CONTENTS

A link to the online bibliography with Vietnamese diacritics can be found at www.cgoscha.uqam.ca

INTRODUCTION

States of War

On 11 September 1946, as negotiations between the French and the Vietnamese broke down in Paris over the question of Vietnam's independence, the president of the one-year-old Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, met with a recently demobilized American army reporter named David Schoenbrun. When Ho informed his sympathetic listener that the Vietnamese had no choice but to fight to ensure their national independence from the French, Schoenbrun was incredulous. How, he asked, could the Vietnamese expect to win against a professional Western army equipped with modern arms? Ho responded that he too had a powerful weapon at his disposal—"Vietnamese nationalism."[1] Still skeptical, Schoenbrun gently reminded the Vietnamese president that he himself had recently conceded that Vietnam's forces were ill prepared to go to war against the French. Ho agreed, but the war in Indochina would be different. "It would be," he predicted:

> a war between an elephant and a tiger. If the tiger ever stands still the elephant will crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger does not stand still. He lurks in the jungle by day and emerges by night. He will leap upon the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from his hide, and then he will leap back into the dark jungle. And slowly the elephant will bleed to death. That will be the war of Indochina.[2]

Eight years later, Ho's prophecy seemed to come true when the Vietnamese handed the French a humiliating defeat on a remote valley floor in northwestern Vietnam called Dien Bien Phu. On 7 May 1954, after

two months of intense fighting, the tiger bested the elephant in a clash that led the French to abandon Vietnam. Ho, it seemed, had been right after all: small independence movements running on high levels of nationalism could triumph over Western military giants in the twentieth century.

Vietnam: The Power of the Nation-in-Arms

Two of the best-known French veterans of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu agreed—or at least would come to do so. In his account of this epic showdown published in 1963, as the French relinquished their hold over Algeria after another long colonial conflict, the legendary commander Pierre Langlais insisted that Ho's army won because it had fought for an ideal, its own national liberation. "The Indochina War," he wrote, "was a war of independence against the French. And if the instrument of combat was forged by Marxist methods, it is no less true that the Viet Minh soldier who mounted the assault against our positions at Dien Bien Phu—and with what courage—did so in a struggle to run us out of his country, not ours."[3] Langlais' brother-in-arms in this epic battle, Marcel Bigeard, also marveled at what the Vietnamese army led by Vo Nguyen Giap had achieved in a decade of war: "Although these men of extraordinary morale had started out with nothing but a hodgepodge of weapons in 1945, they had an ideal, a goal: to drive out the French. In nine years, Giap had indisputably defeated our Expeditionary Corps."[4] For these highly decorated warriors of France's lost colonial wars writing as the historical reality of decolonization finally sank in, it no longer mattered that Ho's state was of communist design. The power of nationalism explained everything.

News of what this Vietnamese David had done in the remote highlands of Southeast Asia quickly reverberated across the French empire as it began to crack. In North Africa, Ferhat Abbas, the first president of the newly independent Algerian Republic, cast the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu in epoch-changing terms as significant as those created by the French revolutionary army's victory over the Prussians during the historic battle of Valmy in 1792:

> Dien Bien Phu was more than just a military victory. This battle is a symbol. It's the "Valmy" of the colonized peoples. It's the affirmation of the Asian and African vis-à-vis the European. It is the confirmation of the universality of human rights. At Dien Bien Phu, the French lost the only source of "legitimation" on which their presence turned, that is the right of the strongest [to rule the weakest].[5]

Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquais doctor, intellectual, and member of the Algerian Front de libération nationale (FLN), agreed. Working inside the Algerian nationalist movement, like Abbas, he had followed the war in Indochina closely. But it was the Vietnamese military victory at Dien Bien Phu that caught his eye. How, he wondered, could the FLN duplicate this remarkable feat on the Algerian battlefield? As he put it in his famous denunciation of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961: "The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien-Bien-Phu is no longer, strictly speaking, a Vietnamese victory. From July 1954, the question for colonized peoples was now: 'What must we do in order to realize a Dien Bien Phu? How do we go about doing it?'"[6]

