

CROSS-CURRENTS



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REVIEW ESSAY

Hanoi and the American War: Two International Histories

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Pierre Asselin. *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 352 pp. \$55 (cloth/e-book).

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 464 pp. \$34.95 (cloth/e-book).

On November 22, 1963, an emergency session of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) opened in Hanoi. The session, known as the Ninth Plenum, was held, in part, to determine the best route forward for the party following the coup that had toppled Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnamese government three weeks before. Over the ensuing weeks, the committee members addressed domestic and international concerns of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), particularly the evolving political situation in the South and the status of the world revolutionary struggle. At the heart of the matter were divisions within the party over the best means to achieve the reunification of Vietnam and the ramifications that the widening Sino-Soviet split might have on this goal. From what can be gleaned from the spotty historical record, the debates were quite contentious.

Ever since Vietnam was divided at the seventeenth parallel following the Geneva Accords of 1954, the VWP had been split over how best to reunify Vietnam. Some advocated a "North-first" strategy, in which efforts would be focused on building a viable socialist base above the demarcation line before embarking on a quest to reunify the nation, by violent means if necessary. Others believed in a "South-first" strategy. They felt that the socialist revolution in the North could be advanced only by eliminating the anticommunist government below the

seventeenth parallel. By the Ninth Plenum, this domestic split was threatening the unity of the party. Militant advocates of the “South-first” strategy viewed the moderate position as bankrupt, believing it had done nothing to further the goal of national reunification. Just as problematically, it threatened to cede the direction of the southern revolution to local revolutionaries, who, after eight and a half years of oppression from the southern government without much relief from the North, were becoming less inclined to pursue the party line as dictated by Hanoi.

This internal struggle had taken on an international dimension as each side found support, respectively, from the two allies of the DRV in the global Cold War: the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. The Soviet Union, promoting Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s tenet of “peaceful coexistence” with the West, encouraged the moderate “North-first” wing of the party. He believed that its focus on building socialism in North Vietnam, rather than militarily supporting the mounting insurgency in the South, was unlikely to precipitate a crisis below the seventeenth parallel that might prompt an American military intervention and the concomitant threat to world peace. The militant “South-first” wing of the party found support for its position in the People’s Republic of China, which was by this point vehemently attacking the so-called right-wing revisionism of the USSR and its policy of peaceful coexistence, which, Beijing contended, encouraged rather than resisted American imperialism.

The Hanoi government feared that a failure to resolve these disputes would compromise the party’s unity of purpose, leading to confusion throughout the North Vietnamese populace, loss of confidence among the southern revolutionaries, and the rupturing of relations with either, or both, Moscow and Beijing. In the end, this extraordinary session of the Central Committee produced a resolution, subsequently called Resolution 9, that committed the DRV militarily to reunification with the South, even though doing so risked war with Saigon’s principle ally, the United States. This new course of action would require decisive leadership, so Resolution 9 also called for the purge of any party leaders or officials who failed to adhere to this new line. This was a clear victory for the militant wing of the Vietnam Workers’ Party and its leader, Le Duan, who would seize this opportunity to eliminate his enemies, consolidate his power, and commit the North irrevocably on a path to war with the United States.

This episode bridges two excellent new works on the Vietnam War, exemplifying their contribution to the expansive literature on the conflict and highlighting some current trends in recent scholarship. Pierre Asselin’s *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* and Lien-

Hang T. Nguyen's *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* focus, respectively, on the events on either side of the Ninth Plenum of the Vietnamese Workers' Party in 1963. Asselin's work traces the ebb and flow of party dynamics from the Geneva Accords to Hanoi's decision at the end of 1964 to send units of the People's Army of Vietnam to the South to assist southern revolutionaries in their struggle to topple the government of the Republic of Vietnam and pave the way for reunification on Hanoi's terms. Nguyen effectively picks up where Asselin leaves off, focusing on Le Duan's struggle to force an end to American military intervention in the South, which began once it had become apparent to Washington that the Saigon regime could not stand on its own in the face of the communist-led insurgency.

