

2018

# H-Diplo

 [@HDiplo](https://twitter.com/HDiplo)

**Roundtable Review**

**Volume XX, No. 2 (2018)**

*10 September 2018*

*Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse  
Roundtable and Web Production Editor: George Fujii*

Introduction by Peter B. Zinoman

**Tuong Vu. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology.***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781107154025 (hardback, \$105.00); 9781316607909 (paperback, \$35.99).

URL: <http://www.tiny.cc/Roundtable-XX-2>

## Contents

---

Introduction by Peter B. Zinoman, University of California, Berkeley.....	2
Review by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal .....	5
Review by Alec Holcombe, Ohio University.....	7
Review by Sophie Quinn-Judge, Temple University.....	14
Review by Stein Tønnesson, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) .....	17
Author's Response by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon.....	25

© **2018 The Authors.**

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

## Introduction by Peter B. Zinoman, University of California, Berkeley

---

In this forum on Tuong Vu's *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*, four distinguished historians address critical questions raised in the book about the history of Vietnamese Communism. They include Christopher Goscha (the most important historian of Vietnam writing today in English), Sophie-Quinn Judge (author of the best biographical study of Ho Chi Minh in any language), Stein Tønnesson (a prolific scholar of the 'international' history of Vietnam in the 1940s) and Alec Holcombe, (a brilliant young historian of Vietnamese Communism). The four participants sort themselves into two factions, a war-era faction (Quinn-Judge and Tønnesson) who reject Tuong Vu's central claims, and a post-war faction (Goscha and Holcombe) who endorse them. The division on exhibit here confirms that, despite the passage of over four decades, old disputes over interpretations of the Vietnam War remain unresolved.

While many Western-language studies have explored discrete periods in the history of Vietnamese Communism, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution* is the first sweeping examination of the movement from its origins in the 1920s through the post-Vietnam War era. Based on a trove of vernacular-language sources of unparalleled scope and depth, it proposes a novel and interesting periodization of Vietnamese Communism (1917-1930, 1931-1940, 1940-1951, 1953-1960, 1957-1963, 1964-1975, 1976-1979, 1980-1991, 1991-2010) and offers a wide-ranging account of its evolution over time. The historical insight featured in the book is especially impressive given Tuong Vu's disciplinary background in political science. Supplementing his arguments about continuity and change, Tuong Vu advances the straightforward thesis that the most influential factor in the history of Vietnamese communism has been its leaders' unwavering devotion to the political ideas of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. This thesis makes a modest contribution to the political science scholarship, Tuong Vu notes, by adding "another case to the comparative literature, demonstrating the salience of revolutionary ideology in world politics" (13). In the context of Vietnam War studies, on the other hand, Tuong Vu's thesis represents a forceful intervention into one of the oldest and most contentious debates in the field.

During the Vietnam conflict, 'hawks' and 'doves' disagreed about the fundamental political orientation of America's enemy. For hawks, both the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the guerilla insurgency that it supported in the southern Republic of Vietnam (RVN) were principally motivated by a version of Communist internationalism. As evidence, hawks pointed to Ho Chi Minh's long career as a Comintern agent, the integration of the DRV into the Eastern bloc, the violent social revolution (including the land reform and collectivization) that the Party spearheaded in the North, and the Vietnamese movement's formal veneration of Mao and Stalin. For hawks, the Communist leadership's relentless and ultimately successful drive to conquer South Vietnam derived from a quasi-religious desire to liberate countrymen oppressed by capitalism and imperialism.

For doves, on the other hand, the Vietnamese Communist leadership's core motivation was nationalism. As evidence, they pointed out that the two great causes animating the movement between 1925 and 1975 were freedom from colonial rule and territorial unification. They also found an intense nationalism in the trope of 'resistance to foreign invasion' that saturated the historical narratives and political culture promoted by Vietnamese Communism. For doves, the critical nationalist agenda of the Vietnamese Communists was an important reason why the containment doctrine should never have been applied to the country and why the American intervention was misguided from the start.

