends at Điện Biên Phủ. Should discussions of the First Indochina War end with that epic military conflict, with the 21 July 1954 signing of the armistice in Geneva, or in July 1956, when a general election was supposed to be held to unify the Vietnamese state? If War Communism is the way to understand the DRV during the First Indochina War, then I would argue that the scope of examination of this war should not end at Điện Biên Phủ, but rather in the summer of 1956—for the DRV had not completed its transformation.

Although the fighting ceased with the signing of the 1954 ceasefire agreement, the DRV continued to operate as though the war would continue for another two years. The hope was that it could prepare conditions north of the 17th parallel to its advantage for the mid-1956 election, knowing that this was unlikely. Hence, for Hồ and his Party-state, the war had not ended, and therefore they continued to operate in the War Communism mode that they used prior to the success at Điện Biên Phủ, but on a much larger scale and a heightened level of intensity, including violence and oppression, in order to transform North Vietnam.

To achieve this transformation, the scope and speed of land reform, which was the DRV's most ambitious post-1954 domestic policy, had to be expanded and accelerated. Hồ and his party-state ordered their cadres to complete land reform by the summer of 1956, before the Geneva Agreement-stipulated election. The objective was to use land reform, a mechanism of War Communism as Goscha describes, to transform the social, economic, and political structures within the geographical space under the DRV's control. This was achieved not purely through the forceful seizure and distribution of land and property, but through another mechanism of War Communism: the rectification of organizations [*chỉnh đốn tổ chức*]. This process aimed at abolishing any established bureaucratic and social-cultural power structures at the village level that might block the Party-state's transformation of the state, society, economy, and culture. This included the eradication of both Communist and non-Communist individuals and institutions who had previously been associated with the French, the ASV, and even the DRV. Newly rectified institutions and recruited cadres who came from the poor and landless strata of society and could be easily manipulated and controlled replaced them.

Achieving this gave Hồ and his Party-state control over the population, thus preparing the advantageous condition necessary for a contentious election, or, at worst, for the resumption of war, this time against the newly established Republic of Vietnam and its ally, the United States. The result, when the northern countryside, which was home to the majority of the population, was destroyed at an incomprehensible pace, was catastrophic for many ordinary Vietnamese. Hundreds of thousands of people were falsely accused and summarily prosecuted, tortured, ostracized, or even executed, especially from the end of 1955 through the first half of 1956. This wholesale implementation of War Communism spread throughout northern Vietnam, causing protests that led to the suppression of dissension, most notably the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm affair of 1956. This power to control the population and silence critics was arguably what enabled Hồ and his Party-state to resume war in 1959.

From this viewpoint, it is possible to argue that neither Điện Biên Phủ nor the Geneva Accords ended the First Indochina War; rather, they gave Hồ and his Party-state the military break necessary to focus on a different battlefield, one in which they could wage class warfare against their fellow Vietnamese.

However, despite this point, one must acknowledge the depth and breadth of Goscha's meticulous research, and his understanding of the nature of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the First Indochina War. As revealing as the other chapters are, for me, the most important part of the book is the first chapter on the rise of the archipelago state and the conclusion. There is nothing necessarily new or revealing there, but Goscha's ability and willingness to depict the political atmosphere that gave rise to competing Vietnamese archipelago states, specifically in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Associated State of Vietnam, is captivating. Here Goscha sets up an important theme of the book: the distrust between Communist and non-Communist nationalists from the early days of the DRV, which then escalated after the battle at Điện Biên Phủ. The chapter set the stage not just for the First Indochina War but also for how we can understand the early factors that led to the second: the civil war among the Vietnamese. Hence, although the book's subtitle is *A History of the First War for Vietnam*, it is less about the First Indochina War, and more about the factors that led to it, in order to understand the Second Indochina War, war in general, as well as how Asian (including formerly) Communist countries such as China, Korea, and Vietnam are able to survive today. The only difference is that the repertoire that enabled Hồ and his Party-state to win the first war was augmented with experience and by a much larger degree during the second.

Thus, in trying to answer Frantz Fanon's question, Goscha is, in his words, trying to "help us understand better how and why Hồ Chí Minh and his communist disciples would resurrect their state of war in both its archipelago and War Communism forms and then turn each on the Americans and their Vietnamese allies with a vengeance once the French had left" (436). With such commendable intent, and to advance the understanding of War Communism, one hopes that scholars (including Goscha) will next study the DRV's War Communism during the Vietnam War. Certainly, the task of examining such a complicated war could be challenging, but if there is anyone who could do it and link the two wars, it would be Chris Goscha.