Both works are international histories of the conflict. They employ sources from multiple national archives, consider the perspectives of all sides in the conflict, and place the events of their respective narratives into a broader global context. In this way, they go beyond the standard Cold War paradigm that has been the hallmark of the bulk of the literature on the Vietnam War to consider how the other international force to affect global politics in the second half of the twentieth century—decolonization—influenced events on the Indochinese peninsula.

To begin, both *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* and *Hanoi's War* continue the trend in the past decade and a half of Vietnam War scholarship of taking advantage of the gradual opening of Vietnamese archives to scholars for the purpose of exploring “the other side” of the war (Asselin, 1; Nguyen, 2). Since the 1990s, scholars with the proper language skills, like Asselin and Nguyen, have been able to use Vietnamese-language sources to provide agency to the Vietnamese actors on both sides of the seventeenth parallel and challenge long-standing Western assumptions about the war in Vietnam (Bradley and Brigham 1993; Masur and Miller 2006). Both scholars draw heavily from Vietnamese Archives Number 3 in Hanoi, which houses the files of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1946–1976). Both supplement their findings with documents from archival collections in the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, while Asselin also consults the holdings of Canadian archives and Nguyen employs material from Vietnamese Archives Number 2 in Ho Chi Minh City—which holds documents from the Republic of (South) Vietnam (1955–1975)—and the Hungarian national archives. (Nguyen also provides a particularly useful “guide” to these collections for the “reader and researcher” [11–14].)

Using these sources, both authors demonstrate that the North Vietnamese were “anything but puppets or passive players” in the war, neither simply reacting to American escalation nor mindlessly following the lead of Moscow or Beijing (the quote is from Nguyen, 312; see also Asselin, 2). Instead, Asselin suggests that the Politburo in Hanoi bears as much responsibility as the Johnson administration for the escalation to war in South Vietnam (3), while Nguyen contends that policy makers in Washington were “often... at the mercy of actors in Hanoi and Saigon who had their own geostrategic reasons to extend the fighting and to frustrate the peace negotiations” (9). As for Hanoi’s relationship with Moscow and Beijing, both authors show that the Politburo was adept at using both of its allies to maximize its freedom to maneuver. For example, Asselin argues that when both Moscow and Beijing were counseling Hanoi to proceed cautiously with regard to reunification, as they did in the years immediately following the Geneva Accords, the DRV pretended “to heed the desires of its Soviet and Chinese allies” in order to “sustain” the “flow” of technical and economic support they provided (33–34).

This brings us to the next contribution these works offer to the scholarship on the Vietnam War. They both place the nation-building policies of Le Duan and other senior party officials into a broader international context. First, they take their cue from area studies specialists and emphasize decolonization, as much as the Cold War, as an international force shaping the actions of the North Vietnamese.¹ Both Asselin and Nguyen implicitly demonstrate that decolonization was an ongoing phenomenon that did not simply end with the independence of the colonial state from the imperial metropole. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was a newly emerging postcolonial state facing a variety of social, economic, and political challenges to its viability, including famine, war weariness, economic dislocation, population displacement, and, most importantly, geographic division into two political entities. For the leadership of the DRV, the nation that emerged from the war with the French was a truncated one that ended at the seventeenth parallel. As both Asselin and Nguyen argue, the members of the Vietnamese Politburo had very specific notions of how to overcome these challenges and realize their vision of a unified Vietnamese nation in a Cold War world, and they did not always agree. Indeed, as Asselin points out, behind the scenes of the Vietnam Workers’ Party there were “sharp” divisions over policy, which affected the course of the Vietnamese struggle (2).