Tuong Vu's argument about the devotion of Vietnamese Communist elites to a radical leftist ideology reprises the hawkish position but he fortifies it significantly by mobilizing a massive new body of corroborating evidence. "In researching his topic," Holcombe points out, "Tuong Vu took advantage of thousands of Party resolutions, orders, circulars, and general policy statements made public by the Vietnamese government in its 2001 *Party Documents* series. He appears to have read, cover to cover, every one of this series' fifty-nine volumes, along with a variety of newspapers, archival materials, memoirs, and secondary scholarship." Tuong Vu's exceptionally wide reading impresses even his toughest critics. Tønnesson praises his "thorough research and impressive erudition" while Quinn-Judge, in an otherwise unsympathetic review, acknowledges that the "author has gone farther and deeper into this topic than any previous writer in English."

While they do not map on to each other with complete precision, the dovish and hawkish positions dovetail with contending schools of historical interpretation of the Vietnam War known as orthodoxy and revisionism. The persistence of these tendencies in the field may be seen in two issues raised in the Forum about which reviewers express conflicting views. The first is the so-called 'lost opportunity thesis' which argues that an irrationally anti-Communist United States rejected friendly overtures from Ho Chi Minh during the 1940s and 50s thus driving the Vietnamese Communists into the arms of Beijing and Moscow. Citing copious textual evidence, Tuong Vu rejects this thesis, arguing that the zealous ideological partisanship of the Vietnamese leadership at the time made an alliance with America unlikely in the extreme. Goscha and Holcombe support Tuong Vu's rejection of the 'lost opportunity thesis,' with Goscha noting that a similar argument about a lost American opportunity in communist China has been called convincingly into question by scholars such as Chen Jian.<sup>1</sup> Quinn-Judge and Tønnesson, on the other hand, continue to endorse 'the lost opportunity thesis,' with Quinn-Judge arguing that it was American intransigence that radicalized the DRV.

A second issue over which reviewers disagree is Tuong Vu's argument about internal factionalism within the Communist leadership. For Tuong Vu, factionalism in the Party has been overrated, as has a theory that the leadership was split between a moderate nationalist wing headed by Ho Chi Minh and a radical, internationalist wing led by Le Duan. Calling into question the characterization of Ho Chi Minh as a moderate nationalist, Tuong Vu suggests that what is most striking about the Vietnamese Communists was their shared commitment to the same overarching ideological project. With some minor caveats, Holcombe endorses this interpretation adding that doves inflate the significance of factionalism within the Vietnamese Communist leadership for two instrumental reasons: it evokes the presence of moderate Communist elites who deserved American support and it heightens a contrast between a flexible, moderate Ho Chi Minh and a rigid extremist United States. Quinn-Judge and Tønnesson remain unconvinced by this revisionist argument. The former argues that Ho Chi Minh was a moderate pragmatist with a strong nationalist streak. The latter attempts to resuscitate the fifty-year old interpretive scheme advanced by Huynh Kim Khanh which highlighted a conflict between 'national patriots' (led by Ho Chi Minh) and 'proletarian internationalists' (ultimately the Le Duan and Le Duc Tho faction).<sup>2</sup>

Contributors to the Forum raise additional questions and concerns. In response to Tuong Vu's analysis of 'factional divides within the party' during the latter stages of the War, Goscha requests more historiography through additional engagement with the work of scholars who hold differing views. Holcombe attributes greater significance to Ho Chi Minh's struggles with rivals in the 1930s and he disputes Tuong Vu's optimistic speculation that the War was 'winnable' for the RVN. He also questions Tuong Vu's conclusions about the 'rationality' of Hanoi's post-war foreign policy. Quinn-Judge and Tønnesson question the book more aggressively. Quinn-Judge challenges its mono-causal explanatory framework and its static portrayal of Communist ideology. She restates her essentially sympathetic interpretation of Ho Chi Minh as a moderate, pragmatic nationalist, an argument of Tønnesson's as well. Tønnesson rejects Tuong Vu's overly rigid view of Communist ideology which, he claims, changed over time and included space for the expression of diverse positions. He also argues that patriotism, not Communism, "carried the greatest normative weight for Vietnam's Communist leaders."

The critiques of Quinn-Judge and Tønnesson affirm the durability of divisions that date back fifty years. But they also introduce little new concrete evidence to back up their claims. This contrasts with the massive excavation of primary source material carried by Tuong Vu. Owing to his prodigious labors, the weight of the empirical record tips significantly in favor of his revisionist thesis.