The Road to Dien Bien Phu, like Shawn McHale's *The First Vietnam War*, is an important contribution to the historiography of Vietnam's modern wars. With a focus on the First Indochina War (1946-1954), which resulted in the defeat of French colonial forces at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and the subsequent partition of Vietnam into North and South Vietnam, Goscha's scholarly effort is notable for the thorough examination of the conflict. He consults a variety of sources, including archives from Vietnam, France, and other countries, as well as interviews with participants and eyewitnesses. He also situates the conflict in its broader historical context, delving into the factors that led to the war and its consequences for Vietnam and the rest of the world. Goscha's book adds to and challenges existing scholarship on the historiography of Vietnam's modern wars. He acknowledges the influence of previous works, but provides new insights and perspectives based on his extensive research. One of the book's most important contributions is its emphasis on the Vietnamese perspective. He provides detailed accounts of the Vietnamese forces' strategies and tactics, as well as an examination of the political and social factors that enabled them to win the war. This approach differs from previous works that tended to focus on the actions and motivations of the French and American forces. Overall, Goscha's *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* is a rich and nuanced account of the First Indochina War that makes an important contribution to the historiography of Vietnam's modern wars.

 Response by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal

A warm and very sincere thanks to the contributors to this roundtable for reviewing my book: *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*. I know how time-consuming it is to read a book, especially one weighing in at over 500 pages, and then, on top of that, to pen such thoughtful and honest reviews of it. I would also like to thank the editors at H-Diplo for kindly organizing this roundtable.

I do not have any ideological ax to grind in *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*. More than anything else, what drove me to write this book on the First Indochina War (1945-54) was my reading of Franz Fanon's 1961 essay, *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹ As a Martiniquais partisan in the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) battling the French during the Algerian War (1954–1962), Fanon was focused on the concept of “revolutionary violence” in a time of decolonization. While reading Fanon's pamphlet, I was particularly struck by his fascination for what the Vietnamese had done to the French at Dien Bien Phu. How, he asked, had the Vietnamese, led by President Ho Chi Minh, generated the armed force capable of bringing down the French imperial army in a set-piece battle in this remote valley in northwestern Vietnam? Fanon must have asked this question knowing that the FLN had failed to generate the violence needed to defeat the same French army in conventional warfare in Algeria.

Intrigued, I, too, wanted to understand how Ho Chi Minh had done this, and why no other movement of national liberation in the twentieth century ever “duplicated a Dien Bien Phu”—not in Algeria, not in Indonesia, Mozambique, the Congo, nor even in the recent “forever wars” in the Middle East. In crafting my response, I did not discard the power of nationalism as a mobilizing force, or the importance of Chinese training and military support for that matter. Nationalism was as important for Ho Chi Minh in his struggle for independence against the French as it was for President Ferhat Abbas leading the resistance government in Algeria against the same foe. But nationalism, I humbly submit, can condition outcomes; it cannot, alone, explain how Ho and his disciples defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu any more than it can serve as the unique factor making sense of how the Ukrainians have pushed back so hard against the invading Russian army in conventional clashes as I write.

What I tried to do in my book was to tell the story of how Ho Chi Minh turned a ragtag guerrilla army, a “tiger” as he put it to a sympathetic American journalist in 1946, into a modern fighting force capable of bringing down a Western colonial army in modern, pitched battle in the open. Guerilla armies, after all, never fight “Dien Bien Phus.” They do not deploy artillery or use anti-aircraft guns. They do not operate in regiments, let alone divisions (Ho had seven by 1954). Nor do they engage in trench warfare—ever. The Vietnamese did. That said, my goal was not to provide yet another entertaining battle history of what happened at Dien Bien Phu² or any other of the set-piece battles opposing the French and their Vietnamese adversaries during the First Indochina War.³ I was interested in the “longer road,” the deeper forces at play, that made Dien Bien Phu possible. I wanted to explain *how* Ho actually transformed a highly decentralized, archipelago-like guerilla state into an increasingly consolidated single-party Communist state that was capable of running a large standing army and mobilizing hundreds of thousands

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Editions La Découverte & Syros, 2002 [first published in 1961]), 69.

