

The impact of the Dien Bien Phu Victory on the decolonization movement in Africa (1954-1960)

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Abstract: The Dien Bien Phu victory of the Vietnamese army over the French colonists in 1954 contributed significantly to the wave of independence in the French colonies in Africa (1954-1960). This paper analyzes the impact of this historic event in inspiring nationalist movements and promoting liberation struggles in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and the French West African countries during that period. It also examines how the Dien Bien Phu victory weakened France's position in its colonies and influenced the independence movements there. The results show that Vietnam's victory had a profound influence by inspiring nationalist sentiments, encouraging resistance spirits, and fueling armed uprisings against French colonialism in Africa. Moreover, it severely undermined France's authority over its colonies, creating favorable conditions for subsequent independence movements. The research results affirm that the Dien Bien Phu Victory was a powerful catalyst that inspired and accelerated the national liberation movements in the French colonies in Africa.

Keywords: Africa, Colonies, Dien Bien Phu victory, Patriotism, Vietnam people's army.

1. Introduction

The 20th century is often referred to by many historians as the “*century of imperial decline*” [2]. The rule of imperialism from the “Contact Period” to the 20th century left many tragic historical legacies for colonial countries worldwide [11]. Consequently, Vietnam's victory in the historic Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 had a profound impact on the decolonization movement across the globe and made a significant contribution to the decline of imperialism in the 20th century [17]. This event ended French colonial domination in Indochina, playing a decisive role in compelling France to sign the Geneva Accords, which restored independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Simultaneously, this event also strongly influenced politics and the rise of nationalism in independence movements in French colonies in Africa in particular and globally in general. Notably, the waves of nationalism and independence struggles in North and West Africa (such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia...) received a powerful “impetus” following the Dien Bien Phu victory of the Vietnam People's Army. As such, the Dien Bien Phu victory has always been a prominent topic of interest among scholars due to its grand scale and level of influence, generating research value to this day. In this context, Christopher Goscha's (2022) study “The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam” recounts how President Ho Chi Minh transformed a poor, backward guerrilla army into a modern fighting force capable of defeating a military power like France. Stephen Tyre's (2008) research “The Memory of French Military Defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Defence of French Algeria” [17] takes a different approach to the impact of this event on the political decisions of French leaders in colonial countries. He challenges other scholars' assessments that the Dien Bien Phu victory had a

decisive influence on the decline of the French colonial regime in colonial countries, arguing that this event did not significantly impact this nation's ambition to maintain colonies. In fact, he contends that internal French political competition led to the gradual withdrawal of resources from colonial countries by this colonial power. Additionally, Patricia Pelley's (1998) study "Barbarians" and "Younger Brothers": The Remaking of Race in Postcolonial Vietnam" [14] points out that despite the military victory, the Dien Bien Phu triumph only created an opportunity for Vietnam to recover after the French colonial period. She argues that an "intellectual offensive" was necessary to counter the cultural influences and mental constraints left by the colonial regime in society.

Through the use of qualitative analysis methods, specifically historical and logical methods and synthesis methods, this article identifies two main hypotheses explaining the influence of the Dien Bien Phu victory on the decolonization movement in French colonies in Africa. The first is the factor of nationalism, where Vietnam's victorious spirit against the powerful French colonizers inspired and encouraged the indomitable spirit and will to fight for national independence in Africa. The second is the political-military factor, as the defeat by a colony like Vietnam severely damaged the position of French colonialism, opening up favorable opportunities for colonial peoples in Africa to rise up and gain independence in the context of French politics falling into chaos. However, the causal relationship between Vietnam's Dien Bien Phu victory and decolonization movements in French colonies in Africa has not been specifically studied and evaluated in detail by many scholars. Therefore, this article aims to clarify the impact of the Dien Bien Phu victory on national liberation struggles against French colonialism in colonial countries in Africa. The article will focus on two key objectives:

Frist, analyze the influence of the Dien Bien Phu victory through its role in inspiring and promoting the decolonization movement in Africa. In this, the article focuses on analyzing the influence of this event in playing an important role in enhancing the spirit of struggle for independence and promoting uprisings and struggles against French colonialism in Africa.