### Participants:

**Tuong Vu** is Professor of Political Science and director of Asian Studies at the University of Oregon, and has held visiting appointments at Princeton University and National University of Singapore. Vu is the author or co-editor of four books, including *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge, 2017), *Paths to Development in Asia: South*

---

<sup>1</sup> Chen Jian, "The Myth of America's 'Lost Chance' in China: A Chinese Perspective in Light of New Evidence," *Diplomatic History* 21:1 (Winter 1997): 77-86.

<sup>2</sup> Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

*Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (Cambridge, 2010), *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (Palgrave, 2009), and *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford, 2008). He has also authored numerous articles on the politics of nationalism, revolution, and state-building in East and Southeast Asia. Currently he is working on a book about the imperial origins of modern states and the global order in East Asia

**Peter Zinoman** is Professor and currently chairman of the history department at University of California Berkeley. He is the author of *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* and *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vu Trong Phung*. He is the co-translator and editor of *Dumb Luck: A Novel by Vu Trong Phung* and the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. He is currently writing a book on North Vietnam in the 1950s.

**Christopher Goscha** is Associate Professor of International Relations in the history department at the Université du Québec à Montréal, where he teaches courses on the Vietnam War, International Relations, Imperial and World History. He received his undergraduate degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in 1987 and received his Ph.D. from the *Ecole pratique des Hautes études* at the Sorbonne in 2001. He recently published *Vietnam, Un Etat né de la guerre* (Armand Colin, 2011). He is currently revising this book for publication in English as the *Road to Dien Bien Phu: The State that Made Modern Vietnam* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming).

**Alec Holcombe** is an Assistant Professor of history at Ohio University, Athens, where he teaches about Vietnam in particular and about Southeast Asia more broadly. His research and writing focuses on the history of Vietnamese communism, especially socialist construction and mass mobilization in the early Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

**Sophie Quinn-Judge** is the author of *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years* (2002) and most recently, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954-75* (2017). She retired as an Associate Professor of History at Temple University in 2015, and is a fellow of the Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture and Society at Temple. She is a co-editor of *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. II, forthcoming in October 2017.

**Stein Tønnesson** is a research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) who served as leader of the East Asian Peace program at Uppsala University, 2011-2017. Among his publications are: *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (SAGE, 1991); 'The South China Sea in the Age of European Decline,' *Modern Asian Studies* 40:1 (2006): 1-57; 'Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and Indochina: A Reassessment,' in M.A. Lawrence and F. Logevall, eds, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Harvard University Press, 2007): 56-73; *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (University of California Press, 2010), *Explaining the East Asian Peace* (NIAS Press, 2017), and 'Peace by Development' in E. Bjarnegård and J. Kreutz, eds. *Debating the East Asian Peace* (NIAS Press, 2017).

Review by Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal

---

Vietnamese Communists believed. From Ho Chi Minh to Truong Chinh by way of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, the founding fathers of the Vietnamese Communist Party today may have been pragmatic nationalists dedicated to the liberation of their country, but they were also dedicated Marxist-Leninists and defenders of the Communist faith. Even when their Soviet and Chinese brothers-in-arms had visibly turned on each other by the early 1960s, Vietnamese Communists soldiered on, convinced of the righteousness of the internationalist cause and determined to carry the torch of world revolution alone if the others were not up to the challenge. In nine chronologically arranged chapters starting with Ho's discovery of Communism in Europe in the 1920s to Vietnam's efforts to navigate a post-Communist world today, Tuong Vu convincingly demonstrates the remarkable extent to which ideology drove the Communist party's view of the world, of Vietnam, and of itself. To make his case over this long period of time, Tuong Vu taps into the Communist Party's recently published documents covering most of the period under study, the *Van Kien Dang* series. He also mines the Communist press and a wide-range of memoirs penned by Vietnamese Communists. H-Diplo readers would, I think, do well to read this book as closely as they have the works of scholars who have stressed the importance of ideology for understanding Chinese Communist foreign relations, such as Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, Lorenz Lüthi, Sergei Radchenko, and Arne Westad among many others.<sup>1</sup>

Like Chen Jian's landmark article destroying the myth of the 'lost chance' in Sino-American relations in 1949-50,<sup>2</sup> Tuong Vu does something similar by debunking the myth that American presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Lyndon Johnson repeatedly 'missed' opportunities to find peace with Ho Chi Minh at Versailles after the First World War, in Hanoi after the Second, in 1950 by refusing to recognize Ho as an 'Asian Tito,' and so on with a flurry of peace overtures proffered by just about every country in the world. Had the Americans just recognized the nationalism driving Vietnamese Communists and allowed them to follow a neutral path in the Cold War, so the standard explanation goes, the two sides could have reached some sort of an arrangement and thereby avoided war. Tuong Vu responds that Vietnamese Communists were more than nationalists. They were, like so many others in twentieth-century world history, committed revolutionaries and, in their case, firm believers in the superiority of Communism. With this book, Tuong Vu shows that there was no real chance for accommodation with the United States.