² Bernard Fall and Pierre Rocolle remain unsurpassed to this day on that score. Pierre Rocolle, *Pourquoi Dien Bien Phu?* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968) and Fall, *The Siege of Dien Bien Phu: Hell in a Very Small Place*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967). For an excellent new history of the battle of Dien Bien Phu from the Vietnamese side, see: Peter Hunt, “Determined to Fight, Determined to Win: The Combat Experience of the People's Army of Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu,” (PhD diss, King's College, 2022).

³ For a fine battle of history of Cao Bang in late 1950, see: Ivan Cadeau, *Cao Bang, 1950: premier désastre français en Indochine*, (Paris, Perrin/Ministère des Armées, 2022).

of people for conventional and guerilla warfare in ways which Fanon could not have fathomed as his book went to press in 1961—but which the Chinese, Soviets, and North Koreans most assuredly could. I concluded my book by suggesting that Fanon could not really grasp this form of “revolutionary violence” because the author of *The Wretched of the Earth* was not privy to this Eurasian form of Communist warfare arcing from the Soviet Union in the early 1920s to northern Indochina in the mid-1950s by way of Communist China. As a member of this Communist community since the 1920s, at ease in Russian and Chinese (and not just French), Ho Chi Minh was. Fanon must have realized that all wars of decolonization are not alike.⁴

I would like to thank Alex-Thai Dinh Vo for kindly sharing his family’s experiences from within the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the First (and Second) Indochina Wars. His beautifully told story takes us into the outer banks of the DRV archipelago state in areas located south of the imperial capital of Hue, better known during the Indochina War as Zone V. Alex-Thai Dinh Vo’s grandparents were among the hundreds of thousands of non-Communists who joined Ho Chi Minh in the war of independence against the French when it first broke out in 1945-46. The patriotic outpouring in those years was real. Alex-Thai Dinh Vo is also right that until the Chinese Communists came to power in late 1949 and threw their military, political, and diplomatic weight behind Ho, the Vietnamese Communists had operated what I call a “coalition state,” consisting of people of all political colors united by their common opposition to this second French colonial invasion of their country (the Japanese overthrew French Indochina at the close of the Second World War). The Communists lined up behind Ho may have been at the helm of important ministries and the army’s general staff in the DRV, but they were acutely aware of the fact that their control over this state in the early years was precarious at best (there were only 5,000 Communist members in 1945 out of a total Vietnamese population at the time of around 20 million people). Ho realized that he needed scores of competent non-Communists to help him run the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its nascent army as the French Expeditionary Corps went on the offensive. He had no choice. The Communists also needed people like the Vo’s to feed guerilla fighters and then, from 1950, regular soldiers organized in much bigger formations engaging the French army directly. If scholars have increasingly paid attention to the non-Communist Vietnamese who joined the French as part of the “Associated State of Vietnam” in 1949 and then its postcolonial avatar that emerged in 1955 in the form of the Republic of Vietnam,⁵ we know little about the tens of thousands of people like the Vo’s, who joined the independent government run by Ho on the grounds that there could be no collaboration with the colonialists.

My book is admittedly focused on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as Claire Tran correctly notes. I do, however, take up the non-Communists in my narrative. I treat in detail the Communist-led assault on the nationalist parties in 1946. I certainly did not ignore the Associated States of Indochina the French brought to life with their partners in 1949.⁶ But as Alex-Thai Dinh Vo recognizes, I was particularly interested in the non-Communists who joined the DRV. I intentionally wove their stories into mine, in

⁴ I argue in my book that French specialists of “revolutionary warfare” making their way from Indochina to Algeria had no better understanding of what this form of communist warfare was than Fanon did.

⁵ See among others: Ninh Xuan Thao, “L’Etat du Viêt-Nam dans ses rapports avec la France (1949–1955): Une autre voie pour l’indépendance du Viêt-Nam” (PhD diss, Université de Bordeaux-Montaigne, 2019); Brett Reilly, “The Origins of the Vietnamese Civil War and the State of Vietnam” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin at Madison, 2018); and François Guillemot, *Dai Viet: indépendance et révolution au Viet-Nam, l’échec de la troisième voie (1938–1955)*, (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2012).