Fanon never had the time to craft a response. (He passed away shortly before the FLN attained Algeria's independence through a negotiated settlement in 1962.) David Schoenbrun, however, was convinced now more than ever of the answer: nationalism, Ho's "secret weapon."[7] And as the Americans expanded their involvement in Vietnam in the hope that the internationally brokered division of the country at the Geneva Conference of 1954 would allow them to protect its southern half from the communist north Ho now ruled, Schoenbrun started telling the parable of the tiger and the elephant to American audiences. He did so in a carefully scripted appearance before the camera in a 1962 documentary hosted by CBS's Walter Cronkite on the end of the French empire in Indochina.[8] He made his case again in a book he published in 1968 as massive US firepower and half a million American troops tried to stop Ho's forces from reuniting the country the Vietnamese president had first declared independent in September 1945. Scholars and journalists have turned to Ho's fable of the tiger and the elephant to remind readers that the Americans, despite their superior army and modern weapons,

were doomed to failure in Vietnam—just like the French before them—because they were fighting against a nation-in-arms, Ho's.[9]

Vietnam: The Myth of the Nation-in-Arms

But does nationalism alone explain everything? We now know that the French revolutionary army also won at Valmy because its commanding officers unleashed state-of-the-art artillery on the adversary and relied on professional soldiers from the *ancien régime* to lead.[10] Moreover, the armies of the first French republic and then those of Napoleon Bonaparte owed their success more to the introduction of compulsory military service initiated in 1793 in the form of the *levée en masse* or "mass mobilization" than to patriotic volunteers. The American War of Independence is also instructive. While patriotism certainly motivated many Americans to take up arms against the British, French military assistance and European advisers also helped transform militia-styled "Minutemen" into an increasingly effective fighting force, the ancestor of the United States Army today. In short, the armies emerging from these Atlantic revolutionary wars in the late eighteenth century were very different from what they had been going in.

Unfortunately, as seductive as it is, Ho Chi Minh's parable of the tiger and the elephant leaves little room for understanding the complexity of the Vietnamese revolutionary war and how it and the state running it adapted and changed over the course of almost a decade of war, the subject of this book. Consider the following: on 13 March 1954, the day the battle of Dien Bien Phu commenced in northwest Vietnam, Vietnamese soldiers did exactly the opposite of what Ho had predicted to Schoenbrun in 1946: they descended from the surrounding hills to attack the French troops waiting to crush them in the open. After a bloody fifty-six-day siege, soldiers of the People's Army of Vietnam, better known to the Americans during the Vietnam War as the PAVN, overran the French Union forces in the entrenched camp on the valley floor and hoisted their red flag in victory against the clear blue sky that day. This had clearly not been a hit-and-run guerrilla skirmish. The army's commanding general, Vo Nguyen Giap, operated a professional army of seven armed divisions, equipped with intelligence, communications,

medical, and logistical services. The general's cannons had 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 antiaircraft guns lit up the skies with flak not seen since the Second World War. Little wonder Langlais and Bigeard were in awe as PAVN troops marched them off to a prisoner-of-war camp in mid-1954: the Vietnamese tiger had fought like an elephant and won. Ho Chi Minh's parable was wrong.

Frantz Fanon must have known as his *Wretched of the Earth* went to press that the Algerian army, despite running on equally high levels of nationalism, was nowhere near being able to engineer such a military revolution against the same French army. For Fanon, the FLN remained a "tiger," its struggle a guerrilla one. 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" or a "Dien Bien Phu." The Indonesian republicans fighting the Dutch in the late 1940s and the Kenyans at war with the British a decade later did not. Nor have recent, religiously fired insurgencies led by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) succeeded in designing forces capable of executing a modern, pitched battle on the scale of Dien Bien Phu. Only Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam did.

Why? If nationalism alone cannot explain Dien Bien Phu and this Vietnamese tiger fighting like a French elephant in the open, then what else allowed this Vietnamese guerrilla army to transform itself into this redoubtable fighting machine? What was it about the nature of the Vietnamese war state that had allowed it to engineer such a historic victory on the battlefield? How had Ho and his followers gone about creating an army of seven divisions in the middle of a full-blown war of decolonization? How did they mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to join in such a Herculean task? And if the French had helped American revolutionaries to prevail against superior British forces in the 1770s, then to what extent did Chinese communist military support and advice help Ho to build a new type of state capable of wielding military force in ways unmatched by anticolonialist polities elsewhere?

