H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Waite. *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History.* New York: Routledge, 2012. 310 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-88684-0.

Reviewed by Tal Tovy (Bar Ilan University)
Published on H-War (December, 2012)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Tovy on Waite

During the thirty years since the end of the Second World War, three wars were waged in Vietnam. The first was between the forces of the Viet Minh against France, which ended with the agreement signed in Geneva in July 1954. The second war was between the United States together with South Vietnam against North Vietnam and the communist guerrillas in the south, the Viet Cong. This war also ended with a peace agreement signed in Paris in January 1973. Almost immediately after the end of this second war, a third war began between North and South Vietnam which ended in the complete reunification of Vietnam after the North Vietnamese forces defeated the South Vietnamese forces. This means that the third war ended in a decisive military victory that was directly translated into a political achievement. We may then claim that from a historical perspective, the two agreements that were signed did not bring stability to Southeast Asia.

The first war in Vietnam began as an attempt by the French to regain control over its empire as well as to restore its image which had suffered humiliation through the rapid German conquest and by the collaboration of many Frenchmen with the Nazi regime. The events in Vietnam occurred in two parallel processes. The first was the stirring of strong national emotions of the Vietnamese under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. This process reached its peak with the declaration by Ho Chi Minh of the independence of Vietnam (September 1945). In spite of the attempts to find a solution for Vietnamese nationalism, France was not prepared for the total relinquishing of its imperialist control over Indochina, and open warfare began at the end of 1946. The second process was the deterioration in the relations between the two superpowers and the outbreak of the Cold War. This means that from its very inception the war in Vietnam became a global event that involved both superpowers in one way or another and several other countries even outside the geographical sphere of Southeast Asia.

The emphasis in the book by James Waite is on the last year and a half of the French-Vietnamese war, which is done through a careful analysis of documents and other primary sources, mainly Western ones. This provides a wider perspective of the political processes that led to the end of the war, with a certain stress laid on French policy. Although Waite does not make use of primary sources from the archives of the various communist countries, especially of the central players, he makes up for this by a critical analysis of the extensive secondary material on the subject.

The main claim made by Waite is that the first war in Vietnam should be regarded as an important event in the context of the Cold War, one that had a decisive influence on world politics. In order to prove his contention, Waite divides his book into three parts, with each part exemplifying the fact that the war was an important international event which defined to a great extent, as did the Korean War, the political realities that had been created after the Second World War. The first part merges the military history with the political history of the war, and deals with the battle in Dien Bien Phu and the political maneuverings ahead of the international conference that would conclude the war. The second part, mainly diplomatic, examines the negotiations that were conducted in Geneva against the background of the Viet Minh victory in Dien Bien Phu. The third part, which Waite calls "The Global Legacy," constitutes a kind of introduction to an understanding of the intensified and direct intervention by the United States in Southeast Asia. This was because, as he claims, "the Geneva Accords ... failed to establish an enduring peace in Indochina" (p. 1).

As said above, the main historical perspective in this study is to examine French policy, which at first regarded the confrontation in Vietnam as just another of the colonial wars France had encountered during the nineteenth

century and the beginning of the twentieth century. During these years, the French took the aggressive initiative, and French forces conquered territories under Viet Minh control, destroying many food and ammunition storage centers. But in the long run, they did not achieve their operational goals. The leaders of the Viet Minh were not caught, and the main communist forces were not defeated. When the French retreated to their bases, the Viet Minh regained control over the vacated areas. Even though it was evident that the Viet Minh were still incapable of direct confrontation with the firepower and mobility of the French army, it was also clear that the lack of manpower would prevent France from maintaining its rule over the territories under Viet Minh control.

The strategic realities in Vietnam changed dramatically at the end of 1949 and in the first half of 1950, by which time the war in Vietnam had clearly become an international issue. The victory of the communists in China (October 1949) allowed China to supply military and technical assistance to the Viet Minh, besides which Viet Minh units crossed the border and South China became a refuge area in which they could train and renew their strength. This military assistance was also accompanied by diplomatic support. On January 18, 1950, China recognized the People's Republic of Vietnam. This recognition also led the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe to recognize Vietnam (January 30).

The conversion of China into a communist state and the support of the communist powers for the People's Republic of Vietnam changed the policy of the United States towards the Indochina conflict in a dramatic manner. This change of policy was a continuation of the deteriorating relations among the powers over issues relating to Europe, especially after the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia and the siege of Berlin. About three weeks after China recognized the People's Republic of Vietnam, the United States recognized the artificial political entity imposed by France, the State of Vietnam. This recognition was at first accompanied by massive U.S. economic and military assistance to France. In June 1950 the Korean War broke out, which was perceived by the American government as instigated by the desire of the Soviet Union, with the help of its allegiant supporters in Southeast Asia, to extend the sphere of its control and influence. The war in Indochina was now perceived as a struggle closely connected with the Cold War, with France standing with the United States to confront communist aggression.