⁶ I wrote my French master’s degree thesis on the Vietnamese civil war of 1946. “Le premier échec contre-révolutionnaire au Vietnam: La destruction des partis nationalistes non-communistes devant le Viet Minh et la France en 1946,” Diplôme d’études approfondies, (Paris, Université de Paris VII, 1994) <https://cgoscha.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2022/09/Goscha-DEA-Contre-Revolution.pdf> accessed on 28 March 2023.

particular the moving memoirs of Nguyen Cong Luan, whose father was a member of the anti-Communist Vietnamese Nationalist Party, or VNQDD, who put his ideological differences on hold and joined the DRV in 1945 in opposition to the French. He refused repeated colonial offers to extricate him from the DRV in exchange for his collaboration with the French-created Associated State of Vietnam. But the Communists also mistrusted this man despite his impeccable anticolonial credentials. In the end, his non-Communist nationalism was such that it landed him in jail in the late 1940s where the Communists let him die. Luan and his father were not the only case I explore in my book. As I point out in chapter 1, the powerful Communist organizer Le Duc Tho was furious to learn that non-Communists *within* the Viet Minh front were actually challenging the Communist party's right to lead the resistance against the French.⁷ Those who want to understand the origins of civil war in Vietnam might want to look in places like this, too.

Alex-Thai Dinh Vo is also right that one of the things I try to show in my book is how, thanks to the support provided from early 1950 by Mao Zedong, the leader of communist China, the Vietnamese Communists in charge of the coalition state were able to light a slow burning coup d'état against their non-Communist allies *within* the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. They did this when Ho Chi Minh willingly aligned the DRV with the Eurasian Communist bloc (the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, North Korea, and China), its statecraft, models, and methods: the Stalinist cult of personality; Sino-Soviet mass mobilization techniques in the form of "hero worship" and "emulation campaigns"; Maoist "rectification campaigns" to homogenize the army and state under party control; massive amounts of Communist propaganda; the socialist nationalization of industry, banking, and the economy; and the introduction of the "agricultural tax" and "land reform" in the countryside. Those non-Communists inside the archipelago who opposed this communization of the coalition state could resist; but in so doing they risked engaging in a civil war against the Communists within the DRV. They faced repression from an army and security service that was increasingly under the Communist party's firm control. Some left the DRV to cross over to the "Associated State of Vietnam" hoping that the French would grant its leader, the former emperor, Bao Dai, the independence they had so stubbornly refused to Ho Chi Minh. Tens of thousands of other non-Communist nationalists stayed put to continue resisting the French. They kept their political heads down, hoping that the coalition state would survive, as Ho had promised once the colonialists had been defeated.⁸

It was not to be, though. During the second half of the conflict, Ho and his Communist entourage began transforming the democratic state that was born in 1945 into a single-party Communist state of an authoritarian kind like its sister states running from Eastern Europe to North Korea by way of the Soviet Union and China. Ho was no "Asian Tito" during the Indochina War. Ho even relied on Leninist notions of federalism (which were used to hold the Russian empire together in the Communist form of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) to justify the creation of Associated States of a Communist kind for Laos (the Pathet Lao) and Cambodia (the Khmer Issarak) under Vietnamese Communist control. They mirrored the monarchical ones which the French created for Bao Dai in Vietnam, King Sisavavong in Laos, and Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia. Stein Tønnesson and I will have to agree to disagree on federalism: I maintain that French colonialists and Vietnamese Communists saw in federalism a strategy of political governance allowing them to administer supranational entities of colonial and Communist design on their terms, each of which denied their respective "Indochinese associated states," by definition, full

⁷ Nguyen Cong Luan, *A Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁸ I try to show in my book, too, how this communist consolidation over the DRV was mirrored by the remarkable French colonial refusal to let go of the Associated State of Vietnam. By refusing to decolonize, the French colonialists actually helped the Vietnamese communists consolidate their hold over DRV Vietnam, if not all of Indochina. A non-military history of the French side of the Indochina War still awaits its historians.

sovereignty.⁹ What is more, by creating these two sets of Associated States of Indochina from 1949, President Ho Chi Minh and his French nemesis at that time, the High Commissioner for Indochina, Léon Pignon, ensured that civil war would spread to western Indochina with terrible consequences for the Laotians and Cambodians over the next half century.