Second, analyze the influence of the Dien Bien Phu victory on the position of French colonialism in the colonies and its impact on decolonization movements in Africa. In this, the article focuses on analyzing the influence of this event in playing an important role in weakening France's position in the colonies and creating a premise for the subsequent national liberation movement in Africa.

2. The Influence of the Dien Bien Phu Victory Through its role in Inspiring and Promoting the Decolonization Movement in Africa

The 1954 Dien Bien Phu victory is considered one of the greatest battles in history between a colony and a colonial power, with decisive significance for the decline of imperialism in the 20th century. This event ended nearly 100 years of French colonial rule in Vietnam and Indochina, forcing France to grant independence to its protectorates in the Indochinese peninsula. As President Ho Chi Minh affirmed: *"For the first time in history, an oppressed nation has defeated the invasion of a powerful empire, regained independence for the nation, brought land to the peasants, and restored true democratic rights to the people"* [9]. This victory not only had a strong impact on the international political arena but also created a political earthquake in other French colonies in Africa, *"it is a great victory of our people, and also a common victory of all oppressed peoples in the world"* [10]. Under the strong influence of the Dien Bien Phu victory, the combined strength of nationalism and patriotism erupted violently, creating a premise for the rise in French colonies in Africa.

President Ho Chi Minh affirmed: *"Dien Bien Phu is like a brilliant golden milestone of history. It clearly marks where colonialism rolled downhill and disintegrated, while the national liberation movement across the world is rising to complete victory. This is a great victory of our people and also a common victory of all oppressed peoples in the world"* [16]. French scholar Charles Fourniaux also acknowledged: *"The Battle of Dien Bien Phu is a model of major events that open new historical periods. In France, France's defeat had many impacts, contributing to major political changes. It is reasonable to say that the French Fourth Republic was killed by Dien Bien Phu. It also opened a new era in the history and politics of the French Republic. France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu spread to the colonies, marking the beginning of the process of resolving colonialism"* [13]. Accordingly, it

can be seen that the Dien Bien Phu victory had great significance for the rise of nationalism in French colonies in Africa, contributing to the success of the Year of Africa event in 1960. Former Algerian President Abdelkader Bensalah stated: *“Vietnam was a great inspiration. The heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people urged us to go all the way in the resistance for independence. Vietnam is a symbol of freedom and courage. The Dien Bien Phu victory answered our question: if the Vietnamese people could defeat the colonial empire, why couldn’t Algeria?”* [12]. Thus, the Dien Bien Phu victory directly impacted the rise of nationalism in French colonies in Africa.

2.1. First, it Strengthened the Spirit of Struggle for Independence in the Colonies

The victory of the Vietnam People’s Army in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu became a profound inspiration, igniting the spirit of struggle for national independence strongly in French colonies in Africa. Previously, colonial peoples always felt powerless and desperate in the face of the overwhelming power of colonialism. Although colonial peoples had always erupted in independence movements against French colonialism throughout their period of domination, these movements occurred in isolation, without close links between the revolutionary movement and the people in the country; between the revolutionary movement in the country and internationally; without the enthusiastic support of the international community. Therefore, throughout the decolonization process, the independence movements of French colonies in Africa were brutally suppressed, with French colonialism using “assimilation” methods and military repression, causing these movements to be quickly extinguished. But the Dien Bien Phu victory proved that French colonialism was not invincible, making them believe they could regain independence for their nation. Accordingly, uprisings and struggles against France erupted violently in African colonies such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia after 1954; the patriotic spirit of the people of these countries was strongly stimulated, they became more aware of their national identity and the right to live independently, free from foreign domination.