This flies in the face of much of what official Vietnamese histories of the war claim: that the struggle against the United States and its South Vietnamese ally—known in contemporary

Vietnam as the American War—was a “sacred war” carried to inevitable victory by a unified party effort centered in Hanoi.² Rather than a homogenous war of national salvation, Asselin and Nguyen show that “the Vietnamese communist struggle was anything but a harmonious, unified effort” (Nguyen, 9). Asselin highlights the internal struggle between the moderate “North-firsters” and militant “South-firsters,” demonstrating that, by 1963, Vietnamese moderates—and party icons—Ho Chi Minh and, to a lesser degree, Vo Nguyen Giap had been effectively marginalized in Vietnamese politics by Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, Truong Chinh, and General Nguyen Chi Thanh. Nguyen contends that over the course of the American War, Le Duan exploited the powers he had achieved at the Ninth Plenum to construct a police state above the seventeenth parallel that would neutralize his domestic opponents. He also repeatedly used the war to mobilize the people to embrace his state-building policies, particularly his controversial General Offensive–General Uprising strategy—a go-for-broke approach to the struggle in the South that would (1) mobilize the North behind the war effort; (2) deliver a decisive victory for Hanoi; (3) serve as the rationale for the DRV’s military escalation in 1964, the Tet offensive in 1968, and the Easter Offensive in 1972; and (4) ultimately fail to achieve the desired results in each case.

Second, the authors examine how the contours of the Sino-Soviet split affected both the internal and external politics of the DRV’s leadership, revealing that the communist bloc was certainly not monolithic. As Nguyen argues, the widening Sino-Soviet split placed “communist, radical, and left-leaning revolutions in a bind,” comparable to the manner in which the Cold War struggle “forced the colonial world to choose a side” between the East and the West (42). Once the American War began, the situation became even worse for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At this point, as both authors show, Le Duan sought to consolidate his hold on power in the North and take control over the direction of the revolution in the South. This necessarily made Hanoi more dependent on its allies for military and economic assistance. According to Nguyen, this dependency offered Beijing and Moscow “a chance to advance their international stature” and increase their influence in Vietnam at the other’s expense. Beijing wanted to use the war to showcase “a Maoist-style conflict with emphasis on protracted, guerrilla war in the countryside,” while rejecting peace talks. Moscow advocated negotiation and “a conventional war in order to test Soviet military hardware against the Americans.” Not only did this apply

unwanted pressure on Hanoi at a difficult time, but it also helped exacerbate the internal divisions within the VWP (80–82).

But the challenges posed by the Sino-Soviet split did not close off avenues for the advancement of the Hanoi Politburo's revolutionary agenda; rather, they provided opportunities. Domestically, both authors show how Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, and others in the Politburo were able to transplant the international split between "rightist" Soviet "revisionists" and "leftist" Chinese "radicals" onto internal party politics to marginalize and eliminate their political enemies and advance their particular agendas. In both accounts, those who adhered to the "North-first" position had their revolutionary credentials questioned and powers stripped. They were accused of harboring Soviet tendencies of being unwilling to support stepped-up military action in the South lest it draw the Americans into a war and threaten Moscow's line of "peaceful coexistence" (Asselin, 49–51, 76–78, 146–148, and 168–172; Nguyen, 63–64, 67–70, and 107).

Internationally, both authors demonstrate that Hanoi pursued a policy of "equilibrium" in the Sino-Soviet split (Asselin, 4; Nguyen, 9). Relations were strained, but they never broke. As Asselin shows, despite the complications caused to the DRV's revolutionary struggle by the Sino-Soviet split, Hanoi was at no time prepared to take any overt action that could result in the complete severance of ties with one side or the other for fear of undermining the idea of communist solidarity, which was essential for legitimizing the revolution in South Vietnam. Following the adoption of Resolution 9, when the Soviet Union refused to "approve such a hazardous initiative," while China increased its military and economic assistance, Hanoi remained unwilling "to side openly with Beijing in the Sino-Soviet dispute" (180–181). In fact, Nguyen shows how the split actually worked to the Politburo's advantage. The competition between China and the Soviet Union for influence in the DRV, she contends, allowed Hanoi to play Beijing and Moscow off of one another and "maintain strict autonomy over its war effort" (194–195).

