

# Dien Bien Phu, symbol for all time

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**This month marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Geneva Accords that ended the war in Indochina, six weeks after the French army was defeated at Dien Bien Phu. This was a signal to other colonies yearning for independence: the next to rise up was Algeria, three months later.**

FRENCH and Vietnamese negotiators signed a ceasefire agreement, backed by the international community in Geneva, on 20 July 1954. The reluctant United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and especially the People's Republic of China, for which this was a first international conference, all took note. On 7 May the last troops defending the garrison of Dien Bien Phu, exhausted by an endless 55-day battle, had been finally forced to admit the enemy's superiority. The war had ended. The Vietnamese had defeated one of the largest western armies, supported by its powerful US ally.

It is hard to imagine the impact of that event 50 years ago on the colonial world, particularly France's overseas colonies. A colonial power had been defeated. A regular army had been beaten. In the late 1980s Ben Youssef Ben Khedda, head of the provisional government of the Algerian Republic, wrote: Ho Chi Minh's army inflicted a humiliating defeat on the French Expeditionary Corps at Dien Bien Phu. The defeat of France was a powerful incentive to all who thought immediate insurrection the only possible strategy . . . All other considerations were set aside, and direct action became the overriding priority [1]. Only three months after the Geneva conference, the Algerian uprising broke out on November 1.

From the outset the political and military struggle of Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh (League for the Independence of Vietnam) influenced nationalist thinkers in colonies well beyond Algeria. The French representative, Jean Sainteny, and the Vietnamese delegate, Ho Chi Minh, had signed an agreement in Hanoi on 6 March 1946 by which France recognised the Republic of Vietnam as a free state, with its own government, parliament, army and finances, within the French Union [2]. Although any mention of independence was carefully avoided, the agreement gave the clear impression that France was intent on establishing new relations with its colonies.

When the postwar Constituent Assembly debated the overseas situation, between 21 and 26 March 1946, Lamin Gueye (French West Africa) [3], Raymond Verges (Réunion) and other members invoked the example of Indochina. The deputies of the Democratic Movement for Malagasy Reform (MDRM) tabled a bill with the exact wording of the Hanoi agreement: France was to recognise Madagascar as a free state, with its own government. The majority of the assembly predictably rejected this demand.

But the contagion spread. Vietnam became a model for many colonial peoples as the negotiations between France and the Vietnamese nationalists continued. There was a growing feeling that an agreement based on French goodwill was possible. Then Ho Chi Minh went to Paris to negotiate Vietnam's final status and returned empty-handed.

Ho Chi Minh, with his modest and reserved demeanour, commanded enormous respect among

nationalists in other colonies. For a long time little attention had been paid to his earlier activity under his real name, Nguyen Ai Quoc, but that changed in 1946. His foundation of the socialist Intercolonial Union and publication of the anti-colonial journal *Le Paria* (The Pariah) in France in the 1920s, and his activity as a professional Comintern revolutionary in the 1930s, became well-known, and his reputation as an incorruptible patriot spread far beyond Vietnam.

Many colonial activists from elsewhere in the French empire thought of Ho Chi Minh, at 56, as an elder brother. Jacques Rabemananjara, a leader of the MDRM, was struck by his combination of firmness as to the ultimate aim of independence and flexibility as to the form—his acceptance of the French Union as a framework. Despite this, the negotiations failed and war began at the end of November 1946. Ho Chi Minh's name resounded again in the Vel d'Hiv cyclodrome in Paris on 5 June 1947, when overseas members of the National Assembly held a mass rally with the slogan The French Union in danger.

Besides the Franco-Vietnamese conflict, there was increasing repression in Madagascar. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, future president of Ivory Coast, spoke for the African Democratic Rally (RDA), which was allied with the Communist group in the National Assembly; the poet Aimé Césaire for the French Communist party (PCF); Lamine Gueye, future president of the Senegalese National Assembly, for the Socialist party; and an Algerian introduced as Chérif for the party of the Algerian Manifesto of Ferhat Abbas [4].