Algerian leaders affirmed: *“Our people welcomed the Dien Bien Phu victory with great joy as if it were their own victory. The Algerian people were encouraged by the military defeat of French imperialism at Dien Bien Phu and, enlightened by the experience of your successful armed struggle, quickly took up arms to end the colonial regime they had endured for 125 years...”* [8]. Thus, the Dien Bien Phu victory inspired the colonial countries in Africa, national liberation armies were continuously formed, carrying out increasingly fierce military activities against France. A series of French colonies in Africa such as Morocco, Tunisia, Guinea, Mali, Madagascar, Cameroon... rose up strongly, forcing French colonialism to grant independence and territorial integrity to these countries. In general, the Dien Bien Phu victory was a great spiritual motivation, strongly promoting patriotic movements and national freedom aspirations to erupt in French colonies in Africa. It awakened the will and fighting spirit of colonial peoples, thereby writing golden pages of history about the path of colonial liberation in the Year of Africa event in 1960.

2.2. Second, Promoting Decolonization and Anti-French Struggles

The Dien Bien Phu victory directly promoted national liberation struggles and resistance against French colonialism to erupt strongly in African colonies. Vietnam’s victory proved the message that a poor, backward colony could defeat a powerful colonial power if the revolutionary movement was commanded and led by a government supported by the people in the country and the international community. Therefore, the brilliant leadership of President Ho Chi Minh and the support and unity between the army and the people helped Vietnam defeat the powerful enemy and liberate the nation after nearly 100 years of colonization. Scholar Musiychuk Victoria assessed that this victory had a ripple effect, encouraging other oppressed countries to be more determined in their struggle against imperialism, emphasizing: *“This victory not only ended French colonial rule but also pointed out the path to independence for all of Indochina and colonial countries in Africa. In fact, the Dien Bien Phu victory acknowledged the truth that even a small and underdeveloped country could win any war against a much stronger enemy as long as there was genuine leadership of the Marxist Party, correct political and military policies, and the support of the entire nation, resources and people around the world”* [6]. Therefore, it can be seen that this

event provided additional motivation and encouragement for the struggle movements in French colonies in Africa. African leaders and people believed that “*if Vietnam could win against French colonialism, they could certainly do the same*” [1].

Moreover, Vietnam’s victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 clearly exposed the decline and serious shaking of the French colonial regime. A powerful European power that once dominated dozens of colonies spread across the world was now defeated by a small, poor colonial country in a battle that had been carefully prepared with the name “impregnable fortress” [1]. Therefore, this event proved that the outward strength of French colonialism was just a disguise for a powerful colonial empire; in fact, their colonial regime had begun to decline and weaken after World War II. The result of Vietnam’s victory had a strong psychological impact on the forces fighting for national independence in French colonies in Africa. They realized that the time had come, the French colonial regime was now just a “paper tiger”, and resistance movements to regain complete independence could be successful. Accordingly, the fighting spirit of the people in African colonial countries erupted strongly, and many major uprisings broke out after the Dien Bien Phu victory. Among them was the Algerian independence resistance that erupted violently right in 1954, after the victory of the Vietnam People’s Army, and by 1962, Algeria had gained complete independence; Morocco also declared independence from France in 1956; Tunisia gained independence in the same year 1956. In 1960, 17 African countries declared independence from French colonialism through various forms of struggle. Scholar Benjamin Strasra had to acknowledge the great influence of the Dien Bien Phu victory on the decolonization process in Africa: “*Fifty years have passed, 1954 still appears as a momentous time, a turning point in contemporary history less than ten years after World War II. The victory of Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954, and the launch of the armed struggle against French colonialism by the Algerian National Liberation Front on November 1 of that year marked the beginning of the decolonization era. It was the historical threshold between the era of colonial regimes and the era of liberation for the colonized*” [13]. Thus, the Dien Bien Phu victory had a profound psychological impact on freedom struggle movements in Africa, proving that the French colonial regime was no longer a threat and that the ideal time had come for colonial countries in Africa to rise up and regain self-determination for their nation and people.