This brings us to the third way in which these books reflect current trends in the study of the Vietnam War. Asselin and Nguyen demonstrate how minor global players could use their leverage to shape the Cold War. The leadership of the Politburo attempted to take advantage of the global climate to gain, on the one hand, international legitimacy for its struggle for national reunification and, on the other hand, international opprobrium for American efforts to thwart it.

Asselin argues that as early as the fall of 1954 the DRV leadership recognized that, though the United States may have been a stronger power materially, if it came to war over South Vietnam, it had no decisive advantage in the eyes of world opinion. To many states of the Third World and burgeoning nonaligned movement struggling to find their place in the global Cold War order, the United States could easily be perceived as a bully. Using that opportunity, Asselin shows how Hanoi embarked on a diplomatic campaign to make the international community “recognize the ‘noble’ aspirations of Hanoi” for “peaceful reunification” and condemn the “wicked intentions” of the U.S. government to prevent such a reunification (26).

Nguyen picks up the story in 1970, when the DRV turned to Nguyen Thi Binh, the foreign minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG)—the rival government established by Hanoi and the National Liberation Front in 1969 to speak for the South Vietnamese people—“to represent the Vietnamese struggle” diplomatically (183). That year, Madame Binh embarked on a goodwill tour to the Third World to gain international recognition for the PRG as the legitimate government of the South Vietnamese people and helped advance Hanoi’s aims at the Paris Peace Talks. Her tour, according to the author, validated the importance of having a diplomatic effort to complement the military struggle to skeptics like Le Duan and Mao Zedong. Though diplomacy might not win the war, Nguyen suggests that Madame Binh’s maneuvering bought “much needed time for forces to regroup, offset Sino-Soviet rivalry,” and helped “damage the enemies’ war efforts” (192). Two years later, when it appeared to Hanoi that both the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, pursuing better relations with the United States to try to blunt the threat posed to Beijing and Moscow by the Sino-Soviet split, were prepared to sell the DRV out to the Americans, the Politburo acted far more aggressively to shape the international system. Rather than cave to the pressure of its erstwhile allies to come to terms with the Americans over South Vietnam, Nguyen argues, the DRV launched the Easter Offensive at the end of March, hoping to score a “decisive victory” in the South and mitigate the danger that the thawing of Washington’s relations with both Beijing and Moscow might pose to the successful completion of the Vietnamese revolution (235).

Beyond these thematic similarities between the two books’ contributions to the scholarship on the Vietnam conflict, there are important differences. *Hanoi’s Road to War* takes a more focused approach to its subject matter than *Hanoi’s War*. Asselin concentrates on the “elements informing communist revolutionary struggle and the domestic and foreign policies

that strategy produced,” as the Politburo gradually shifted “from a cautious approach centered on nonviolent political struggle to a risky, even reckless strategy” based on violence and “decisive” victory over the enemy (1). Nguyen offers a broader account of how that strategy played out once the die had been irrevocably cast and the DRV and United States were at war with each other. She not only considers Le Duan and his efforts to use the conflict to consolidate his hold on power—though that is a primary concern of her work—but also offers a more sweeping narrative of the war for peace on the Indochinese peninsula. She explores, for example, how and why the war spilled into Laos and Cambodia and the international ramifications of that expansion; Nixon’s efforts to use the opening to China and détente with the Soviets to pressure Hanoi at the negotiating table; and Nguyen Van Thieu’s attempts to tap regional and world opinion to thwart Nixon and Kissinger’s efforts to betray the Saigon government with the Paris Peace Agreement.

With all scholarship there are certain limitations that one would like to see overcome and questions implicitly or explicitly raised that require further study. These books are no different. It should be noted up front that none of these critiques should detract from the significant contributions of these two important books to the literature and their accomplishments in demonstrating the best of the recent trends in studies of the Vietnam War. One of the biggest limitations to these studies, and one that is no fault of the authors, is the access to Vietnamese sources. Both Asselin and Nguyen make excellent use of the material they were able to acquire in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, but they still just scratch the surface. While the Vietnamese government has made significant strides in opening up its archives to foreign and domestic scholars, significant barriers remain. Absent from these books are the crucial accounts of the internal party debates between “North-” and “South-firsters,” deliberations over policy in the Foreign and Defense Ministries, and discussions of strategy among Hanoi’s military leadership. Until significant changes regarding access to information occur within the government in Hanoi, such limitations will remain for scholars of the Vietnam War.

