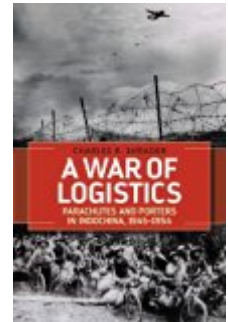


**Charles R. Shrader.** *A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters in Indochina, 1945-1954.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015. 514 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-6575-2.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Charles R. Shrader's new work on the First Indochina War, *A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters, 1945-1954*, once again demonstrates the author's keen understanding of an oft-neglected facet of warfare. His contribution here is especially important because—particularly in the Anglophone world—knowledge of the First Indochina War operates from a series of well-worn stereotypes and clichés rather than from rigorous historical research. The military aspects of this conflict are notoriously thin in the literature, so Shrader has performed a much-needed service in one synthetic volume by liming the *matériel* factors that played so crucial a role in the outworking of the conflict. Though not without some drawbacks in terms of argument and emphasis, for serious students of the Indochina Wars Shrader's book is an indispensable resource.

In terms of organization, Shrader proceeds thematically through the various aspects of supply and support alternating, between the French and Viet Minh perspectives. He devotes considerable time and space to the rival logistical organi-

zations and practices, as well as to the competing sources of external supply and finance, namely the United States and China. In much greater detail than is available anywhere else Shrader reconstructs the competing systems in order to flesh out their strengths, weaknesses, and the dynamics that shaped their evolution over the course of the struggle. In these chapters lie the real strength of the book. For the French, in particular, they highlight the truly shoestring nature of the French endeavor and are replete with telling details far beyond the cocktail-party knowledge of a general French penury that stands in for analysis in too many corners. For example, Shrader dissects and explains that while the French expeditionary force grew nearly 400 percent during the course of the war, the ratio of logistical personnel actually decreased over the same period, undoubtedly a key factor in understanding continued French operational difficulties despite the glut of American supplies flowing in after 1950. Though he relies to a great extent on a series of translations of French lesson-learned documents produced shortly after

the war, Shrader has supplemented the analysis with enough other archival and secondary material to make for a new, thoroughly illuminating whole.

Shrader's analysis of the Viet Minh side is perhaps not as robust as the French--by dint of availability of records it must be gleaned largely from captured documents and French intel report--but is certainly more complete than is available elsewhere. Here Shrader advances what amounts to his basic argument--that the Viet Minh were more flexible and adaptable in their logistical organization and implementation and thereby won the war. French continual underestimation of growing Viet Minh logistical capacity is also a key point for Shrader.

The later portions of the book focus on the rival logistical infrastructures in action. Once again proceeding largely thematically, Shrader analyzes campaigns that he categorizes as either concerning control of logistical base areas, or contests for lines of communication. In these sections Shrader tackles most of the significant campaigns/operations of the Tonkin theater; however, the thematic rather than chronological focus means that an unfamiliar reader will likely need to reference a timeline of events quite frequently to keep things in order. The detail is admirable, though in the main French-focused. A key exception here is Shrader's discussion of Giap's 1951 campaign against the Red River delta, which is fairly detailed and draws accurate, important conclusions about the Viet Minh's underdeveloped but improving logistical system as a key variable in communist defeat in that fight.

The final segment of Shrader's analysis focuses on the preparations for and logistical execution of the dramatic conclusion of the First Indochina War, the battle of Dien Bien Phu. In many ways what preceded this section can be as prelude, providing the reader with the knowledge and language for assessing the climatic French defeat/Viet Minh triumph. This is a key point, and Shrader

is entirely correct in seeing Dien Bien Phu as the ultimate audit of the two competing logistical systems developed and exercised over the prior years. His final analysis expertly demonstrates the salient features of the supply struggle that Shrader establishes over the prior chapters. And while the details of the battle hinge primarily on the logistical factors and the difficult nature of the French attempt to hold Dien Bien Phu--too often fobbed off as glaringly unworkable--Shrader should be commended for reviewing the strategic/political situation in a nuanced fashion and for clearly explaining why French commander Henri Navarre would have been very hard-pressed to do otherwise. His subsequent analysis of French archival reports reinforces and adds much-needed depth to our understanding of the problematic staff work and assumptions that went into launching Operation CASTOR.

However valuable, *A War of Logistics* is not without some drawbacks. The chief problem comes from the framing of the problem. Shrader says up front that his analysis will focus on those aspects of the war most determined by logistics, i.e., the largely conventional confrontations of the later years and mainly those in the far north, in Tonkin. His then subsequent depiction of the conflict as peculiarly influenced by logistical considerations takes on an almost tautological hue considering that estimation is more than partially determined by the framework he imposed at the outset. In reality, however, a simpler point still stands, that being that the war was from soup to nuts bound up with logistics; but then few wars are not. This selection, as noted above, limits Shrader's focus, with notable exceptions, to events in Tonkin. To be sure, Tonkin was the theater of decision and Shrader's attention there has a strong historiographical pedigree. Still, why logistics potentially played a different, and less decisive role elsewhere (i.e., Annam and Cochinchina) is left mostly unexamined.

On another level Shrader seems to parrot a number of fairly standard criticisms against the putatively lazy, slipshod French handling of the war going back to the time of the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) themselves. Shrader criticizes the territorial organization of French logistics as a vestige of the colonial regime and fundamentally unsuited to mobile operations. One wonders, on the other hand, if this critique would be quite as stinging if the analysis had been differently framed in time and space. He also repeats the contemporaneous American frustration at the French unwillingness to get behind the formation of a national army. But of course the French army itself shortly after taking up the war required Vietnamese troops to bolster its own units. It was certainly not just pride and national vanity that kept the French from doing things differently. Subsequent American efforts (and failures) should caution us against crowing too loudly alongside the self-assured American advisors of the 1940s/50s.

Any review of this book must also caution about the readability of much of the early material. Shrader absolutely does his level best to keep the prose lively, but vim and verve do not arise naturally from detailed descriptions of logistical arrangements. The thematic character means that the reader is in for some tough sledding in these initial chapters. Things improve markedly later on, and the earlier material is crucial for grasping the dynamics of the following campaign analyses.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Shrader's book is a tremendous boon to our growing, yet still very much incomplete understanding of the First Indochina War. *A War of Logistics* represents a treasure trove of archival and French-language material delivered to an ironically resource-poor Anglophone audience. While the casual reader will likely be intimidated by the material, serious students and scholars of the Indochina Wars will recognize this as the definitive look into

the main theater of the war for the foreseeable future.

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