

'The sacrifice' from Le Figaro (8 May 1954)

Caption: On 8 May 1954, the day after the fall of the heavily fortified Dien Bien Phu base, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro leads with the sacrifice of the French soldiers and deplors the attitude of French Communist leaders in the Indo-China war.

Source: Le Figaro. dir. de publ. BRISSON, Pierre. 08-09.05.1954, n° 3005; 128e année. Paris: Le Figaro. "Le sacrifice", auteur:Brisson, Pierre , p. 1.

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The sacrifice

The fortress of Dien Bien Phu falls after the 55 days of fighting.

The courage expended on this bloody scrap of land in the depths of the jungle, the valour of General de Castries and his troops, the exploits of the pilots and paratroops, the continuous sacrifice of lives, the enthusiasm of this desperate brotherhood of volunteers — all we know of the merciless battle waged by free men against the forces of fanaticism has aroused universal admiration and stirred us to the core.

No words can express our praise. Nor is this a time for fine phrases.

What these sacrifices demand of us this evening is that we examine our conscience.

We would do well to recall the epitaph Rudyard Kipling suggested for those killed in the First World War: 'If any question why we died, Tell them, because our fathers lied'.

The troops at Dien Bien Phu died because we lied to ourselves.

They died because we did not know how to wage this war, because we were incapable of accepting or refusing it, because we were unable to take its true measure, or foresee its consequences, or place it from the outset in its world context. Throughout these nine years, opportunities to negotiate were lost, as were opportunities for victory. They were all lost in the same way. Through weakness.

Yielding to Communist blackmail, we went into this war shamefaced. Troops were loaded on trains at dusk at outlying railway stations, the authorities said little, the army command minimised the difficulties, extravagant incentives and bonuses were granted — in short, the whole operation seemed wrapped in excuses from the outset.

By the time Marshal de Lattre de Tassigny irrupted on the scene, making the nation aware of the dramatic turn of events, victory was already beyond our means. Refusing to admit it, we deceived ourselves once again.

In France, Moscow did all it could to encourage public disillusionment with the war. In Asia, it whipped up the crowds against us.

There can be no more miserable backtracking than the tears shed by the CP over the slaughter caused by weapons which Communism placed in the hands of our enemies.

The real victors this evening are the friends of Maurice Thorez and Jacques Duclos. It is they who should raise the red death's head banner over the ruins and graves.

One hope remains: that the tragedy which has just been played out will finally arouse the conscience of the free world and that the Western powers will combine forces in Geneva in a common front to end the madness and arrive at a peace settlement.

Pierre Brisson