The next stage, which is perhaps an even greater indication of the international character of the war, was the military and diplomatic measures that occurred during the final stages of the war, especially in the defeat of the French in Dien Bien Phu. This stage began with the battle around the village of Dien Bien Phu. On November 20, 1953, about two thousand French paratroopers landed near the village, quickly destroyed the stationed forces of the Viet Minh, and began to build a defense system. The Viet Minh forces under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap, had no choice but to respond to the challenge. The forces were exhausted, there was a lack of food, and the morale of the recruits was low. There is no doubt that extreme political pressure was exerted on Giap to eliminate the French stronghold that had been erected deep within the area under Viet Minh control. This was because an international conference was supposed to open in April 1954 in Geneva, in which it was planned to raise the many political issues relating to East Asia, including Korea and the confrontations in Indochina. Ho Chi Minh wanted to achieve an important military victory that could be translated into diplomatic advantage during the discussions in Geneva.

The battle over Dien Bien Phu, which began officially on March 13, 1954, is also important for the American intervention in Vietnam. During the course of the fighting, many discussions were held between the senior French command and the heads of the American army over the possibility that the United States would intervene openly in the battle in order to save the French forces in Dien Bien Phu and restore the attack initiative to France (Operation Vulture). President Eisenhower was committed to the policy of containment that had been formulated by his predecessor, President Harry Truman. The basic essentials of the Truman Doctrine determined that the United States should use all the means at its disposal, including military force, to block communist aspirations from spreading beyond the areas it had gained at the end of the Second World War. The practical aspect of this policy was well exemplified in the Korean War. In an interview given by Eisenhower in April 1954, the president said that if Vietnam fell into communist hands, then the rest of the countries in Southeast Asia and even beyond them would fall like dominoes. Although at first he had supported direct American intervention, Eisenhower also wanted the participation of Britain. But the British refused and asserted that a diplomatic solution should be sought in the framework of the conference that was to be held in Geneva. At the end of intensive discussions, the United States decided to increase its military assistance to France but not to intervene directly. Thus Eisenhower became the first president who had to decide about the possible direct intervention by the United States in Viet-

nam. But his decision against sending American forces only postponed this intervention by a decade.

The final stage of the battle began on April 29 around the airport. On May 4 the senior command realized that the hope for victory was lost. The last attack was launched on May 6, and a day later the remaining French soldiers surrendered. It is a mistake to suppose that the French army was beaten by a handful of guerrilla fighters. In the two years before the battle, Giap had built up a regular army equipped with heavy armaments and a supporting logistical system. The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was therefore one that was held between two regular armies. Moreover, the defeat did not change the strategic situation in Indochina. The French continued to control the urban centers and the deltas, and their hold over South Vietnam and Cambodia did not collapse. However, the defeat marked a political death blow to French colonialism in Asia and assisted in ending the war since it provided a motive for those who opposed French colonial policy in general and war in particular to reach an honorable political arrangement. The means to do this was the international conference that had opened in Geneva on April 26, about two weeks before the surrender of the French troops stationed in Dien Bien Phu.

At the Geneva Conference, other issues relating to East Asia were discussed, including the issue of Korea. The countries that participated in this conference were the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Britain, and France. Representatives also arrived from the two Vietnamese states. The American delegate to the conference, secretary of state John Dulles, decided to pull the United States out of the talks for two reasons. The first was that he had already understood at the beginning of the discussions that no agreement would be formulated to which the United States could agree. The second was the reluctance to side at the same table with the Chinese delegate since at that time the United States had not yet recognized communist China as a legitimate political entity representative of the Chinese people. Thus only the lowest rank of American representatives remained as mere observers to report the developments of the discussion to the State Department. We may then regard the conference at Geneva, like the talks that ended the war in Korea, as a central event that shaped the initial years of the Cold War.