Tuong Vu's book, however, is about much more than debunking the American myth of 'missed opportunities.' On the contrary, he provides the most in-depth and sustained analysis of the role of ideology in the making of the Vietnamese Communist revolution from the early 1920s to the present. Like their Chinese counterparts, obtaining full independence from imperial control was a top priority; but it was also part of a wider march towards the creation of a single-party Communist state (based on land reform, collectivization, and Stalinist industrialization) and the promotion of a wider internationalist revolution. War, Tuong Vu argues, was not simply imposed on the Vietnamese Communists. The latter chose war in order to realize the revolution they had begun against the French with Chinese help but temporarily put on hold at the Geneva Conference of 1954 dividing Vietnam into a Communist north and a non-Communist south. Tuong Vu carefully analyzes how the party's commitment to ideology led it to resume war under the leadership of a committed Marxist-Leninist, Le Duan, with, according to Vu, a green light from Ho Chi Minh. In Vu's words, "patriotism was made to serve socialism, not vice versa" (147).

Chapters five and six are perhaps two of the most thought-provoking parts of Tuong Vu's book. Running from 1957 to 1975, the chapters first demonstrates how Le Duan climbed to the top of the party and, faced with the burgeoning Sino-Soviet dispute, shifted the party to a 'realistic internationalism' instead of blindly following Sino-Soviet suggestions as in the past. Tuong Vu then carefully analyzes how Le Duan's participation in the Moscow Conference in 1960 and in inner Party discussions in Hanoi

---

<sup>1</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China & the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Qiang Zhai, *China & the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sergei Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); and Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Chen Jian, "The Myth of America's 'Lost Chance' in China: A Chinese Perspective in Light of New Evidence," *Diplomatic History* 21:1 (1997): 77-86.

thereafter led to a more independent-minded Communist party under Le Duan's leadership. Despite this independence in the Sino-Soviet dispute, the party under Le Duan's stewardship remained as committed as ever to promoting Communism inside Vietnam and at the international level. This meant accepting that the Communist bloc was divided and that the Soviets under Nikita Khrushchev had perhaps lost their way, but the party got around this by pledging allegiance to the 'socialist camp' rather than the Soviet hub. There was thus no break with the Soviet Union. There was no attempt to follow a neutralist, 'Titoist' line either. While Le Duan pushed out the pro-Soviet revisionists in his own party (apparently they were gravitating around General Vo Nguyen Giap), he also refused to recognize the Chinese as the head of the Communist camp. Again, it was fidelity to the 'socialist camp' that counted most and loyalty to it allowed the Vietnamese to maintain joint Sino-Soviet support despite the rift between the Communist giants.

But Le Duan went further. While he embraced Vietnam's long history of resisting foreign aggression as the war against the Americans intensified, he also saw the war as placing the Vietnamese party on the cutting edge of the revolutionary struggle against American imperialism, what Vu refers to as "vanguard internationalism" (18). This audacious view of the Vietnamese revolution, according to Vu, led Le Duan to approve the massive attacks of the Tet Offensive in 1968 and again during the Easter Offensive of 1972, both of which cost the People's Army of Vietnam, not to mention the civilian populations caught in the crossfire, huge casualties. Le Duan launched these attacks in the interests of the Vietnamese revolution but also did so in the belief that this put the Vietnamese on the revolutionary map like no other party at the time.

