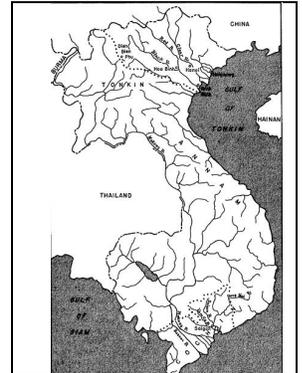


The Significance of Dien Bien Phu (1954)

by Brad Seidman and Charles De Jesus

Indochina, including Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, became a French colony in the 1880s. Like other 19th century European powers looking to establish global empires, France used the spread of Christianity to insert themselves into Indochinese society. However, this was merely a pretext to establish political control and exploit Indochina's natural resources, particularly rubber. France's goals were summarized by Prime Minister Jules Ferry with the remark, "Colonial policy is the daughter of industrial policy." French actions were continually met with resistance by the people of Indochina. In 1858, the Emperor Thieu Tri unsuccessfully sought to limit the activities of foreigners in Vietnam and between 1885 and 1916 the Vietnamese mounted a series of rebellions. At the Versailles Conference at the end of World War I, a Vietnamese delegation tried to petition for an end to French colonialism, but it was barred from participation.



During the 1920s, a figure emerged who brought unity to the different factions fighting against the French. Nguyen Tat Than, also known as Ho Chi Minh, joined the French Communist Party in 1920 and secured the support of the newly established Soviet Union for his movement. Ho Chi Minh believed that "All subject peoples are filled with hope by the prospect that an era of right and justice is opening for them. . . in the struggle of civilization against barbarism." He declared, "If you force us into war, we will fight. The struggle will be atrocious, but the Vietnamese people will suffer anything rather than renounce their freedom."

The situation in Vietnam fundamentally changed with the onset of World War II. The defeat of France by Germany led to Japanese occupation of the former French colony. From 1940 until 1945, the Viet Minh (Front for the Independence of Vietnam), under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, fought a guerrilla war against the Japanese. In July, 1945, Allied leaders decided to partition Vietnam, placing the south under British authority and the north under the Chinese. However in August, the Viet Minh captured Hanoi and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Chinese withdrew, but the British turned control over the south to France, which wanted to reestablish its colonial empire. In 1946, the Viet Minh began their struggle against the French.

Bao Dai, the nominal Emperor of Vietnam, abdicated and told the French, "You would understand better if you could see what is happening here, if you could feel this yearning for independence that is in everyone's heart, and which no human force can any longer restrain. Should you re-establish a French administration here, it will not be obeyed. Every village will be a nest of resistance, each foreign collaborator an enemy."

With financial support from the United States, French forces tried to regain control over Vietnam until they were defeated by the Viet Minh at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in April, 1954. In that battle, there were 1,500 French killed, 4,000 wounded and 10,000 soldiers taken as prisoners. In July, 1954, the Viet Minh and France signed an armistice and France agreed to withdraw all of her troops by July 1956.

Global Impact of Dien Bien Phu

In 1962, Franz Fanon, a French trained psychiatrist who was working in Algeria in the middle of its independence struggle explained the importance of Dien Bien Phu to all third world revolutionary movements. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon wrote, "The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer, strictly speaking, a Vietnamese victory. Since July 1954, the questions which colonized people have asked themselves has been, 'What must be done to bring about another Dien Bien Phu? How can we manage?'. . . This encompassing violence does not work upon the colonized people only; it modifies the attitude of the colonists who become aware of manifold Dien Bien Phus."

A useful video for teaching about the French in Vietnam is the first episode of the PBS series, *Vietnam: A Television History*. It chronicles French colonialism and Vietnamese resistance. In the document-based assignment that follows, students examine the origins of French imperial policy, the struggle to overthrow it, and the global consequences of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

Document Packet: What were the global consequences of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu?

Introduction: This document-based essay is based on documents (1-10). It is designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. Some of the documents have been edited. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and any point of view that may be presented in the document.

Historical Context: Indochina, colonized by France in the 19th century, entered into a long struggle to achieve independence. The Indochinese were eventually victorious in 1954 after the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Task: Using information from the documents and your knowledge of global history, answer the questions that follow each document in Part A. Your answers to the questions will help you write the Part B essay, in which you will be asked to:

Identify two (2) reasons why the French colonized Indochina.