The North Vietnamese representatives wanted the establishment of a unified Vietnam in order to give political expression to their military victories. But the Chinese and Soviet representatives actually supported the French proposal for a temporary division of Vietnam along the 17^{th}parallel. The reason for this was that China and the Soviet Union were afraid that this demand for unification would also be made by North Korea and East Germany, and thus the communists would lose their control over these countries. At the end of long discussions the Geneva Agreement was signed on July 21, 1954, which redefined the political configuration of Indochina. It was decided to establish Laos and Cambodia as independent countries. The most important decision was the division of Vietnam into two states and the creation of a demilitarized zone of six kilometers with the aim of avoiding military clashes that might lead to the escalation of warfare. It was also decided that the future of Vietnam as an independent and unified country would determined by a referendum that would be held in July 1956. The Vietnamese people would then decide whether it wanted to be under the rule of the Communist Party or under the rule of Emperor Bao Dai.

To supervise the application of the agreement a committee was appointed composed from members from a Western state, Canada; a communist state, Poland; and a nonaligned country, India. The representatives of the Viet Minh left Geneva in disappointment because they were unable to convert their military successes into political ones. Perhaps this fact may prove that despite the important victory in Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh did not achieve a decisive victory and that the political arrangement which was forced upon them expressed the wish of France to end the war but did not express decisive military defeat. The very fact that France remained in control in the south and in the urban centers denied full victory to the Viet Minh and helped France to create a political system that reflected the strategic realities of the summer of 1954.

Waite examines the first war in Vietnam mainly through the prism of the Cold War, but there were in fact three wars in Indochina. It began as an anticolonial struggle or war for national liberation. When the State of Vietnam was established by France, the war took on another dimension and can be defined as a civil war. With the outbreak of the Korean War and the beginning of United States intervention on the side of France, the war in Indochina became part of the broad and general framework of the Cold War. The United States ignored or was not able to understand the three-fold nature of the conflict. Moreover, in 1954 it was already faced with another example of a war that contained three conflicts–the Korean War.

The war in Korea broke out because of the patriotic aspirations of the northern leader Kim Il Sung to

bring about the national unification of Korea. Between the years 1949-50, a confrontation occurred between the two Koreas which can be defined as a civil war which exploded in full force with the massive invasion by the North in June 1950. At the start of United States intervention in the war and the intervention of China (November 1950) there was no doubt among the American policymakers that the Korean War was caused by communist aggression directed by Moscow, and that this was the first hot war in the framework of the Cold War. It may be said that already in 1947 American foreign and defense policy defined communism as the main and perhaps exclusive enemy of the free world. Therefore, any popular uprising was marked by the United States as instigated by the Soviet Union. This line of thought would steer American foreign policy towards Vietnam until the end of 1968.

The book under review can be placed within a number of historical frameworks. The first is the very fact that it is an additional historical work on the first war in Vietnam and an introduction to the second one, the stage of American intervention, which is better known. It is also a book about the foreign and internal policy of France after the Second World War and a book on the origins of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This is also an important work for the understanding of global history after the Second World War. Through the war in Vietnam as a test case, we may learn about the relations among the powers and the complex interrelations within every coalition under the direction of the superpowers. The book therefore constitutes another example of the fact that the communist bloc was not monolithic, and that in spite of Soviet seniority, we can already find at this stage the roots of the ideological and political dispute between the Soviet Union and China.

Another historical framework incorporates the war as an important event in the period after the Second World War, with an emphasis on it as a means for understanding the spread and escalation of the Cold War. The value of the book lies in providing a balanced analysis which does not place exclusive blame on the United States for involving Indochina in the Cold War. It also analyzes the creation of a communist coalition which thus converted the antiolonial struggle into a part of the Cold War. Quite simply, it should be claimed that the two processes influenced and were influenced by each other, and that it is not possible to determine which was the more important one, and certainly not during the first two decades after the Second World War. The last part of the book which deals with the first two years after the signing of the Geneva Agreement, describes with great care the problematic merging of the two historical processes.

We therefore have before us a book that departs from the borderlines of analyzing a single event and is instead a study that merges within it a number of historical issues that clarify their importance during the reading process. The book is worth reading by all those who are engaged in global political history after the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. It is also an important contribution as an introduction to the beginnings of American intervention in Vietnam as the roots of the Soviet-Chinese conflict. The book may serve as a valuable basis for a number of comparative studies, especially the comparative evaluation of the discussions that were held in Geneva and the exhaustive ones that were conducted in Panmunjom at the end of the Korean War, and a comparison between Geneva of 1954 and Paris of 1972-73.

As already mentioned above, the book ends with a discussion of the events that occurred through 1956, the year in which the people of Vietnam were supposed to decide its fate. This referendum never took place, and thus the chessboard was rearranged for the next confrontation–the second war in Vietnam, or simply, the Vietnam War.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Tal Tovy. Review of Waite, James, *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36874

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.