One wishes here that Tuong Vu could have said just a bit more for the general reader as well as the specialist about why Le Duan's rise to power is so significant in the historiography of the Vietnam War and of Vietnamese Communism. Why and how did Le Duan replace Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh and come to oppose General Vo Nguyen Giap? Tuong Vu says that Ho Chi Minh apparently sided with Le Duan's aggressive line on the war, approved in 1963, but then avoids engaging with Pierre Asselin and Lien-Hang Nguyen's argument that Le Duan was the hawk and Ho was the dove who lost out to Le Duan.<sup>3</sup> What exactly were the factional divides within the party? Sophie Quinn-Judge, Lien-Hang Nguyen, Judy Stowe, Georges Boudarel, and Martin Grossheim among others have written on the importance of the Anti-Revisionist affair.<sup>4</sup> What are the competing views on this very important event in the history of Vietnamese Communism and the Vietnam War? And if Giap was in such deep trouble in the late 1960s, is it not significant that he led the Easter Offensive of 1972 and played a central role in the Great Spring Offensive that brought down the Republic of Vietnam in 1975—in collaboration with the Secretary General of the Party, Le Duan? Does this mean that it was a question of differences over changing military strategy rather than ideological debates that divided the party?

Whatever one's take on Vietnamese Communism, Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, or the wars over Vietnam, Tuong Vu's book confirms wonderfully that a full reappraisal of such events is now underway. This is a welcome and good thing, as similar books on Chinese and Soviet foreign relations reviewed on H-Diplo and elsewhere have shown. Tuong Vu's book should spark honest debate and fruitful exchanges that move us away from the out-dated polemics opposing 'Orthodox' and 'Revisionist' scholars and counterfactual arguments about 'missed opportunities' that do not really get us anywhere.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) and 'Derrière Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan l'apparatchik', *L'Histoire—Les Collections de l'Histoire : Le Vietnam depuis 2000 ans* 62 (2014): 66-70; and Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, 'The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-1968', *Cold War History* 5:4 (2005): 479-500; Georges Boudarel, *Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam. Communisme et dissidence 1954-1956* (Paris: Jacques Bertoin, 1991); Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*; Judy Stowe, 'Révisionnisme au Vietnam', *Communisme* 65-66 (2001): 233-249; Martin Grossheim, 'Revisionism' in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam', *Cold War History* 5:4 (2005): 451-477.



Review by Alec Holcombe, Ohio University

---

Tuong Vu's recently published book, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (hereafter, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*), makes an outstanding contribution to the field of Vietnam studies in particular and to Cold War studies more broadly. Never before have we seen a book on Vietnamese Communism that traces the evolution of ideas and policies from the movement's beginnings, in the mid-1920s, to recent times. In researching his topic, Tuong Vu took advantage of thousands of Party resolutions, orders, circulars, and general policy statements made public by the Vietnamese government in its 2001 *Party Documents* series. He appears to have read, cover to cover, every one of this series' fifty-nine volumes, along with a variety of newspapers, archival materials, memoirs, and secondary scholarship.

*Vietnam's Communist Revolution* continues a scholarly trend toward greater interest in the ideological commitment of Vietnamese Communists. According to Tuong Vu, the men and women who led the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, 1945-1975) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV, 1976-today) were not "ideologically shallow" (2). They saw Marxism Leninism as much more than a patriotic tool used to liberate the country from colonialism or to unify a divided country. Leaders such as Hồ Chí Minh and Lê Duẩn had "deeply held" Communist beliefs and "dedicated their careers to utopia" (1).

The revisionist character of Tuong Vu's book lies primarily in the author's willingness to put Communism at the narrative forefront and to examine how the ideology shaped the worldview and decisions of Party leaders. Up until the last decade or two, influential scholarship on the Vietnam War or on the Vietnamese Revolution often showed a reluctance to pursue this line of inquiry with any kind of resolve. Much of this reluctance surely stemmed from a fear of providing retrospective justification for America's disastrous military intervention or of diverting attention away from the consequences of that intervention. Set against this scholarly background, Tuong Vu's contrasting approach, his unwavering and rigorous attention to Communist ideology, explored in thousands of recently released Party documents, produces a narrative of striking newness sure to generate controversy.

In this review, I work chronologically through *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*. The review's first section covers the colonial period (1924-1945), the second covers the First Indochina War (1946-1954), the third covers the Second Indochina War (1954-1975), and the fourth covers the period of the SRV (1976 to today). I find Tuong Vu's overall argument for the importance of ideology convincing, but I challenge a few of his smaller arguments along the way.

