

INFORMATION

27

Tuesday, March 5, 1968 - 3:30 pm

Pres file

Mr. President:

Herewith what we believe is an authentic Hungarian account (the defector, Radvanyi) of Gen. Giap lecturing to a visiting delegation on how he took Dien Bien Phu.

W. W. Rostow

WWRostow:rln

On the third day of our visit to Vietnam, the delegation visited the Museum of Party History in Hanoi. We had a distinguished tourist guide, General Giap himself. In one of the halls of the modestly furnished museum, in a group picture hanging on the wall, we discovered a youthful photograph of Ho Chi Minh. It had been taken in Paris. Ho was rising to speak in a congress of the French Communist Party. In the background of the picture Maurice Teorez and the other French party leaders were visible. In another group picture Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong were standing next to Stalin on a scaffolding on Moscow's Red Square Mausoleum, on the occasion of a May-first parade. A third photograph had been taken in Peking, as Mao Tse Tung and Ho Chi Minh were shaking hands in a friendly manner after signing a friendship and cooperation agreement (?) concluded between the two countries.

In the central hall of the Museum had been placed a papier-mâché model commemorating the battle of Dien Bien Phu. General Giap stepped up into a pulpit placed on one side of the model, from where the Museum's tourist guide usually narrates to groups of visitors the story of the battle. The delegation sat down on wooden benches placed facing him. Like a university professor, Giap picked up a long bamboo stick. With fanatically burning eyes, first in a soft voice, then with increasingly decisive modulation, he began to narrate the battle which sealed the victory over the French. "The battle of Dien Bien Phu was essentially the last, desperate exertion of the Viet Minh guerrilla army," said the general. "Had we not been victorious there, French colonial power in Vietnam would still be having its seat in Hanoi and Saigon. Our armed forces were on the verge of complete exhaustion. Our supply of rice was running out; lack of ammunition was reaching catastrophic proportions. The population had become apathetic during the long partisan war and it was becoming difficult to draft new fighters for our guerrilla army. Because of years of jungle warfare, morale in the fighting units had reached the low point. We had to put everything on the card. The supreme council of war remained in session for days and finally came to the decision that the impossible had to be attempted, a decisive battle had to be joined. We picked Dien Bien Phu as the scene of the battle. It was our assumption that General Leclerc (?), the commander of the French expeditionary forces, must feel excessively secure in the militarily (extraordinarily) fortified, mountain-girt valley of Dien Bien Phu. We knew the French military school and strategic thinking. We counted on the fact that the postwar French military leadership had not drawn a lesson from its defeat suffered during World War II at the Maginot Line and that, similarly to the Maginot Line, it considered Dien Bien Phu an impregnable fortification. Our calculations this time proved to be correct. The French could not imagine how the Vietminh could be able, through the almost impenetrable forest, to bring onto the scene units in adequate

numbers and strength and also the necessary war materiel. The task was indeed difficult, said the General. First provisions had to be made for a detailed reconnoitering of the terrain, which could be effected in a relatively short time. The second step was to organize the transportation of the forces. The road was covered by some of the fighters on bicycle, by others on foot. They carried no load whatsoever. There was one burden-bearing coolie for each soldier; these former carried the hand-weapons and the ammunition, as well as the rice ration needed by the soldier and the coolie. We solved the problem of transporting the artillery batteries captured from the French and those received from abroad -- mostly from the Soviet Union and China -- with the aid of elephants and buffaloes. To the elephants we gave military grades of rank, as in the case of the soldiers, remarked Giap in a half sentence.

When we reached the area of Dien Bien Phu, continued the general, I ordered a general rest of three days. During this the political officers endeavored to raise the morale of the soldiers. They explained to them that the French could be beaten, the same way the Japanese had been beaten in World War II. If a Frenchman is hit by a bullet, it kills him just as surely as it would a Vietnamese. The French are not gods by any means, repeated the political officers a hundred and a thousand times. There was, indeed, great need for this agitation, because, in all honesty, the soldiers were scared of the French.

After the three-day rest we started the siege. During the first phase of the battle we conducted typical guerrilla warfare. We attacked, only at night and wiped out only one or two French pillboxes. This was done by digging subterranean tunnels to the pillboxes, by rendering harmless the French soldiers outside the pillboxes, and then by blowing up the pillboxes. At first the French command had thought that this was only the usual partisan attack, which was a customary event in that military region. We permitted the undisturbed traffic of their resupply transport aircraft. It was only later that we brought up artillery and began shelling the only runway on the Bien Bien Phu airfield, which then we kept under constant fire, so that the French had to try to assure resupply for their base with the aid of parachutes. These parachuted packages often landed near to our position. We changed the positions of our batteries often, and by the time the French artillery could triangulate (?) us, our mortars and cannon were in other positions.

We increased the pressure systematically and finally we were attacking the base day and night from all sides. Finally the day arrived when the French military command realized the hopeless nature of the battle and surrendered the fortifications of Dien Bien Phu.

Everyone listened very attentively to the general's presentation, and the delegation members asked many questions. Foreign Minister Endre Sik asked him what would have happened, had the Americans granted the military assistance which the French requested, and what would have happened if the Americans had intervened. The reason we went to Geneva in 1954 was because we assessed this possibility as a real danger, replied General Giap.