

***Vietnam 1946: How the War Began.* By Stein Tønnesson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Hardcover: 361pp.**

How did the First Indochina War begin? The official French interpretations place the responsibility squarely on Ho Chi Minh's government. In the 1950s, the French historian Philippe Devillers first contradicted this official view by contending that the French, particularly local commanders in Indochina, should also be blamed. Drawing upon exhaustive research in archives in France, Britain and the United States, Tønnesson confirms the conclusions of Devillers.

Tønnesson argues convincingly that the outbreak of the war on 19 December 1946 could have been avoided as both French and Vietnamese leaders were eager to save human lives and prevent the economic and political costs of a protracted war. Among these high-level officials were President Ho Chi Minh and French Prime Minister Leon Blum. But they were pre-empted and outmaneuvered by a trio of French officials in Saigon: High Commissioner Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, Supreme Commander General Jean-Etienne Valluy, and Federal Commissioner of Political Affairs Leon Pignon, all of whom were determined to break relations with the communist-controlled Vietnamese government. Accordingly they conspired to provoke the Vietnamese to take action. Ho Chi Minh's forces fell into the French trap by launching their assault on 19 December.

Tønnesson acknowledges that because the relevant Vietnamese archives are not open, the precise role of Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap on that fateful day remains to be determined. In spite of the limitations imposed by the Vietnamese files not being available, however, Tønnesson has done his best to piece together a credible picture of Vietnamese calculations and policy-making by skillfully utilizing French intelligence summaries, Vietnamese accounts and memoirs (primarily those of Vo Nguyen Giap) and some interviews with Vietnamese veterans and scholars. Citing French intelligence reports, Tønnesson points out that Ho Chi Minh, Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Hoang Minh Giam and Undersecretary of the Interior Hoang Huu Nam, appeared more patient and interested in exploring the change to the left in French politics than Vo Nguyen Giap. Tønnesson believes that Giap may have represented the rank and file who were eager to retaliate for the Haiphong killings in March 1946 and forestall a similar French massacre in Hanoi.

Tønnesson's discussion of Chiang Kai-shek's policy in Vietnam is judicious. He demonstrates how the Chinese leader took advantage of his government's role in disarming the Japanese in northern Vietnam to extract concessions from France. The agreement concluded between China and France on 28 February 1946 revealed Chiang's deft diplomatic hand. By allowing the French to return to Indochina, Chiang secured agreement from Paris to terminate all French extra-territorial rights in China. Tønnesson makes clear that the 1946 "Haiphong Incident" did not stem from any miscommunication or initiatives from local Chinese officials in contradiction to instructions from Chiang's government in Chongqing. Although the Chongqing government and the Chinese generals in Vietnam did not always see eye to eye, they shared the view that a Franco-Vietnamese war must be averted before the complete withdrawal of Chinese troops from Indochina. Chiang Kai-shek understood that if conflict broke out between the French and the Vietnamese, China would be blamed and embroiled because he had recognized French sovereignty in Indochina when he authorized his representatives to sign the 28 February agreement. Getting bogged down in Vietnam was the last thing Chiang wanted at the time because he was anxious to move his troops from northern Vietnam to Manchuria to fight the Chinese Communists.

Although Tønnesson's account is carefully documented and clearly written in general, a few questionable and inaccurate descriptions mar the text. First, he claims that "[i]n 1950, some of the same Chinese officers who had served Chiang Kai-shek in Vietnam during 1945–46 would be sent by Mao Zedong to the 'liberated areas' of northern Indochina as advisors, instructors, and road builders in the service of the Viet Minh" (p. 64). Which officers is Tønnesson referring to? There is no evidence from the available Chinese sources to indicate that the advisors sent by Mao to Ho Chi Minh's forces in 1950 ever worked for Chiang Kai-shek. Second, Tønnesson describes Wang Lihuan as a "Manchu General" (p. 54). This reviewer is puzzled by this description: does Tønnesson mean that Wang was Manchu by his ethnic background? Third, Yunnan province is in southwestern, not southeastern, China (p. 54).

Despite these quibbles, Tønnesson's study remains an authoritative account of the immediate cause of the First Indochina War.

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