Furthermore, Vietnam’s victory at Dien Bien Phu demonstrated the effectiveness of the revolutionary violent struggle line aimed at overthrowing colonial rule. Previously, many national liberation movements in Africa still used peaceful methods of struggle, resulting in very limited outcomes for national liberation campaigns. However, after witnessing Vietnam defeat the powerful French military colonialism through revolutionary force, decolonization movements realized the need for a change in military thinking strategy. Accordingly, revolutionary forces in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, etc., shifted to armed struggle, conducting large-scale uprisings to expel French colonialism, realizing that only by applying revolutionary force could they overthrow the French colonial regime. This change in tactics proved highly effective, helping North and West African countries regain independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, Vietnam’s military victory demonstrated to African colonial peoples the necessity of using revolutionary violence and armed struggle to hope to overthrow colonial rule. Vietnam’s experience proved that the path of violent struggle was necessary and effective for national liberation from the chains of slavery. This was the valuable lesson that African revolutionary movements learned after the glorious victory of the Vietnamese army and people in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu.

3. The Influence of the Dien Bien Phu Victory on the Position of French Colonialism in the Colonies and its Impact on Decolonization Movements in Africa

The Dien Bien Phu victory affected the rise of nationalism in French colonies in Africa by weakening France’s position in the colonies and creating a premise for subsequent independence movements in Africa. Scholar Rattrick Franck remarked: “*The impact of Dien Bien Phu was like thunder in the French sky, and Dien Bien Phu was truly considered a defeat and also the bankruptcy of French colonialism*” [6]. Agreeing with this view, scholar Jayres C. Rome also acknowledged: “*The Dien Bien Phu victory*

reversed French colonial policy, forcing them to adjust, respect the interests of other countries and declare 'autonomy' or return independence to many African countries, first to North African countries like Tunisia, Morocco..." [6]. Thus, it can be seen that the Dien Bien Phu victory strongly impacted France's position in the colonies and thereby created a premise for subsequent independence movements in the Year of Africa event.

Vietnam's victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 marked the complete collapse of French colonialism's ambition to build Indochina into an "impregnable fortress." Although General Henri Navarre tried to justify: "*Dien Bien Phu may have absorbed 5% of French combat forces in Indochina, it tied down up to 50% of Viet Minh forces, Viet Minh could win largely thanks to military aid from China*" [5]. However, this weak justification attempt to turn around the result of Dien Bien Phu only highlighted France's strategic miscalculations and failure. This seriously shook France's credibility and position in African colonies. Before 1954, France was one of the world's leading colonial powers, occupying many vast colonies in Asia and Africa. However, after the heavy defeat at Dien Bien Phu, France's prestige and reputation were severely damaged. Scholar Giuyn Roa had to admit: "*Dien Bien Phu was a terrible horror and the greatest defeat of the West, heralding the collapse of old colonialism and the end of the French republic, ending the domination not only of France but also in other French colonies in Africa and Asia. Therefore, without a doubt, Dien Bien Phu was the first victory of colonial countries against a powerful invading army of a great empire*" [6]. This victory strongly impacted the belief of indigenous peoples in the colonies about the weakening of France's military power. They realized that French colonialism was no longer an insurmountable threat, but could be defeated. Moreover, as the leading colonial power in Africa, France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu made other colonies feel that France was no longer strong enough to protect and rule other colonies. Previously, France had always claimed to have the mission of bringing Western European civilization and culture to "civilize" indigenous peoples. After this defeat, French colonies realized that the French colonial empire was not invincible, and they had a complete opportunity to stand up and fight for national independence.

Furthermore, Vietnam's victory clearly exposed the weaknesses and severe decline in France's economy, politics, and military after World War II. France's actual strength was only a shell, and the French colonial empire had entered a phase of decline [7]. Therefore, anti-French forces in African colonies reinforced their belief that the time had come to regain independence for their peoples. Finally, Vietnam's victory at Dien Bien Phu seriously shook international public support for France's colonial policy [4]. Previously, as one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, France still received political support from the international community for its colonial activities in Africa and Indochina. However, after being defeated by a colonial country, France no longer had that support. This severely diminished France's position and prestige on the international stage. Thus, it can be seen that Vietnam's victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 strongly shook the prestige and position of French colonialism, not only in Indochina but also in France's other vast colonies in Africa. This opened up opportunities for decolonization struggle movements to erupt in French colonies, thereby creating the Year of Africa in 1960.

