

Christopher Goscha. *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022, 437 notes and index. \$35.00

To most Americans, the Vietnam War and U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia is a subject rather forgotten than remembered. Although the U.S. endured combat for over a decade, the average American, including those that served, knows little about the period between the end of World War II and the deployment of the U.S. military in the early 1960s. Dr. Christopher Goscha is a specialist in the history of the Cold War at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM). Goscha has produced a thorough and well-documented history of Vietnam from the closing days of World War II to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. As in all matters of Southeast Asia, it is never a simple spatial look at the area. Especially in the early days after World War II, it was a multiple-faceted realignment of world politics with Indochina in the center.

As you begin to read *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, I would suggest leaving all previous ideas about the war behind and using critical thinking skills to sort through the world events that occurred after World War II. Additionally, reading the book with an atlas will assist in understanding the movement of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh through North Vietnam and Southern China.

Goscha goes into detail about Ho Chi Minh's early life in France, the Soviet Union, and with Mao in China during the early days of the Communist Revolution. This helps the reader understand his actions after World War II ended. Additionally, Ho Chi Minh's contact with Mao led to China deploying a military advisory group which was tasked not to take over the fighting as the Military Advisory Group Vietnam would later do when the U.S. replaced French forces. Mao suggested that they should not try to teach the Vietnamese how to fight but to assist the Vietnamese in creating a professional army and allowed the Vietnamese to attend training

schools and academies in Southern China. Goscha does touch on Ho's contacts with the U.S. through the Army's Office of Strategic Services, which were negated by the Truman administration's decision to support France in the return of its colonies.

An important aspect of Goscha's writing is describing the development of methodologies, tactics, and procedures to combat the modern French forces. Those same tactics would be seen ten years later when the U.S. deployed thousands of the most modern, highly trained and equipped armed forces to the Republic of Vietnam, the formal name of what was referred to as South Vietnam after the Geneva Convention in 1954. For example, the French Navy quickly established superiority on the seas to deny the smuggling and importation of supplies from the Soviet Union, China, and other ports throughout the region. A network of clandestine agents in regional ports worked to ensure shipping of war materials continued while the North Vietnamese mobilized to construct what in the west would be known as the "Ho Chi Minh trail" to bring material overland along the western spine of Vietnam through its bordering counties of Laos and Cambodia. This same network would play prominently in the 1960s during the American War.

Although the North Vietnamese under Ho Chi Minh could raise food to feed both the guerrilla fighters and regular army soldiers, they could not quickly create an industrial base to manufacture the modern weapons to fight both the French and later Americans. In addition to buying World War II weapons left after the Japanese surrender, Ho resorted to the large diaspora of Vietnamese living primarily in France to return to Vietnam. One of those was Tran Dai Nghia, who had worked in the French defense industry and returned in 1946. In 1948, he became head of the Bureau of Armaments Production. He was able to use American designs to create hand grenades and bazookas. Tran was promoted to general in 1948.

It would be the culmination of Ho's foresight, determination, and spirit of the Vietnamese people to accomplish what the French and the U.S. thought was impossible, to move an overwhelming force into position to defeat the French at the northwest stronghold of Dien Bien Phu. Sadly, that would end one chapter. The French War set the stage for the next chapter: the American War.

The Road to Dien Bien Phu will become a classic volume in the history of the Indochinese Wars, standing alongside Bernard B. Fall's *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, Max Hastings's *Vietnam: An Epic History of a Divisive War 1945-1975*, H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*, and Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. The book should be required reading for anyone studying the post-World War II era of Southeast Asian politics. Goscha has provided keen insight into the war through his travels and interviews in the region. *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* belongs on the bookshelf of any historian studying this area of history or politics.

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