

Review Essay

## Wartime Experiences of Young Vietnamese

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Olga Dror. *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965–1975*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 338 pp.

The three decades of warfare that ravaged Vietnam from 1945 to 1975 produced, temporarily, two competing polities: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, also known as North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, also known as South Vietnam). At the conclusion of these wars, a single state, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, emerged. As Olga Dror emphasizes in her introduction to *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965–1975*, the literature on this topic is more than extensive: on the years 1955–1975 alone, there are approximately thirty thousand volumes. The vast majority of these works, however, dwell on military and sociopolitical dynamics. Relegating Vietnamese people to the background, they tend to focus on the American experiences of the war (3). To push discussions of the Vietnam War in a new direction, Dror delves into the experiences of children and adolescents in the North and in the South.

To underscore fundamental dissimilarities between the DRV and the RVN, Dror opens her introduction with an image that provides, at first glance, a glimpse of domestic well-being. In this drawing, a well-fed, contented cat sits smiling, looking at a boy, also smiling, as he marks his height on the wall. The verse that follows shatters any illusion of innocence and ease. It reads, "I am a year older, already several centimeters taller; soon I will be able to join the army and fight the Americans until they turn tail and flee" (1–2). Dror contrasts this vignette, published in Hanoi in 1969, with a joke that surfaced just three years later in Saigon. A teacher asks a boy to identify the branch of the armed forces in which he prefers to enlist. The boy turns in a blank sheet of paper. He then explains, "I hear that in several years there will be peace, so I think by the age of eighteen I will be free from going into the army" (2). Dror sees the dissonance between the image from the northern newspaper and the anecdote that circulated in a children's magazine in the South as a reflection of divergent political cultures: a commitment to socialism in the North and to anticommunism in the South.

Dror observes that the viability of the DRV and the RVN depended on multiple factors, perhaps most critically, the ability of both governments to generate new sources of support for their respective agendas, which they attempted to do through educational initiatives. She explores this topic in the first chapter. Dror recognizes that both governments made great strides in expanding their educational systems. In the North, however, “a single ideology was imposed,” whereas “a pluralistic scene tolerating a measure of dissent and the necessity of negotiation among rivals” developed in the South (15). (Most readers will be unperturbed by this claim; others will find it needlessly tendentious.) Because of this discrepancy, Dror maintains, officials in the DRV and the RVN viewed the methods and goals of instruction in fundamentally dissimilar ways. In the DRV proper, in the DRV’s schools in China, as well as in “liberated areas” of the RVN, the curriculum was extremely politicized (25). Furthermore, because the same official served as the minister of education for a period of thirty years, educational agendas in the DRV exhibited a high degree of continuity. In the RVN, the situation was more chaotic, in part because, during this period (1945–1975), the supervision of curricular matters fell to a series of more than twenty-five officials. The greater diversity of political possibilities in southern Vietnam, the salience of class differences, and a more variegated religious culture resulted in an educational system that was less politicized and even apolitical (49).

In the second chapter Dror compares social organizations in the DRV and the RVN. In northern Vietnam, she asserts, Communist Party leaders “eliminated all competing organizations and any ideological ambiguity” (76). (Like the claim of “a pluralistic scene” in the first chapter, this statement will be unremarkable to most readers; others will be puzzled by its flattening approach to northern culture and politics.) Dror goes on to describe the various organizations that anticolonial activists devised for children and adolescents, beginning with the Indochinese Communist Youth League (1931): the Pioneer Organization and the Children’s Association to Save the Country—both formed in 1941 and slightly reformulated in 1950 as the Pioneers (ages 12–15) and the Children of August (ages 7–12)—and countless others, including the Youth Shock Brigades created in 1950 (74–79, 88–92). During this period and in the years that followed, DRV officials also began to emphasize new notions of kinship that specifically depicted children as the obedient “nephews” and “nieces” of Uncle Hồ (81–87). Dror moves beyond traditional comparisons of North and South by also discussing communist youth groups in the RVN (92–97).