In the late 1980s, Ben Youssef Ben Khedda, head of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic, looked back on history and affirmed: "*Ho Chi Minh's army defeated the French expeditionary force at Dien Bien Phu. France's defeat was a powerful motivation for everyone. Those who believed that immediate uprising was the only viable strategy... All other considerations were pushed aside, and direct action became the top priority*" [15]. Therefore, Vietnam's victory set the stage for subsequent independence uprisings in Africa. Scholar Alain Ruscio affirmed: "*The Battle of Dien Bien Phu was seen worldwide as a harbinger for other struggles. The smell of gunpowder had hardly faded in the Tonkin basin when the Aures mountains were thick with gunpowder. And less than a year later, countries under colonial domination gathered in Bandung*" [15]. Thus, the Dien Bien Phu victory created a premise for the rise of colonial countries in Africa. Through this battle, African revolutionary forces learned many valuable lessons about revolutionary struggle strategies and tactics against a colonial power. They realized the need to gain the support of the masses and national unity; build strong armed forces; launch persistent guerrilla warfare to weaken

and exhaust the enemy. These were the key strategic lessons that African revolutionary movements successfully applied later. Thus, it can be affirmed that the Dien Bien Phu victory strongly influenced the national freedom struggle movements that erupted strongly in French colonies in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. This was an important premise for these countries to regain independence and sovereignty shortly after Vietnam's historic Dien Bien Phu victory.

4. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, this article has demonstrated that Vietnam's victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 had profound, direct and indirect impacts on national liberation movements and independence struggles in French colonies in Africa. The direct impact was manifested in the fact that Vietnam's triumph served as a tremendous inspiration, stimulating the spirit of struggle for independence among African nations. Simultaneously, Vietnam's intellectually and courageously executed military victory also provided a powerful impetus, prompting the outbreak of armed struggles for independence in African colonies. Indirectly, the Dien Bien Phu victory severely diminished the prestige and position of the French colonial administration, causing them to lose their ability to control their colonies. Revolutionary forces in African countries perceived that the French colonial regime was now merely a "paper tiger" and gained greater confidence in their ability to successfully struggle against their adversaries. Additionally, the victory also demonstrated to them that engaging in armed struggle was the most effective choice for overthrowing the colonial regime, rather than the peaceful struggles that had previously failed to yield success. It is evident that the Dien Bien Phu victory was not only significant for Vietnam but also became a symbol of the indomitable spirit of other oppressed peoples worldwide in their struggle to regain independence, freedom, and social progress. Through the victory on the Dien Bien Phu battlefield, Vietnam made a considerable contribution to the acceleration of the global decolonization movement in general and the rise of nationalism in French colonies in Africa in particular.

However, in addition to the aforementioned impacts, it should be noted that the influence of the Dien Bien Phu victory on decolonization movements in African countries was not the sole determining factor. On one hand, the power of nationalism and the will for independence had long been robust among the people of the colonized nations, yet it required eruption at an opportune moment. On the other hand, the severe weakening of the French economy and military after World War II, along with internal political conflicts in France, were also important factors that rendered them incapable of controlling their colonies. These two factors, combined with the impact of the Dien Bien Phu victory and other objective conditions, created a favorable context for national liberation struggles in African countries to erupt in the 1950s and 1960s. In summary, the Dien Bien Phu victory profoundly influenced and contributed to accelerating the decolonization process in African colonies, liberating them from the yoke of colonialism. However, it cannot be considered the sole factor determining the ultimate success of decolonization movements during that historical period. The close combination of subjective and objective conditions created the momentum and breakthrough leading to the victory of these movements. Within this context, the Dien Bien Phu victory served as a crucial catalyst, vigorously propelling the decolonization process in African colonies.

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