*Vietnamese Communism during the Colonial Period, 1924-1945*

In his account of Vietnamese Communism during the colonial period, Tuong Vu argues that past histories, particularly influential ones written by Huynh Kim Khanh and Sophie Quinn-Judge,<sup>1</sup> have exaggerated the extent to which "fragmentation" and "ideological confusion" affected the movement: "Despite two complete turnovers of leadership, continuity and unity within the ICP [Indochinese Communist Party]<sup>2</sup> were far more significant than conventionally believed" (88). For scholars of an antiwar bent, the image of a complex Communist movement with a wide range of views held strong appeal. First, it provided a pleasing contrast to the U.S. government's nuance-averse anti-Communism of the 1950s and 1960s. Second, it created the tantalizing possibility that Vietnam's Communist movement had moderates who could have been courted successfully by the U.S. government in 1945 and 1946.

The most famous of those alleged moderates was Hồ Chí Minh, the father of Vietnamese Communism. To a large extent, how scholars have interpreted the first two decades of Vietnam's Communist movement has been determined by how they have

---

<sup>1</sup> Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism: 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 152; Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Hồ Chí Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 190.

<sup>2</sup> This was the name for Vietnam's Communist Party from 1930-1945.

interpreted HỒ's early career. In the standard narrative that appears in books by Khanh, Quinn-Judge, Pierre Brocheux, and William Duiker,<sup>3</sup> a moderate or "pragmatic" HỒ founded and led the movement from 1925 to 1927, started to lose control of it from 1928 to 1929, suffered sidelining by younger and more "dogmatic" (79) Party leaders from 1930 to 1939, and returned to the fore in 1940. Did HỒ experience a dramatic fall from grace during the 1930s as most scholars have alleged? Tuong Vu acknowledges that "tension" existed between HỒ and other Party leaders but argues that scholars have mischaracterized the nature of that tension and overstated its extent.

According to Tuong Vu, the policy differences behind the tension add up to less than the fundamental change depicted by earlier scholars. The younger cohort of leaders who rose to prominence during the 1930s "built on the work" of HỒ—they did not veer in a radically new direction (89). In particular, Tuong Vu shows that Vladimir Lenin's two-stage revolutionary strategy, introduced by HỒ in the 1920s and fine-tuned by his successor, Trần Phú, in 1931, "remained endearing to ICP leaders" throughout the colonial period (87). Inspired by the Comintern's more aggressive policies of the "Third Period" (1928-1935), younger Party leaders of the 1930s made tactical adjustments to HỒ's prescriptions. These comrades called for more overlap between Lenin's two revolutionary stages, more openness about the Communist future, and more restraint in the use of temporary class alliances (49). But the two distinct stages remained, as did the movement's consistent end goals: alliance with the Soviet Union, national independence under Party leadership, and socialist transformation under Party guidance. Thus, by Tuong Vu's yardstick of overall strategy and end goals (as opposed to the broadness or narrowness of the Party's front strategy), ideological continuity appears strong in Vietnam's Communist movement.

On the related question of HỒ's alleged professional reversal, Tuong Vu again sees scholarly exaggeration. I am not so sure. To me, the complaints about HỒ that the Party General Secretary, Trần Phú, sent to the Comintern in a 1931 letter still seem severe, even if they were more "bureaucratic" in nature than they were "ideological" (65-66). Phú's "not-to-criticize-Kok [HỒ]" comment (65), which Tuong Vu discovered in the above-mentioned Comintern letter, is intriguing. But does it necessarily cast Phú's criticisms of HỒ in a significantly less negative light, as Tuong Vu argues? Does it prove that Phú had "clearly absolved" HỒ of responsibility for past problems in the movement (66)?

Another piece of evidence for the fall-from-grace theory is the fact that, in 1935, HỒ's comrades did not elect him, the founder and early leader of Vietnam's Communist movement, to be a full-fledged member of the Central Committee—they only elected him 'candidate member' [*dự bị*]. Tuong Vu argues that this does not indicate a "demotion" since HỒ's comrades "may have intended for him to take over the Party if its leadership was arrested or killed." Additionally, Tuong Vu points out, the Party leaders still affirmed HỒ's position as Comintern representative and "asked him to write a book using his earlier mistakes in [his front organization] *Thanh niên* to help the Party fight against the lingering influences of revolutionary nationalism, reformism, and idealism." These leaders also recommended that HỒ, then based in Moscow, work translating documents and checking the translations of others (77).