No one denies that tens of thousands of Vietnamese patriots closed ranks behind Ho's republic when full-scale war broke out in Hanoi in

1946 (they did),[11] just as so many French men and women rushed to the defense of their embattled republic at Valmy in 1792. Nationalism was an important factor, as many pages in this book will show. The problem is that the notion of the "nation-in-arms" or "people's war" poses problems when it is advanced as the sole explanation for "Valmy" or "Dien Bien Phu." Serious students of the French Revolution know this. They recognize, for example, that the famous *levée en masse* of 1793 may have been couched in terms glorifying the nation, but, in reality, it imposed military conscription on young men and required civilians of both sexes to participate in the war effort whether they wanted to or not. These scholars know, too, that there was resistance to the *levée en masse*, and not just from counterrevolutionary, pro-monarchist elites opposed to republican government, but also from exhausted peasants who wanted nothing to do with war or revolution. Desertion occurred during the French revolutionary war and the American one. It occurred during the Vietnamese ones too.[12]

Specialists of the Vietnamese revolutionary wars have overlooked the fact that Ho's government also introduced obligatory military service (*nghia vu quan su*) and decreed mass mobilization of the population (*tong dong vien*) in 1949–50 in order to generate the military and civilian manpower needed to win at Dien Bien Phu.[13] By imposing the draft and mobilization laws in the middle of the Indochina War, Vietnamese revolutionaries acknowledged what their French predecessors had discovered in the early 1790s: namely, that nationalism alone could never move enough people to ensure victory on the battlefields against powerful foreign enemies. Whether wrapped in a French, American, or Vietnamese flag, the "nation-in-arms" or "people's war" is a state-sponsored myth designed in part to legitimate the coercive side of mass mobilization.

The Two States of the Vietnamese Revolutionary War

In this book, I would like to move beyond the myth of the Vietnamese nation-in-arms without necessarily denying the importance of nationalism. It was one factor, an important one, but it did not alone determine the outcome of the war in 1954. In the following chapters, I would like

to look more closely at the nature of this Vietnamese revolutionary state forged from almost a decade of war against the French between September 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared modern Vietnam's birth, and May 1954, when Vo Nguyen Giap's army defeated the French in pitched battle at Dien Bien Phu. Two interconnected arguments run through this book about the dual nature of the state of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh. The first concerns the development and operation of a decentralized guerrilla polity during the Indochina War. The second analyzes how a communist-driven, single-party state arose from this very entity thanks to Chinese communist backing during the second half of the conflict. Let me explain what I mean a little further.

The Archipelago State

The first argument seeks to explain how Ho and his followers built an operational yet territorially incomplete guerrilla state in the countryside that was strong enough to weather French attacks in order to still be "there" in 1950 to receive communist bloc aid and turn itself into something else. Here I explore the contingent, fragmented, and decentralized nature of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the Indochina War. Despite the support the two main belligerents would eventually receive from their respective American and Chinese allies, neither the French nor the Vietnamese were ever able to impose undisputed control over people, territory, and resources. The French may have controlled Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon, parts of the Mekong and Red River deltas, as well as a handful of provincial towns and roads connecting them. But they never had enough troops, administrators, or money to be everywhere all the time. As a result, they ended up ceding large swaths of territory to their adversaries in central Vietnam, parts of the northern highlands, and, to a lesser extent, in secluded areas of the Mekong Delta in the south.

In 1949, to complicate matters further, a third political entity entered the picture when the French presided over the creation of the "Associated State of Vietnam" under the leadership of the ex-emperor Bao Dai.

"Association" was the legally binding term that kept this new Vietnamese state (along with its Laotian and Cambodian counterparts) within the confines of an Indochinese colonial federation, itself part of a larger French Union directed from Paris. Inside Indochina, this second Vietnam possessed its own administration, army, and security forces. Its leaders claimed sovereignty over all of Vietnam, including the areas controlled by Ho's government. The French and their Vietnamese partners joined hands to administer people, territory, and resources as well as to fight a common adversary. They shared one common colonial currency with the Laotians and the Cambodians: the Indochinese piaster.[14]

These "two-and-a-half" competing sovereignties—the French Indochinese federation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and this less-than-fully independent Associated State of Vietnam—gave rise to archipelago-like territorial formations fanning out from core centers like islands in a stream. Despite denying the existence of the other and declaring sovereignty over all of Vietnam for themselves, leaders on each side knew that their claims were exaggerated. On the ground, territorial control was fragmented. The war dragged on precisely because no one side exercised the military force or possessed the political infrastructure needed to control people, territory, and resources completely. As a result, these island-like domains were in a constant state of competitive flux. Each bumped up against the other, expanding and contracting like sponges being squeezed in and out as their soldiers, security officials, and civil servants moved into an area while their adversaries pulled back—and vice versa. For the French and their Vietnamese allies, political control was anchored in the urban centers and stretched out from there. Ho Chi Minh presided over a rural constellation in which smaller territories revolved around larger clusters in northern, central, and, to a lesser extent, southern Vietnam.

