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The Winning Side

If the battle of Điện Biên Phủ – the Stalingrad of decolonization – were in need of a symbol, you could do worse than a bicycle. One saddled with pieces of Katyusha rocket artillery, en route to be reassembled on the rim of the highlands overlooking the valley where the army divisions of Võ Nguyên Giáp smashed the French imperial forces seventy years ago. To commemorate their victory, the Vietnamese state this week staged a full-scale re-enactment of the events, with thousands taking up the roles of peasant porters and army regulars who won the First Indochina War. Everything was in place except for actors to play the French, though if the invitation had gone out to veterans of the French New Wave, it's hard to see them turning down the call. Jean-Pierre Léaud as Henri Navarre!

One of the central dramas of Điện Biên Phủ is that both sides wanted the showdown. The commander of the French, Navarre, was confident they could rout the Vietnamese army just as they had done at Nà Sản two years before. He wanted to shut off any Vietnamese incursion into Laos in the north, turning Điện Biên Phủ into an 'entrenched camp' populated by 12,000 French troops, while simultaneously dispatching 53 battalions to root out the Vietnamese forces in the southern river delta. His second in command, René Cogy, wanted to meet Giáp's soldiers out in the open in the style of battles of the previous century: 'I want a clash at Điện Biên Phủ. I'll do everything possible to make him eat dirt and forget about wanting to try his hand at grand strategy.' Giáp was happy to take up the gauntlet, telling his planners that 'Điện Biên Phủ could be the battle'.

The battle itself had features that seemed to look backwards rather than forwards: a set-piece confrontation, in open terrain, with trenches that, with tropical monsoons, must have rivalled Verdun (a few of whose veterans fought on the French side). There were calls to go over the

top; there were attempts to tunnel under the enemy; there were even poets involved on both sides. French politicians tried to gin up war fever by suggesting that Ho's forces were nothing less than Nazis. 'I say that any current policy of capitulation in Indochina would be just like Vichy', Edmond Michelet told the French deputies in Paris. (The call went unheeded by the dockworkers of Marseilles who refused to unload the coffins that came back from Điện Biên Phủ.)

But for Ho the battle was even more existential: it would be the masterstroke that would put Hanoi in a strong position in the postwar negotiations in Geneva. In the month leading up to the clash, the Chinese supplied the Vietnamese troops with a bounty of artillery and ammunition. Giáp's guns took out the French airstrip within the early days of bombardment. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese, most of them women, were recruited as porters, providing food and weapons. The French focused on breaking their access to rice. 'Starve the adversary', was Raoul Salan's command. The robustness of food supply chains was paramount for such an extended battle, and northern Vietnamese memories were raw from the experience of famine brought on by the US aerial blockade in 1944-5 – a famine in which at least a million people died, and which deserves a firmer place in the annals of liberal-capitalist infamy.

The First Indochina War was in many ways a continuation of the US–China confrontation in Korea, carried out on new terrain, with the US supplying the French. The 1950s were a decade when nuclear weapons still figured as a godsend in the Western military mind, and their use was not at all off limits. MacArthur had mused about their deployment in Korea; Eisenhower would threaten China with them in the Taiwan Straits Crisis. Whether or not Secretary of State John Dulles offered to supply the French forces with atomic weapons – as Georges Bidault said he had – the idea of nuking a coalescing communist state was far from fantastical for Washington or Langley.

'What must we do to realize a Điện Biên Phủ? How do we go about doing it?', Fanon asked in *The Wretched of the Earth*. It's a question the historian Christopher Goscha answers with aplomb in his recent history of the battle. His response is that the Vietnamese revolution in the postwar decades went beyond that of almost any other decolonizing state. Ho may have spoken in parables about Vietnam being the guerilla tiger capable of taking on the imperial elephant. But by 1954, as Goscha shows, Ho had an elephant of his own. As well as introducing obligatory military service, the communist Vietnamese state daringly – and brilliantly – implemented land reform at the height of its conflict with the French, in order to build the type of war communism that could fully mobilize a peasant class and turn minorities into Vietnamese. For Ho the war had two fronts: against the French, and against

even the most ‘patriotic’ Vietnamese landowners. The peasants proved to be the decisive factor in Giáp’s victory. This was in stark contrast to the more guerilla-style forces of Indonesia and Algeria, which had no communist states to guide them.

The legacy of Điện Biên Phủ was already of limited use by Fanon’s time. There was no conventional force in the Middle East, nor Africa, nor the rest of Southeast Asia capable of meeting the Western powers on open terrain. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by some Southern states, if anything, obviated the need for conventional forces that aspired to that level of strength. The Algerians, meanwhile, showed that political victories could be as effective as battlefield ones. But the capacity of Asian states to fight maximal wars with vast tolerance for casualties and shift to a war economy on a dime never became entirely idle. Though the battle was merely a prologue to the decade of aerial bombardment and chemical warfare that the US was about to unleash, no Western power ever won another major land war in Asia. Western leaders were haunted by the memory of 1954. As Lyndon Johnson put it: ‘I don’t want any damn Điện Biên Phủ.’

Read on: Che Guevara, [‘Vietnam Must Not Stand Alone’](#), NLR 1/43.