I accept Alex-Thai Dinh Vo's critique that I could have pushed my story to 1956. There is, indeed, a case to be made for taking the war-driven communization of the DRV up to that year when Ho finally ended the radical land reform he and his party had initiated in 1953. I admittedly balked at doing so given that the book had already become too big. I would have needed to add another chapter to get from 1954 to 1956. And even then, how would I bring my other thematic chapters up to speed, if I had to extend each one by almost three years? I am confident that Alex-Thai Dinh Vo's work on this topic and that of others of his pathbreaking generation will do a better job than I in dealing with the period running up to 1956 and beyond. They already have.¹⁰

Many thanks to my colleagues and friends, Stein Tønnesson and Claire Tran, for their penetrating critique of my use of the concept of "War Communism". To be clear, I used this notion, which was first developed by Vladimir Lenin during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922), as a *heuristic* device in my book for trying to understand how a specific form of Communist warfare emerged from within this Eurasian arc that aimed both at fighting war and using it simultaneously to drive state-building under the increasing control of the Communist Party. This is what Lenin aimed to do coming out of the First World War; Mao Zedong added to it during the struggle against the Japanese during the Second one and then during the Chinese civil war. Tønnesson and Tran do not agree that Ho Chi Minh would have embarked his countrymen on such a coercive road to victory along the lines I detail in the second half of my book. As Tønnesson writes:

I surmise that the ability of Vietnam's "War Communists" to mobilize the people during 1950-54 was not primarily due to imported Russian, Chinese and Korean techniques or from radical land reform, but rather to the popular legitimacy that the DRV and the person of Ho Chi Minh had gained in the coalition period.

I would like to emphasize that I do believe that Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist, and I do believe that nationalism ("popular legitimacy" as Tønnesson puts it) was a very important factor explaining the Vietnamese victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu. For the record, Communists, like anti-Communists, can be patriots. But at the risk of repeating myself, nationalism can condition outcomes; it cannot alone explain the end result, whether it be of Communist design or not. French revolutionaries coming to the defense of the young Republic in 1792 at Valmy were patriots of the highest order. However, the leaders of the embattled Republic quickly realized that "popular legitimacy" was not enough to move French people to turn over their crops or give up their sons to the war state in sufficient quantities and numbers to prevail on the battlefield. In order to move enough people to fight in the Revolutionary Wars in the 1790s (and those of Napoléon Bonaparte in the ensuing years), the *Directoire* imposed military conscription and passed a general mobilization law, better known together in French as

⁹ On Western and non-Western empires, see: Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, "From Anticolonialism to Mobilizing Socialist Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2019); Alec Holcombe, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020); Christian Lentz, *Contesting Territory: Dien Bien Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Brett Reilly, "The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945–1955," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 11, nos. 3-4, (2016), 103-139; Kevin Li, "Partisan to Sovereign: The Makings of the Binh Xuyen in Southern Vietnam, 1945-1948," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 11, nos. 3-4, (2016), 140-187 among others.

the *levée en masse*. Ho Chi Minh had no choice but to adopt the same coercive state methods in order to take the battle to the French in the open from 1950. To that end, Ho had already decreed conscription in late 1949 and imposed a general mobilization law a few months later. These were landmark decisions in the military, political, economic, and social history of the First Indochina War. All the more so when General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as High Commissioner of Indochina imposed the same things on his Associated State of Vietnam in 1951 in the form of a colonial *levée en masse* and Bao Dai let him do it (colonial “Association” required it). No other war of decolonization, to my knowledge, ever witnessed the imposition of this dual *levée en masse* of the Vietnamese populations across the board. Does this make the Indochina War a “total war” as Claire Tran suggests? I’m not so sure. Following the advice of Hew Strachan and Talbot Imlay, I avoided using this concept in my book. Their articles convinced me that the concept of “total war” should be used with great caution.¹¹

But Ho went further as a Communist when he adopted a range of specifically Sino-Soviet methods allowing him to use the war—indeed to ramp it up—to consolidate his party’s control over the DRV coalition state, its society, and army with the Communist tools Ho knew from his time in the Soviet Union and China since the 1920s: again, the cult of personality, models for hero worship, emulation competitions, rectification campaigns, recipes for massive propaganda drives, the socialization of the economy, the agricultural tax, and land reform. “Land reform” is but one tool in the War Communist chest. It is the entire repertoire—including the *levée en masse*—that differentiates Vietnam from Algeria in terms of statecraft and warfare, but aligns Ho’s Vietnam squarely with wartime China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea.¹² Some 200 advisors Mao sent to work alongside Ho from 1950 onwards not only helped the Vietnamese create the People’s Army of Vietnam or PAVN, they also introduced these Sino-Soviet methods, based on their own experiences during two decades of war in China. The Vietnamese applied them in the crucible of their anticolonial war to consolidate their hold over the state, master and deploy military force of a modern kind, and, at the same time, take control and mobilize people in *the hundreds of thousands* to serve the state, feed its bureaucrats, and man and feed the newly created PAVN’s divisions from areas along the border with China to lower central Vietnam below Hue, not far from where the Vo’s once lived.