Describe the reactions of the people of Indochina to French rule.

Explain how the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu affected their role on a global scale.

In your opinion, did France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu mark the end of an era? Explain.

Note: Be sure to use specific evidence cited in the documents as well as outside knowledge about Global history.

Part A

1. Chronology of French Colonialism in Vietnam

Source: <http://www.entrenet.com/~groedmed/Vietnam/viethistoryindex.html>

- 1789 - 1792. Dynastic war in Vietnam. Prince Nguyen Anh accepts military assistance from the French.
- 1801. Nguyen Anh triumphs and is proclaimed Emperor of Vietnam. The French became major figures in Vietnamese government, business, trade and military affairs.
- 1847. French warships fire on and defeat Vietnamese warships.
- 1858 - 1859. Emperor Thieu Tri, alarmed by European colonialism, limits the activities of foreigners, including Catholic missionaries in Vietnam. The restrictions are used to justify a French invasion .
- 1883. The Vietnamese Emperor signs a treaty effectively making Vietnam a French colony.
- 1885 - 1916. Vietnamese patriots mount a series of unsuccessful rebellions.
- 1919. A Vietnamese delegation is barred when it tries to present a petition for an end to French colonialism at the Versailles Conference.
- 1920. Ho Chi Minh joins the French Communist Party and secures support from the Soviet Union.
- 1932. Bao Dai becomes Emperor of Vietnam and seeks reform. He appoints Ngo Dinh Diem his prime minister.
- 1933. Diem resigns and seeks political asylum in Japan.
- 1939. Nationalist groups unite in Viet Minh (Front for the Independence of Vietnam), under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.
- 1940 - 1944. Vietnam is occupied by Japan. The Viet Minh fight a guerrilla war against the Japanese.
- 1945. Allied leaders agree to a temporary partitioning of Vietnam. The south is placed under the British and the north under China. The Viet Minh capture Hanoi and proclaim the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Bao Dai abdicates as emperor and the Chinese withdraw. British troops return control of southern Vietnam to France.
- 1946. The Viet Minh fight against French efforts to restore colonialism.
- 1949. France offers Vietnam limited independence and asks Bao Dai to form a government. The Viet Minh refuse to recognize Bao Dai.

- 1950 - 1952. U.S. grants France aid to fight against the Viet Minh and sends a small military force to Saigon.
1953. French concentrate troops at Dien Bien Phu.
1954. Despite massive American financial assistance, the Viet Minh defeat the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Only 3,000 of a French force of 16,500 survive. In July, the Viet Minh and France sign an armistice. All combatants withdraw to either side of a line of demarcation. All French troops are to leave Vietnam by July 1956, when elections are to be held to choose a national government.

2. Justifications for French Colonialism

Source: Karnow, S. (1983). Vietnam, p. 55, 97.

Monsignor Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Behaine (1787). "We must, with unquenchable ardor, propagate our sacred religion"

Jules Ferry, French Prime Minister (c. 1883). "Colonial policy is the daughter of industrial policy."

Paul Doumer, French governor of Indochina (1902). "When France arrived in Indochina, the Annamites (Vietnamese) were ripe for servitude".

1. According to these quotations, why did the French colonize Indochina?

4. Ho Chi Minh. Ho Chi Minh was a Vietnamese citizen and a communist leader who played a major role in unifying the factions fighting against the French in the 1920s and 1930s. When the country was divided in 1956, he became President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the northern section of the country. He died in 1969, before the country was reunified (Source: Karnow, p. 135).

"All subject peoples are filled with hope by the prospect that an era of right and justice is opening for them. . . in the struggle of civilization against barbarism. . . If you force us into war, we will fight. The struggle will be atrocious, but the Vietnamese people will suffer anything rather than renounce their freedom. . . You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at these odds, you will lose and I will win."

1. What did Ho Chi Minh say to the French?
2. Based on this quote, do you think Ho Chi Minh should be considered primarily a communist or a nationalist?
3. In your opinion, if the struggle in war will be "atrocious," is it worth the battle? Explain.