As for questions raised, these relate to Vietnam’s position in the broader transnational story of decolonization. This phenomenon produced international forces that were arguably far more relevant to the states of the developing world than the Cold War. As we have seen, both authors demonstrate that the leadership in Hanoi, like that of many other states in the developing world, was attempting to harness these forces to advance its revolution both domestically and

internationally. This offers opportunities for broader study. For example, in the first chapter of *Hanoi's War*, Nguyen argues that Le Duan's and Le Duc Tho's revolutionary "careers were forged in the actual and metaphorical prisons of colonial Indochina under French rule" and that "the tools" they required to consolidate their hold on power in Hanoi came from "their experiences in the Mekong Delta" (19, 47). Unfortunately, she offers very little analysis or explanation of how exactly these experiences shaped these individuals as revolutionaries or informed their abilities to consolidate their power. While this was most likely done to quickly advance the narrative to the main focus of the study—the period from the Tet Offensive to the Paris Peace Agreement—it nevertheless leaves the reader wanting more. As Nguyen herself suggests, and as so much of the literature on the Vietnam Revolution emphasizes, the oppressive nature of the French colonial apparatus, especially its penal institutions, played an important role as crucibles of the revolution, particularly for Le Duan and Le Duc Tho (see, for example, Marr 1981 and Zinoman 2001). As their efforts to use first the revolution in the South and then the war against the Americans to establish their police state are central to the story, I would like to have seen more critical assessment of the French colonial apparatus and its penal colonies as loci of "revolutionary education" or the lessons learned in Vietnam's "Wild South" during their formative years (19, 23).

Internationally, there is room in these works for further study of the influence of the forces unleashed by decolonization on the Vietnam conflict. It is clear from both works that Hanoi believed that the struggle below the seventeenth parallel had implications well beyond the borders of what was then South Vietnam. Asselin notes in his introduction that, as "a newly decolonized polity engaged in a national liberation struggle" in South Vietnam, the DRV "hoped to be an example of the possibilities of national liberation" to the nonaligned and Third World states (4). Nguyen contends that "Hanoi tapped into a revolutionary network of relations that managed to bridge the Global South with progressive segments of the West," and that "this is perhaps the greatest legacy of Hanoi's war" (312). Given the fact that decolonization played such an important role in the course of the American War, and given that these authors are both telling the story from the "other side," more should be done to tease out these themes. How exactly did the Politburo in Hanoi see itself as an exemplar of national liberation to the developing world? What were the reactions of policy makers in Moscow, Beijing, and Washington to Hanoi's efforts to engage the Global South in its struggles with these powers? This in turn raises larger

questions, touched on, but admittedly beyond the scope of either book. How was the Cold War constructed in the developing world? How was it conceived by the myriad national liberation movements? Asselin states that Hanoi's "socialist allies... were more deeply invested in the global Cold War" (2). Nguyen concludes that "the global Cold War looked very different from the perspectives of the small powers in the Third World" (308). The impact of decolonization accounts for this difference in perception. Future authors on the Vietnam conflict should follow the lead of Asselin and Nguyen, bearing these conclusions in mind, and consider in their analysis how the challenges of state formation unleashed by decolonization affected the geostrategic imperatives of the Cold War.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, the "Prelude" in Bradley (2009), particularly pages 2–6, for a discussion of the influence of Vietnam studies on the scholarship of the Vietnam War.
- 2 Bradley discusses the carefully constructed narrative of "sacred war" (2009, 132–134 and 183–184), which Lien-Hang Nguyen refers to as the "bamboo curtain" (3–4).

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