Tuong Vu is right to point out the importance of the work of Charles Tilly on how war makes states, and those states make war at the same time. But as Tuong Vu also correctly notes, Tilly was most interested in monarchical states opposing each other in early modern Europe. In my book, I tried to push Tilly’s insights beyond Europe and into the twentieth century. I intentionally shifted the focus of the study of statecraft to wars of decolonization that occurred in the non-Western world, where European colonial states went up against weak anti-colonialist states of an archipelago kind, but whose leaders were fiercely determined to forge states in and of violence. This explains why I draw heavily in the book on the comparison between what happened in Vietnam and Algeria during what I call the long French “Indo-Algerian War” (1945–1962). I also tried to push the study of Vietnam’s statecraft during the First Indochina War into the Communist world, into what I refer to as a “Eurasian communist arc” (436-37) running from the Soviet Union to Thai Nguyen. My goal was to try to show how Ho Chi Minh tapped

¹¹ Hew Strachan, “Essay and Reflection: On Total War and Modern War,” *The International History Review*, vol. 22, no. 2 (June 2000): 341-70 and Talbot Imlay, “Total War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2007): 547-70.

¹² On the Algerian side, the French did not impose military conscription on the Algerians. They did not create an Algerian army to fight with the French army. Whatever the reasons (and it’s not just because Algeria was a “French department”), this is a major difference between what happened in Indochina and Algeria when it comes to the social impact of the long French Indo-Algerian War, as I argue in my book. I suspect that the techniques the Chinese and the North Korean communists were using in their war against the American-led coalition in Korea had much more in common with the methods being used by the Vietnamese in Indochina than by the FLN in Algeria. Only comparative studies will allow us to know.

into a specific type of “War Communism” (Lenin’s term) that was unknown in world history until the end of World War I. This gave rise to a unique form of communist warfare of a very coercive kind by the mid-twentieth century.

I concur entirely with Claire Tran that Chinese assistance to the Vietnamese was essential to Ho’s ability to take the war to the French on the battlefield and I say so in my book. I also state clearly in my book that American assistance kept the French in the war (I went so far as to argue that had the Americans not sent aid by 1951, de Lattre would have lost the Red River delta). I agree, too, that Volodymyr Zelensky could never have taken on the Russians without the Atlantic alliance standing behind him, providing arms and training like the Chinese did for Ho Chi Minh. My point, however, is that Zelensky never had to create a professional army from scratch or, at the same time, forge a state capable of running it in a conventional war with Russia. The Vietnamese Communists *and* non-Communists in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam did. The Communist mobilization techniques Ho applied were important, for they helped Ho create a state that was capable of mobilizing—yes, through coercion—the hundreds of thousands of civilians needed to run the human logistical services I describe carefully in my book. In Ukraine, and this is extremely important, Zelensky’s army can rely on mechanized logistics—transport trucks, trains, helicopters, and airplanes. Only at Dien Bien Phu did “this”—mechanized logistics, the availability of transport trucks—become a real possibility for the Vietnamese. Until then, the Vietnamese, like the North Koreans and Chinese Communists before them, had to rely on human logistics. How these states could do this requires explanation.

Tønnesson states in his review of my book that the popular mobilization and patriotic legitimacy which David Marr discussed for 1945–1946 in *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution* could have responded to the needs in manpower and resources for the post-1950 period.¹³ That is my point: it could not. The mobilization Marr analyzed in the early years of the war (his book only covers the period from mid-1945 to early 1947) was sufficient to fight a guerilla war similar to the one the Indonesians were operating against the Dutch and the Algerians would run against the French. But the “state capacity” of the DRV as it existed in early 1947 could *never* have responded to the requirements in logistics (people power) and supplies (gathering rice in massive quantities) needed to execute eight set-piece battles between Cao Bang and Dien Bien Phu. A seven-division strong PAVN was not a “tiger”; by early 1954 it had become an “elephant” weighing in at around 200,000 hungry men. Ho Chi Minh and his Communist entourage and Mao and his Chinese advisors all knew this and acted accordingly with the war communist methods including the *levée en masse* mentioned above. This, then, is how the Vietnamese guerilla state of 1945–1946 became something very different from 1950, as Ho pushed his party’s control and state capacity to mobilize people and resources down to the district and village levels wherever he could. The FLN would never do this. The Chinese had already done so.