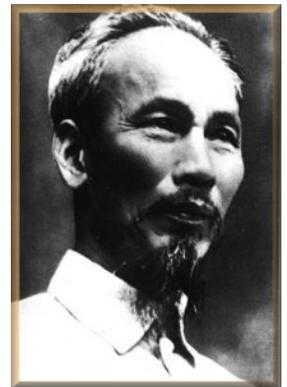
5. Between 1940 and 1945, an occupying Japanese army controlled Vietnam. "Supplies for the United States Embassy and Chungking are among the shipments held up because of the French- Japanese agreement for a cessation of all shipments of militarily valuable goods from Indochina into Nationalist China, it was learned today. French officials said the American supplies, consigned to Ambassador Nelson T. Johnson, were held up "temporarily" pending regularization of the Japanese inspection system, which is designed to prevent passage of any supplies that might be of use to Chinese armies in their "war of resistance" against Japan." -*The New York Times*, July 25, 1940

1. According to this news item, what is happening in Vietnam?

3. A French picture postcard showing the severed heads of Vietnamese insurgents, circa 1880s.



- What does this picture postcard say about French attitudes toward the Vietnamese?



2. In your opinion, should the Japanese be considered liberators or conquerors of Vietnam? Explain.

5. Emperor Bao Dai. Bao Dai became Emperor of Vietnam in 1932, while it was a French colony. During World War II, he cooperated with both the Vichy French and the Japanese. At the end of the war, the Viet Minh nationalists under Ho Chi Minh forced his resignation. When he transferred his mandate to govern Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh, he issued a warning to France: “Should you re-establish a French administration here, it will not be obeyed. Every village will be a nest of resistance, each former collaborator an enemy.” (Karnow, p. 147)

3. How does Bao Dai feel about the French efforts to re-establish a colony in Vietnam?

6. An Historian Examines Efforts to Reestablish a French Colony in Vietnam after World War II.

Source: Karnow, S. (1983) Vietnam.

A. “On the morning of November 23 [1946], [a French Colonel named] Dèbes demanded that the Viet Minh authorities evacuate their troops . . . within two hours. The Vietnamese, protesting that they were observing the cease-fire, telephone Hanoi for instructions. Dèbes gave them an additional 45 minutes, then issued the order. French infantry and armored units went through the city, fighting house to house against Viet Minh squads. French aircraft zoomed in to bomb and strafe while the cruiser *Suffren*, in the harbor lobbed shells into the city, demolishing whole neighborhoods of flimsy structures” (p. 156).

B. “[United States President] Truman did not actually sign the military aid legislation until July 26, 1950. But on June 28, three days after the Korean War broke out, [Secretary of State] Acheson persuaded him to order an ‘acceleration’ of assistance to the French. A day after that, and four weeks before the military aid bill becomes law, eight C-47 cargo aircraft flew across the Pacific to Indochina - not the only time that the United States was to act illegally in Vietnam. During the next four year, the United States was to spend nearly \$3 billion to finance the French in Indochina” (p. 177).

1. How did the French try to re-establish themselves in Vietnam after the defeat of the Japanese in World War II?
2. How did the United States respond to the French’s efforts to re-colonize?
3. In your opinion, why did the United States decide to support the French?

7. The fall of Dien Bien Phu. Dien Bien Phu fell to the Viet Minh on May 7, 1954.

At least 2,200 members of the French forces died during the siege and thousands more taken prisoner. Of the 50,000 or so Vietnamese who besieged the garrison, there were about 23,000 casualties including an estimated 8,000 killed.

“Vietminh insurgents wrested three strong points from the French today in their third major assault on besieged Dien Bien Phu. French positions were overrun in the eastern, northeastern and western sectors of the shrinking Dien Bien Phu redoubt. . . Fierce hand-to-hand fighting was reported in what might be the decisive battle for Dien Bien Phu. A French military spokesman said: “There have been heavy losses on our side and extremely heavy losses on the Viet Minh side.” – *The New York Times*, May 3, 1954 p. 1.

- In your opinion, why was the fighting at Dien Bien Phu so intense and the casualties so high?