How would HỒ, a man of enormous confidence and ambition, have interpreted this treatment by younger comrades? I think scholars will continue to debate whether his professional experiences during the Comintern's "Third Period" constitute a major career reversal. But, in carefully re-examining the evidence, Tuong Vu makes a convincing case that scholars have inflated the alleged moderate-versus-radical ideological gap between HỒ and the Party leaders of the 1930s, under-appreciating the strong elements of continuity in the movement.

---

<sup>3</sup> Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*; Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years*; Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), trans. 2003 Claire Duiker; William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).



*The First Indochina War: 1946-1954*

In 1945, Hồ Chí Minh eagerly cooperated with an American Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.) team, inserted elements of the American Declaration of Independence into his own DRV Declaration of Independence, claimed to dissolve the Communist Party, and publicly insisted that his DRV regime was not Communist. For many years, scholars such as David Marr<sup>4</sup> saw these and other moves as evidence that the United States could have allied with Hồ's DRV government and thereby prevented the horrors of the First and Second Indochina Wars. An apparent desire of scholars to keep the "lost opportunity" lesson in play meant avoiding or somehow downplaying many of Hồ's anti-American statements, his militantly Communist ones, and the implications of his numerous propaganda articles written under various aliases. The overall effect of such an approach is a Hồ Chí Minh and an early DRV state that look "ideologically shallow," to borrow Tuong Vu's term—shallow enough to set aside Communist beliefs indefinitely for the sake of friendship with the capitalist United States. In his book, Tuong Vu lets readers hear the Bolshevik Hồ as he sounds in dozens of articles written under pseudonyms such as "C.B.," "Đ.X.," "T.L.," etc. (127-128).

This more complete image of the DRV leader shows the unlikelihood that the above-mentioned evidence for the "lost opportunity" theory reflected genuine belief. These actions are most reasonably interpreted as temporary tactical moves intended to give Hồ's Communist Party an advantage over domestic rivals and, after seizing power, a chance at survival in dangerous circumstances. Furthermore, as Tuong Vu argues, the remarkable victory of the Soviet Union in the Second World War and that socialist country's emergence as a great power brightened the prospects for world revolution in the 1945-1946 period: "It is unthinkable, therefore, that Vietnamese communists would have given up their radical ambitions at such an exciting time, even if American policies had been more accommodating" (292).

A second interesting aspect of Tuong Vu's coverage of the First Indochina War concerns the way that Party leaders viewed the coming of the Cold War to Vietnam, which was formalized in early 1950 with Soviet-bloc recognition of the DRV. Past accounts have tended to depict Party leaders as appreciative of Soviet and Chinese military aid but have said little about how Hồ and other DRV leaders viewed the extension of Cold War politics into Vietnam. Tuong Vu shows that the Party leaders maintained the "two-camp worldview" throughout World War II and even during their brief period of cooperation with the O.S.S. in 1945 (155). After the First Indochina War began, DRV leaders lobbied hard for a reluctant Stalin to see the conflict as a Cold War battle. "Clearly China and the Soviet Union had become involved in Indochina not at their own initiatives, but by the persistent and proactive efforts of Ho and his comrades" (110). In *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, the DRV leaders appear to relish their role as "vanguard" of the Socialist bloc. Tuong Vu quotes a telling passage from a Party resolution released in February of 1950:

After the victory of the Chinese revolution, Indochina has become an outpost [*tiền tiêu*] in the anti-imperialist front in Southeast Asia. However, the world counter-revolutionary camp is not deterred [*chun*] by the fact that Vietnam has been recognized by [the socialist bloc]; they are even more actively executing their conspiracy to intervene. The issue for us is that we must act faster [*tranh thủ thời gian*]...move on to an all-out attack phase to liberate our country and also to protect world peace, to protect the Soviet Union, to stall the plot of warmongers, and to spread revolution to Southeast Asia (112).

This passage reflects one of the most important messages of *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*: the great extent to which the ambitions and reputations of the Party leaders were tied to a hot Cold War and to an expansionist Soviet Union. In early 1950, the Party leaders railed against fellow Vietnamese who feared the extension of the Cold War into their small country, dismissing these

---

<sup>4</sup> See David Marr's two books on the Vietnamese Revolution: *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and *Vietnam: State, War, Revolution (1945-1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

worriers as “caring only about their selfish interests [*quyền lợi riêng*]” (112). Tuong Vu shows that Hồ Chí Minh and his comrades saw the arrival of the Cold War in Vietnam as a “great opportunity” (115).

