

Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge New York–Port Melbourne–Delhi–Singapore 2018, pp. XL + 283

Despite the passage of time, the historiography of the Vietnam War is in constant flux. Or perhaps it is exactly because of the passage of time. Old common truths are challenged, new archival materials become available, and new research trends and directions bring novel information, enriching our understanding of that conflict. In the United States historiography, for obvious reasons dominating in this particular field, the last two decades were marked by a new perspective of the Vietnam War in a more global context. Recognition of the existence and importance of other actors besides the United States brought interest also in the opposing side of the conflict, i.e. communist countries. A brief and partial opening of archives in Russia provided us with books about the USSR's attitude to this war by Ilya Gaiduk.¹ In China, access to archives was even more complicated, nevertheless, historians were still able to extract shreds of information casting new light on Beijing's involvement in this conflict.² Finally, a partial opening of Vietnamese archives, along with the appearance of a group of scholars fluent in Vietnamese, provided us with a peek into Hanoi's perspective, until recently obscured behind myths and clichés dating back to the very conflict and its propaganda. The reviewed book belongs exactly to the latter group. The author is a Canadian scholar working at an American university, fluent in Vietnamese, and who was able to gain access to Vietnam's state archives.

The book's main purpose is to provide insight into the North Vietnamese perspective of the conflict known widely as the Vietnam War or Second Indochina War. In Vietnam itself it is known as the American War, both to differentiate it from the earlier conflict with the French, but also, and probably more importantly as Asselin points out, to obscure the fact that it was mainly a civil war between Northern and Southern Vietnamese, a fact extremely inconvenient for the Vietnamese Workers' Party, which based its whole narrative of the conflict around heroic resistance against external invasion.

The book also presents the role of Ho Chi Minh in forming and leading the communist movement in Indochina, and his troubled relationship with the USSR, and Stalin in particular. However, there is a minor inconsistency in the narration about

¹ I.V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, Chicago 1996; idem, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy towards the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963*, Stanford 2003.

² Q. Zhai, *China & the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, Chapel Hill–London 2000; X. Li, *The Dragon in the Jungle*, New York 2020.

Uncle Ho. While Asselin quite rightly describes how Ho Chi Minh was perceived as a moderate and “too much of a nationalist, and not a enough of a communist”³ by his more radical comrades, nevertheless he is not able to escape from one of the most persistent speculations in American academia about Vietnam War, which boils down to a question if Ho Chi Minh could be Southeast Asian Josip Broz Tito. Asselin does that by suggesting that if Washington kept their channels open to Vietminh in the late 1940s, it would know about the Kremlin’s lack of interest in Indochina, and Stalin’s personal antipathy towards Ho, and somehow utilize this knowledge to strike a deal with Vietnamese, instead of supporting the French.⁴ However in this particular case, Asselin for a moment forgets what he actually argues about Ho Chi Minh in the same book: that while being branded a “moderate” or “nationalist” by the radicals in his movement, he was still a loyal and devoted communist, just like, for example, Władysław Gomułka in Poland. And just like Comrade Wiesław, being disliked by Stalin and radical doctrinaires didn’t mean Ho would ever decide to jump ship and join the capitalist side. This is a minor detail, but it illustrates how hard is it to escape from some ideas entrenched in academia.

Another aim of the book is to introduce to a wider audience and scholarship the person of the main architect of the confrontation with South Vietnam and the United States, VWP General Secretary, Le Duan. While Ho Chi Minh remained the popular face of the Vietnamese struggle until his death in 1969, or even beyond that, it was Le Duan who actually ruled in Hanoi. A hardline revolutionary originally from the South, after becoming VWP General Secretary in 1960, he sidelined Ho Chi Minh from real power in 1964, and after additional purges in 1967, he became the undisputed ruler of communist Vietnam, holding it with an iron grip until his death in 1986. Despite that, Le Duan and his role in the regime remained mostly hidden from Americans during the war, first behind the carefully cultivated propaganda image of President Ho Chi Minh, and then the cliché of united collective leadership dedicated to achieving the vision of the late Ho. In reality, as Asselin persuasively argues on the pages of his book, Le Duan’s position in the Hanoi power structure was more similar to dictators like Mao or Stalin, than his other contemporary communist colleagues. Obsessed with the idea of unifying Vietnam by any means necessary, Le Duan also provided rigidity and doctrinaire zealotry needed to overcome numerous bloody gambles he took and lost, with great cost to Vietnam.