In this contingent, fragmented, and makeshift world where political power was diffuse and military control incomplete, territorial sovereignties could overlap. People and resources could be shared. One state's administrators could exercise sovereignty during the day and then turn

it over to the other side's people during the night. Sovereignties touched up against each other or even intertwined along roads, jungle trails, coastlines, rivers, and canals. In certain, revealing instances, civil servants, security officials, and customs agents from opposing sides could coexist in the same villages, relying on family ties, prewar friendships, and, beneath it all, the diluted nature of power in order to operate. As the interim head of the Communist Party, Truong Chinh, had described it as early as 1947: "This war has the characteristic of two combs whose teeth are interlocked."[15]

This Vietnamese archipelago state was, by its nature, weak. The main strategic goal for its architects was always to expand it, to spread its control over as much territory and as many people as it could, whenever and wherever possible. The idea was to push the available streams of sovereignty, no matter how small, into every possible nook and cranny left unguarded by the enemy, even poking feelers into the colonial cities. The success of the archipelago state, its ability to expand and hold itself together despite its incomplete territorial constitution, owed much to nationalism to be sure, but it turned on other things too—the use of wireless radios and hand couriers; the collection, analysis, and circulation of information; the expansion of police control and intelligence services; the movement of civil servants and their paperwork; and the administration of a war economy and clandestine commercial networks running into the colonial cities and surrounding Asian markets. Together, these things made up the nervous system that connected, supplied, and accorded operational coherence to what was, again, a highly fragmented and rudimentary state of war. As seemingly unimportant as these "connective tissues" might appear at first glance, they were, in fact, vital to the war state's survival, the object of several of the thematic chapters in this book. The French and their Vietnamese allies understood what their enemy was doing with these things. In fact, they were trying to do similar "things" in order to operate their own states and hold them together in this highly volatile and ever-shifting wartime constellation that was, when taken together, "Vietnam" between 1945 and 1954.[16]

Vietnamese War Communism and the Rise of a Single-Party State

That was one kind of state the Vietnamese revolutionary war carried within it. The second type arose from its upper half because of the favorable conditions created by the Chinese communist victory in 1949 and Mao Zedong's decision to back his Vietnamese allies in their bid to take the war to the French and remake their state in communist ways at the same time. With Mao's support, from 1950 Ho Chi Minh and his communist core used war—in fact, they ramped it up—to create a postcolonial state very different from the ones Sukarno and Ferhat Abbas were building in Indonesia and Algeria in their national liberation struggles. Indeed, the state Ho started building was very different from the republican-minded, national union government he had himself declared independent in 1945. Ho and his lieutenants now saw in communist bloc support and in the simultaneous intensification of the war the chance to transform their guerrilla archipelago of a coalition kind into a single-party state under the Communist Party's sole control.

Backed by the Chinese, Ho began transforming the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in communist ways. In 1951, for example, he presided over the creation of the Vietnamese Workers Party, replacing the one he had first established in Hong Kong two decades earlier. The Vietnamese communists aligned this new party ideologically with its bigger brothers in Moscow and Beijing. They streamlined and purged it of unwanted elements in order to expand the party center's control over the state. The communists did something similar by creating the People's Army of Vietnam in 1950. The party would now run the armed forces and the state. To do both, Ho and his entourage implemented a series of Sino-Soviet methods of revolutionary statecraft: rectification campaigns, struggle sessions, emulation movements, new hero worship, intensive cadre training, a personality cult for Ho, central planning, state banking, food requisitioning, and land reform. Combined, this war-driven process allowed Ho to forge a new type of revolutionary state in the crucible of war—a communist one. It did not replace the preexisting

archipelago entity. It arose from within it. It was an embedded process of statecraft.

The advent of this second type of revolutionary state is the product of what I call "Vietnamese War Communism." At a broad level, I use this term as a heuristic device to explain the "rise" of the single-party Vietnamese communist state in wartime between 1945 and 1954. Used in this way, the phrase allows me to describe how the Communist Party, at the helm of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, worked to expand its fragile hold over a sprawling archipelago state that was not all that communist at the start. At a more specific level, though, "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. Again, this included the application of specific tools of communist design (rectification, emulation campaigns, the cult of personality, food requisitioning, and land reform). Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese did not wait for the hostilities to end before using these instruments to push through the creation of a single-party state. They used war to do it. This process of War Communism generated during the second half of the conflict what was, in effect, a slow-burning coup d'état of historic proportions, largely imperceptible to outsiders at the time, but from which the Vietnam we know today first emerged, a communist Vietnam with nationalist characteristics.