I would like to thank Martin Grossheim and Claire Tran for recognizing the brutality of the First Indochina War. If we can believe the French specialist of the First Indochina War, Bernard Fall, as many as one million Vietnamese died between 1945 and 1954, the overwhelming majority of whom were civilians.¹⁴ Vietnamese sources put the number at half a million.¹⁵ Even if we accept the lower number, this makes the First Indochina War the most violent war of decolonization of the twentieth century. I tried to show at different stages in my book how and why the First Indochina War became such a brutal affair.

¹³ David Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Bernard Fall, “This Isn’t Munich, It’s Spain,” *Ramparts*, (December 1965), 23; see <https://cgoscha.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2022/07/Bernard-Fall-This-isnt-munich.pdf> accessed on 12 March 2023.

¹⁵ Ngo Van Chieu, *Journal d’un combattant Viet-Minh* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955), 106.

Part of the reason is this shift to conventional warfare and the use of modern arms like artillery and napalm. This of course led to more intense and deadly battlefield confrontations from 1950.

But part of it is also due to the fact that the borders of the archipelago state, the zones where Ho's islands bumped up against those of the French colonial federation and those of its Vietnamese allies, were dangerous places for the people living there. Mindboggling violence could occur in these borderland regions when one side decided to push in administratively, militarily, or both on the other side's territory in the form of "pacification operations." Some of the worst atrocities of the Indochina War occurred in villages caught in this savage war of sovereignties that broke out repeatedly across the archipelago and claimed an untold number of civilian lives. The violence was indeed often committed by Vietnamese against Vietnamese; but let us be clear that the French advocated from the outset the use of civil war as a strategy and, in so doing, increased the level of violence of their colonial war by arming one side against the other in order to keep Indochina in the empire as part of the French Union. The powerful French administrator in the late 1940s, Léon Pignon, was but one advocate of colonial-backed civil war. De Lattre was another. Colonial-driven civil war wasn't such a new idea, however. "Pacification", as I argue in my book, was intrinsically a form of "colonial-fired civil war". So were the Associated States of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia Pignon brought to life in 1949.¹⁶ And by pushing back against both at the village level, the leaders of the DRV (Communist *and* non-Communist anticolonialists mind you) only made the Indochina War all the more destructive in terms of the civil strife it created in the borderlands. Those who paid the highest price were the tens of thousands of innocent Vietnamese civilians sucked into this bloody maelstrom that must have provided Fall with that ghastly number, if true, of one million dead (Curiously, to my knowledge, Fall never said a word about the massive civilian suffering that occurred on the French watch during the First Indochina War).

Understanding the logic, dynamics, and mechanics of colonial- and Communist-backed civil violence over local sovereignty at the micro level remains one of the most important chapters of the First and Second Indochina Wars that has still to be written. One thing is sure: if ever a map of the Vietnamese dead during the First Indochina War is made, the reddest stains will not be in places like Dien Bien Phu, but in countless villages strewn across the borders of the Vietnamese countryside today, where the savagery of the Indochina War unleashed by the French in 1945–1946 and assumed by the Vietnamese Communists and non-Communists did its dirtiest work.¹⁷

¹⁶ As I show in my book, de Lattre imposed the colonial *levée en masse* on Bao Dai and, in so doing, increased the size of the Associated State of Vietnam's army in 1951 in order to keep Indochina French and to fight the DRV at the village level without having to draft French boys to do the fighting themselves. It was not a "Vietnamization" or "*jaunissement*" per se; it was a French decision to further "imperialize" the army that was already fighting in Indochina to include large numbers of Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians. To put it another way, unlike the Americans during the Vietnam War, the French did not want to send their "boys" in large numbers to fight in Indochina. The French government threatened to send French draftees to Indochina as part of a surge to ensure victory, but they never did—in direct contrast to what they did during the Algerian War.

¹⁷ Shawn F. McHale has taken an important first step in furthering our understanding of the dynamics of civil strife in *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). So has Edward Miller: "The War that Dare not Speak its Name: The Vietnam War as a Civil War," an unpublished paper kindly shared by the author. The reference on civil war remains Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).