This brings us to another important argument of the book: despite the propaganda of the David versus Goliath struggle and the popular image of Vietnamese communists as “wizards who seemed to have inflicted a mortal blow to Washington and Saigon’s ability to carry on the war,”⁵ reality looked completely different. After the start of the American bombing campaign North Vietnam in fact became completely dependent on external assistance from its allies, mainly China and the Soviet Union. And while Hanoi was able to play off its powerful allies mired in the Sino-Soviet

³ P. Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War: A History*, Cambridge 2018, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Split, it was always treading a thin line in its relation with Moscow and Beijing. Also, Asselin points out that Hanoi's leadership with Le Duan at the helm was far from omniscient often ascribed to them. Actually aforementioned wizard quote refers to the Tet Offensive, which was an unqualified, unmitigated military disaster for the communist side. A risky gamble on the open military confrontation that was supposed to cause a popular uprising, a gamble Le Duan took and lost at great cost. Luckily for him, for various reasons, Tet turned out beneficial for the communist cause on the diplomatic and political level, but it was not the only blunder he made that is described in the book. In fact, as the author argues, it was not the ability to outwit and outperform their adversaries that brought the communists in Vietnam their final victory, but the ability to persevere and endure numerous severe bloody setbacks and failures.

The book is divided into six chapters, each composed of numerous short subchapters. In the first chapter dedicated to pre-WW2 Vietnam, Pierre Asselin starts his narration going back as far as 111 BC. While it seems excessive at first glance, there is a logical reasoning behind this – the author explains how from the very start Vietnamese history was full of myths, which in modern times were successfully adapted for propaganda. As it turns out, the supposed unique unshakable unity of the Vietnamese nation, and indomitable will of resistance against foreign rule or invasions, eagerly publicized by Hanoi and applauded by their supporters, was far from historical reality. In subsequent, chronologically arranged chapters, the author presents the development of the Indochina conflict: The war against the French (2), the period before American direct involvement (3), the titular American War until the Tet Offensive (4), and to Paris Peace Accords (5), with last chapter on the final showdown between North and South Vietnam after American departure (6).

The main chapters are forwarded by an Introduction, not only describing “why Vietnam matters”⁶ and how the book is composed but also explaining the Vietnamese Communist Party structure, a subsection particularly useful to Western readers, usually unfamiliar with the specifics of the functioning of communist party apparatus. The book finishes with an Epilogue, explaining many legacies of the American War, from the painful and brutal communist reunification of Vietnam, through the failure of the planned economy and misery of *boat people*, intervention in Cambodia, and a brief war with China, to an gradual improvement of Vietnam's situation after Le Duan's death, culminating in normalization of diplomatic ties with the United States in 1995.

In addition, the book includes several maps, a glossary of terms and acronyms, a cast of main characters appearing on her pages, a list of US presidential administrations from 1945 to 1975, a separate timeline of events presented in the chapters, and an index of places, people and terms.

Notes are provided after each chapter, which is much better than the usual style of placing them *en bloc* at the end of the book, as it is usually done in English-language


⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

publications. The annotated bibliography at the end of the book provides an extensive and highly useful overview of the most relevant literature on the subject.

The composition of the book, devised by the author, proved highly apt. Numerous subchapters, with logical titles, provide smooth sailing through the text and make it easy to find and return to the passage we are looking for. The language is rich and displays the author's knowledge of the described issues. In fact, author's ability to present such complex problems on relatively few pages is worthy of the highest admiration and testifies to both his erudition about the subject and excellent control of his writing process.

Pierre Asselin's line of argumentation in the book is sound and logical. He also seems to have a proper grasp of the communist party's inner workings and line of thought. Furthermore, it appears that he managed to evade the common pitfall of either demonizing or romanticizing the protagonists of his narration and their motivations.⁷ Most of his conclusions, for example about the character of relations with other communist countries, or Hanoi's dependence on external aid, can be confirmed by the archival material from said countries.

In conclusion, despite the book's apparent modest size, it is a very valuable addition to the field. In fact, this publication's conciseness should be applauded and pointed out, as an example that it is possible to competently and accessibly write about complex subjects in such a format. Focus on the Hanoi perspective also provides a unique experience for Western readers, usually overwhelmed by the American perspective and narrative of the conflict. *Vietnam's American War* is also a rare example of a book that can be recommended both to specialists and novice readers of the subject.

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⁷ An example that this is still an ongoing problem can be found in a recent book by Max Hastings, in which the author basically repeats word for word the Communist propaganda narrative of Ho Chi Minh's extraordinary modesty, who was said to be living in a gardener's cottage in Hanoi instead of the presidential palace. M. Hastings, *Wietnam: Epicka tragedia 1945–1975*, Kraków 2021, p. 160 (Polish translation of Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy*, New York 2018).