According to several contemporary accounts, all eyes were turned toward the Vietminh who had dared to challenge French colonial power. Would they hold out against the infinitely superior forces of the French Expeditionary Corps? That concern was shared by students from the colonies living in France, who were strongly influenced by the PCF at the time and very active in the anti-colonial movement. Niggling censorship and repression in the colonies prevented any spectacular show of solidarity, but statements by the RDA in Black Africa and the PCF in Algeria refer specifically to the struggle of the Vietnamese people [5].

The writer and member of the French Academy, Maurice Genevoix, travelled widely in Africa in 1949 and on his return he published his impressions. Everywhere I went, he wrote, in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Sudan, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire or Niger, it was taken for granted that events in Indochina would be decisive. On this point, silence spoke louder than words [6].

There were strong echoes of this in North Africa. Early in 1949 Dr Pham Ngoc Thach, a prominent minister in Ho Chi Minh's government, wrote to Abd al-Krim [7], then in exile in Cairo, asking him to issue an appeal to North African soldiers serving in the French Expeditionary Corps. The old leader of the Rif tribes happily obliged: The victory of colonialism, even at the other end of the world, is a defeat for us and a setback to our cause. The victory of liberty in any part of the world is our victory, the sign of our approaching independence [8].

In 1950 the Moroccan Communist party, contacted by the Vietminh through the PCF, seconded a member of its central committee, Mohamed Ben Aomar Lahrach, to Ho Chi Minh's staff [9]. Lahrach, known as General Maarouf to Maghrebis and Anh Ma to the Vietnamese, played a major role throughout the conflict, often calling on his brothers in the Expeditionary Corps to desert, and working on the Marxist political education of prisoners and North Africans who had rallied to the cause of the Vietminh [10].

The French army's successive setbacks in Indochina strengthened the growing solidarity among the colonised throughout the French Union. It was in the Algerian ports of Oran and Algiers, not those of metropolitan France, that dockers first refused to load war materials destined for Indochina.

French decision-makers understood what was happening and tried to oppose the solidarity of the colonised through the solidarity of the colonisers. Maurice Genevoix concluded from his African observations that once the string is broken, all the pearls of the necklace fall off, one by one: the problem of the Empire is a single whole.

The fundamental anti-communism of those who supported the war effort was reinforced by their determination to prevent any breach in the French Union. They banked on the contagious effect of victory: the use of force in Indochina would avoid the need to use it elsewhere. Georges Bidault, several times minister for foreign affairs in the early 1950s, told everyone that the French Union was a single bloc: capitulation in any part of it would bring it all crashing down [11]. The most conservative, such as National Assembly members Eduard Frédéric-Dupont and Adolphe Aumeran, and journalists Robert Lazurick and Rémy Roure, former sympathisers of the colonial party [12] proclaimed that only strong-arm methods would silence native pseudo-nationalists in Indochina.

Yet other French politicians thought Indochina was already lost. What they feared was the contagious effect of defeat. Pierre Mendès-France thought the game was up as early as the autumn of 1950. France, he said, no longer had sufficient forces to deal with conflict throughout the empire. François Mitterrand argued that the war in Asia would undermine France's only real prospects, which were in Africa. The Asian limb must be severed before gangrene spread to the whole body [13]. It was no accident that the Mendès-Mitterrand team settled the Indochina issue only to be intransigent over Algeria.

These arguments went unheeded; then came the disaster of Dien Bien Phu. What was its impact in other French colonies? There is as yet no well-documented study of public opinion, including police reports or the colonial press of the period. But clues suggest that many people in Algiers, Tananarive and Dakar rejoiced at the defeat of the French.

Four days later, on 11 May, the Gaullist minister Christian Fouchet announced that several French residents in Morocco had received anonymous letters threatening that Casablanca would be a second Dien Bien Phu [14]. As Ben Khedda's memoirs show, the Algerian nationalists reacted by increasing their preparations for armed insurrection [15].