In her analysis of social organizations in the South, Dror begins by noting a more elastic notion of “youth,” which included university students in their thirties as well as young professionals, civil servants, and army officers who had once participated in youth programs. She also points out that, due to the greater degree of political diversity and frequent changes in the government’s composition, young people received less official guidance than their northern peers (97). Nevertheless, officials in Ngô Đình Diệm’s government encouraged the formation of the Republican Youth League, designed for ages 18–35; in 1963, after Diệm’s assassination, it was succeeded by the Rural Development Units (103–104). Other youth groups proliferated: Girl Scouts and Boy

Scouts, Buddhists, Hòa Hảo Buddhists, Catholics, and Cao Đài. Although these groups may have been sympathetic to various southern Vietnamese regimes, they were not extensions of the state. These details substantiate Dror's claim that culture and society were more pluralistic in the South than in the North.

In the third chapter, Dror compares policies regarding the publication of newspapers, textbooks, and literature in the North and South. She also discusses the differences in censorship, including various forms of self-censorship as well as external mechanisms of control. In the DRV, writers who proceeded in unauthorized ways—even if, like those associated with the journals *Nhân văn* (Humanities) and *Giai phẩm* (Fine arts), they had supported the August Revolution of 1945 and the resistance war against France (1946–1954), risked harsh consequences, including debilitating stints in reeducation camps and sentences of hard labor (111). (It should be noted that southern dissidents also faced harsh reprisals for these sorts of offenses.) To reinforce revolutionary ways of thinking, in 1954 a group of famous writers created *Thiếu niên tiền phong* (Vanguard adolescents, 110). Countless similar gestures followed. For example, the Kim Đồng Publishing House, created in 1957, disseminated an amazing array of translations, often of Russian-language texts, including materials in science and technology, biographies, and socialist-realist fabrications (113–127). Among the DRV's many taboos were suggestions of uncertainty and hints of pessimism concerning the outcome of the war (130–133). Having discussed the circulation of Soviet works in the North, Dror considers the fascination with French existentialism and literary forms of “entertainment” that developed in the South (141–144). She also identifies the requirements for someone hoping to launch a new newspaper or journal: Vietnamese citizenship, a minimum age of 25, and the obligation to refrain from Communist proselytizing (147).

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Dror explores historical narratives, political discourse, and literary forms in the DRV and the RVN. Certain topics, such as the prehistoric Hùng kings, national unity, and national heroes, surfaced on both sides of the border. Other themes prominent in one setting were essentially unimaginable in the other: the preference for revolutionary discourses (in the North), to cite one example, and the prominence of romantic love (in southern literary sources), to cite another.

Although *Making Two Vietnams* is an extraordinary work, it is not entirely free of flaws. First, because Vietnamese is a tonal language, the diacritical marks are an intrinsic part of the written script and not an optional “add-on.” In Dror's previous books—which include a translation of Adriano Di St. Thecla's *Opusculum de Sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses: A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese* (2002), her own *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* (2007), and a superb translation of Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Hue* (2014)—the personal names, place names, titles, and quotations of text appear as they should: with the diacritical marks. In *Mourning Headband for Hue*, Dror explains that she preserved the diacritical marks (except in well-known toponyms and personal names) in order to eliminate the confusion that ensues when they are missing. She implies that those who do not read Vietnamese can ignore them (xiii–xiv), and I agree. It is unfortunate, therefore, that she

omitted the diacritical marks from *Making Two Vietnams*. Second, much to her credit, Dror has extensively investigated essential sources that other scholars have ignored. I am not convinced, though, that the overall interpretive framework is sufficiently nuanced and supple. For example, one could plausibly argue that culture and politics were more contested and less monotone in the DRV than the author claims; one could also credibly demonstrate that conditions in the RVN were more censorious and less tolerant than the author believes.

That said, I want to emphasize in closing that Olga Dror has articulated a genuinely innovative way of thinking about the war. Thanks to her uncommon linguistic skills—she is truly virtuosic—she was able to work with unpublished documents from National Archive Three in Hanoi and the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University; she has also incorporated material from a wide range of primary and secondary sources published in Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian, German, and French. In this way, Dror illuminates the wartime experiences of once-marginalized actors. Her energetic and imaginative research has resulted in a book that deserves to be widely read.

### References

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