8. Reactions to the French Defeat at Dien Bien Phu

A. “Dien Bien Phu,” Editorial, *The New York Times* (May 6, 1954). “A few months ago it was an unheard of point in a far-away valley in the jungles of Southeastern Asia. Today Dien Bien Phu rings around the world as one of the epic battles of history. . . For fifty-six days wave after wave of besiegers have been thrown, for political purposes and with a reckless disregard of human life,



Captured French troops.

against the isolated and outnumbered garrison. Dien Bien Phu may fall at last, . . . but the defenders have exacted from the enemy so high a price that the end of the siege can never be called a defeat. . . . It was held long enough to renew the free world's faith in the victory of the cause for which it stands."

B. "Dien Bien Phu Mourning Eclipses French World War Victory Fete," *The New York Times* (May 9, 1954). "The ninth anniversary of victory over Germany was observed here today by Frenchmen too struck by the defeat at Dien Bien Phu to feel any joy. 'A veil has fallen over France', Edouard Herriot, an 81-year old statesman said, his statement appeared to sum up the atmosphere, for never have there such solemn observances of an armistice that established Allied supremacy in World War II."

C. "After Dien Bien Phu, What?," *The New York Times* (May 9, 1954). "The fall of Dien Bien Phu marks the end of an era. The ultimate military, political and psychological reactions may either make or break the anti-Communist front in the Far East and France as a great power. . . . A lost battle has tipped the scales of history in the past; Dien Bien Phu may prove, in future accountings, to be the balance point of contemporary history."

D. "You are all aware that the French and their Vietnam ally have suffered reverses, notably the fall of Dien Bien Phu after a superb defense. The present situation is grave, but by no means hopeless. In the present conference at Geneva, we and other free nations are seeking a formula by which the fighting can be ended and the people of Indochina assured true independence. So far the Communist attitude at Geneva is not encouraging." – Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, June, 1954.

E. "Reason and peace have won out. After days and nights of hard negotiations, filled with anxiety and hope, the cease-fire has been signed. In my soul and my conscience, I am sure these are the best conditions we could have hoped for in the present state of things." Premier Pierre Mendes-France, July 21, 1954.

1. According to *The New York Times*, how did the French public respond to defeat at Dien Bien Phu?
2. Why does the New York Times believe that Dien Bien Phu marks the end of an era?
3. How did the U.S. Secretary of State view the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu?
4. What did the French government decide to do after Dien Bien Phu?

9. Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam, July 20, 1954

The Geneva Agreements ended the war between France and the Viet Minh. Vietnam was temporarily divided until "free elections" could be held by July 20, 1956. Source: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/genevacc.htm>

Article 1. A provisional military demarcation line shall be fixed, on either side of which the forces of the two parties shall be regrouped after their withdrawal, the forces of the People's Army of Viet-Nam to the north of the line and the forces of the French Union to the south.

Article 16 (a). The withdrawals and transfers of the military forces equipment and supplies of the two parties shall be completed within three hundred (300) days.

Article 34. An International Commission shall be set up for the control and supervision over the application of the provisions of the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Viet-Nam. It shall be composed of representatives of the following States: Canada, India and Poland.

- What were the results of the Geneva Accords?
- In your opinion, which side had won the war? Explain.

10. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth* (1963). Fanon was a French trained psychiatrist from Martinique.

“In spite of all that colonialism can do, its frontiers remain open to new ideas and echoes from the world outside. . . The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer, strictly speaking, a Vietnamese victory. Since July 1954, the questions which colonized people have asked themselves has been, ‘What must be done to bring about another Dien Bien Phu? How can we manage?’ . . . This encompassing violence does not work upon the colonized people only; it modifies the attitude of the colonists who become aware of manifold Dien Bien Phus. This is why a veritable panic takes hold of the colonialist governments in turn” (p. 70).

1. Does the author speak positively or negatively about colonialism? Explain.
2. Why does the author feel that the Dien Bien Phu victory is not only a victory for the Vietnamese people?
3. If you were a French colonial, how might you react after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu?

Part B

Identify two (2) reasons why the French colonized Indochina.

Describe the reactions of the people of Indochina to French rule.

Explain how the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu affected their role on a global scale.

In your opinion, did France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu mark the end of an era? Explain.