Dien Bien Phu became France's symbol of anachronistic obstinacy culminating in disaster. For Vietnam it symbolised the reconquest of national independence. But its impact was much wider. The battle was seen throughout the world as foreshadowing other struggles. Hardly had the smell of gunpowder faded in the Tonkin Basin when the Aures Mountains were thick with it. And barely a year later the wretched of the earth A reference to Frantz Fanon's influential *Les damnés de la terre* (The Wretched of the Earth), which examined the psychological and material costs of colonisation during the Algerian war of independence 1954-62. came together in Bandung [16].

Two men on opposing sides drew parallels that testify to Dien Bien Phu's historical significance. In 1962 the Algerian nationalist leader Ferhat Abbas wrote: Dien Bien Phu was more than a military victory. It is a symbol for all time. It was the Battle of Valmy [17] of the colonial peoples, an affirmation of Asian and African man against the European and a confirmation of universal human rights. At Dien Bien Phu France lost its sole claim to a presence in Indochina - the right of the strongest [18].

In 1974 Jean Pouget, a former officer in the Expeditionary Corps, commented bitterly but perceptively: The fall of Dien Bien Phu marked the end of the colonial period and the beginning of the era of third-world independence. Today there is not a revolt, rebellion or uprising in Asia, Africa or America that fails to invoke General Giap's victory. Dien Bien Phu has become decolonisation's 14<sup>th</sup> of July [19].

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## P.S.

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## Footnotes

[1] *Les origines du 1er novembre 1954, Dahlab, Alger, 1989*; quoted in Benjamin Stora, *Un passé dépassé? 1954, de Dien Bien Phu aux Aurès*, symposium typescript, Hanoi, 2004.

[2] The French Union was the name given by the French Constitution of 1946 to the entity constituted by the French Republic (metropolitan France and the overseas departments and territories) and the associated territories and states. See Jacques Tronchon, *L'Insurrection malgache de 1947*, Maspero/CNRS, Paris, 1974.

[3] Established in 1895, French West Africa was a federation of Senegal, Mauritania, Sudan, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Guinea, Niger, Ivory Coast and Dahomey (now Benin), with Dakar as its capital.

[4] *L'Humanité*, 6 June 1947.

[5] See *Au service de l'Afrique noire: Le Rassemblement Démocratique Africain dans la lutte anti-impérialiste*, brochure published in 1949.

[6] *Afrique blanche, Afrique noire*, Flammarion, Paris, 1949.

[7] A leader of the Moroccan independence movement in the struggle against Spaniards and French in the 1920s. He was deported to Reunion and escaped to Cairo, where he organised the Committee for the Liberation of the Maghreb.

[8] See Abdelkrim Khattabi *et son rôle dans le Comité de libération du Maghreb*, quoted in Abdallah Saaf, *Histoire d'Anh Ma*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996.

[9] See Abdallah Saaf, *op cit.*

[10] Nelcya Delanoë, *Poussières d'Empire*, Paris, PUF, 2002.

[11] See Jacques Dalloz, *Georges Bidault, biographie politique*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1993.

[12] The colonial party was an informal organisation of voluntary bodies.

[13] *Aux frontières de l'Union française: Indochine, Tunisie*, Paris, Julliard, Paris, 1953.

[14] *Journal officiel*, Paris, 11 May 1954.

[15] See Mohamed Harbi, *L'écho sur les rives de la Méditerranée, Carnets du Vietnam*, February

2004.

[16] First meeting of the non-aligned countries in April 1955: 29 states were represented, including Indonesia, China, India and Algeria, which had just begun its war of liberation.

[17] A famous French victory over Prussian troops in 1792 that marked a turning point in the revolutionary war.

[18] erhat Abbas, *La Nuit coloniale*, Julliard, Paris, 1962.

[19] “Le mythe et la réalité”, *Le Figaro*, Paris, 7 May 1974.