This second type of "War Communist state" was not a Vietnamese or Chinese invention. It was part of a bigger process. War Communism had first emerged as part of the struggle that brought to life the first communist-run nation-state in world history, the Soviet Union (1922). The Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin had first conceived and implemented this war-driven form of communist statecraft in Russia after the First World War. No sooner had communist leaders withdrawn Russia from the Great War than they found themselves mired in a civil conflict against anticommunist forces, the "Whites," and engaged in a war of national salvation against Allied intervention forces opposed to the

October Revolution of 1917. At the helm of the embattled revolutionary state, Lenin applied a policy of "War Communism" (Военный коммунизм) between 1918 and 1921 that saw the Bolsheviks extend their control over the army, the state, and the economy as part of an effort to mobilize everyone and everything for war. At a purely pragmatic level, War Communism authorized the revolutionary state to mobilize the majority rural population to procure much-needed food for the cities and to recruit essential manpower for the army. The young regime's survival depended on it.

Of course, imperiled states do this everywhere in wartime. But there was also an ideological component to it in the Bolshevik case—followed by the Chinese and the Vietnamese. Many in the leadership, including Lenin, saw in "war" and the mobilization it required the chance, indeed the favorable conditions, for implementing revolutionary policies in the countryside essential to transforming social and political relations in communist ways (increased central management by the party, the nationalization of industry and trade, and the requisition of labor and food in the countryside, among other things). War and communist statecraft could advance hand in hand, one feeding off the other. And like their successors in East Asia, the Bolsheviks did not wait for the hostilities to end before embarking upon the communist transformation of state and society. They used war to do it.[17]

Vietnamese War Communism, however, was never designed to wage war on the peasantry in the way that the Bolsheviks ended up doing during the civil war and later under Stalin. It would have been suicidal in a country where, as in China, around 90 percent of the Vietnamese population lived in the countryside and the French controlled most of Indochina's cities and working class. Vietnamese communists looked more to the peasant-mobilizing methods developed by Mao during two decades of war, first against Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China in civil war (1928–36), next against the Japanese (1937–45), then in a new round of civil war against Chiang Kai-shek that ended in communist victory (1946–9). Using Maoist methods, Vietnamese communists based in the countryside sought to politicize their majority peasant population in order to control and mobilize this rural force for fighting war, procuring

food and labor, and building a communist state. Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese made land reform a central part of their War Communism. They could incentivize peasants to fight by giving them land, all the while breaking the "feudal" bonds of the landowning class, thereby allowing the party to take control of social and political relations in the countryside. It was no accident that Ho Chi Minh finally unleashed full-scale land reform in late 1953 as he and his party went for broke against the colonialists in the set-piece battle at Dien Bien Phu just as Mao was doing as he fought the Americans to a draw in Korea in 1953.[18]

In short, in revolutionary Russia, China, and Vietnam, war served as an accelerator in the crafting of statecraft of a communist kind. I am not saying that Vietnamese "War Communism" is a replica of the Bolshevik model or the Chinese one. What I am saying is that from 1950 the Vietnamese, like the Chinese and the Soviets, practiced a unique type of warfare, a communist one, with the dual goals of generating a modern military force and a single-party state to direct it at the same time. This type of Vietnamese communist warfare was part of a wider Eurasian revolutionary arc that adapted and changed as its practitioners in China and Indochina tailored it to their local needs. Revolutionary Algeria and Indonesia never went down this road because neither had a Communist Party at the helm of their archipelago states. All wars of decolonization are not alike, and it is time we stop treating them as if they were.[19]

Some readers will jump ship on me here. This may not be the story they were expecting to hear about Vietnam, especially Ho's. Admittedly, the narrative I am laying out here is more complicated than the myth of the "nation-in-arms," "people's war," and the parable of the "tiger and the elephant." I ask readers to stay on board, for I would like to think that the story I am about to tell, as complicated as it may be, can serve as an alternative narrative, capable of explaining in more historical and less polemical ways the making of modern Vietnam and the nature of the wars fought over it during the second half of the twentieth century. Although this book focuses on the "first war," the one against the French between 1945 and 1954, I would also like to think that those seeking a better understanding of the "making of America's Vietnam" might find something of interest in the pages that follow. I say this too,

because Ho Chi Minh and his communist disciples would resurrect and turn their states of war, both of them, on the Americans and their Vietnamese allies with a vengeance after the French left. But more than anything else, I hope that this book might respond to Fanon's question above—"What must we do in order to realize a Dien Bien Phu?" The answer is perhaps not what we have long thought. To understand why, let us follow the Vietnamese "tiger" from 1945 as it moved to turn itself into something very different a decade later—and not necessarily an "elephant."

INDEX