### *The Second Indochina War: 1954-1975*

In his account of how the Second Indochina War began (the period from 1954 to 1964), Tuong Vu mostly affirms the process’s basic elements described in recent books by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and Pierre Asselin.<sup>5</sup> These elements include the importance of Lê Duẩn (Party leader from the late 1950s to 1986) as a driver of policy, the top-Party struggle between ‘pro-Soviet moderates’ and ‘pro-Beijing radicals,’ and the overall agency of Hà Nội in the military escalation. As Asselin does, Tuong Vu cautions against overemphasizing the Party Central Committee’s January 1959 meeting (the 15th Plenum) as a turning point in the process. At this meeting, the DRV leaders did formalize their commitment to a greater stress on “armed struggle” in the South. But, “ideologically speaking,” Tuong Vu argues, the importance of the following year, 1960, needs to be recognized. This was when Lê Duẩn proposed that the DRV “break its ideological link with the Soviet Union” and stand more closely with Mao’s militant line in the Sino-Soviet split (154). As other scholars do, Tuong Vu stresses the importance of the Central Committee’s meeting held in December 1963 (the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenum), when Lê Duẩn formalized his decision to escalate the war and pursue a quick victory, hopefully before the United States had time to counter (173).

*Vietnam’s Communist Revolution* departs from the accounts of Nguyen, Asselin, and others in a couple of ways. First, past scholars have often attributed the 1959 move primarily to Lê Duẩn, who, at that time, was consolidating his position as Party leader. Unlike Asselin, who suggests that Hồ Chí Minh was opposed to Duẩn’s stance,<sup>6</sup> Tuong Vu holds that Hồ and also Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng “played critical albeit less acknowledged roles in the eventual making of that decision” (142). Hồ produced a number of propaganda articles that aimed to prepare the DRV psychologically for the coming struggle. Đồng, for his part, worked on drafting the ideological justification for the move. In *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution*, the Party leaders in 1959 appear more unified in their basic beliefs about policy in the South than they do in Nguyen’s and Asselin’s accounts (142).

Second, Tuong Vu’s and Asselin’s narratives diverge in a similar way in their coverage of the above-mentioned Central Committee meeting of December 1963, when Lê Duẩn committed the DRV to all-out war. The two scholars interpret differently the subsequent “special Political Conference,” a quasi-public meeting chaired by Hồ Chí Minh in March of 1964 to discuss (and provide a democratic veneer to) the move toward full mobilization for war. Asselin sees dissent in Hồ’s speech at the conference<sup>7</sup> while Tuong Vu sees a “willingness to cooperate with Lê Duẩn’s faction,” even if Hồ’s feelings about the policy had been “ambivalent” (180).

---

<sup>5</sup> 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); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War: 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). These works, it should be noted, benefited from other important treatments of the period. An incomplete list includes Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) and *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Washington D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003); Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ang Chen Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists’ Perspective* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002); Martin Grossheim, “Revisionism in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” *Cold War History* 5:4 (November-December 2005), 451-477; Sophie Quinn-Judge, “The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-1968,” *Cold War History* 5:4 (November-December 2005): 479-500; Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-1964: Changing Alliances* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Asselin, 61-62.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Tuong Vu's image of a more unified top Party leadership committing the North to armed struggle in 1959 and of Hồ Chí Minh supporting Lê Duẩn's move to all-out war four years later is intriguing. It suggests that the field of Vietnam studies, perhaps inspired by the severity of Lê Duẩn's repression of "moderate" rivals during the 1963-1964 and 1967 periods, may have inflated the actual differences between these two Party factions. In spirit, Tuong Vu's image seems to align with Christopher Goscha's recent take on the factionalism of this period: "This group [of "moderates"] was not 'pro Soviet' or a bunch of 'doves', but rather believed that the best military strategy *for the time being* was a guerrilla, protracted people's war, not a conventional, direct one."<sup>8</sup>

Did any of the "moderates" (Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Hoàng Minh Chính, etc.), while publicly espousing the Soviet line of "peaceful coexistence," actually question the Party's right to send agents into the South, to recruit soldiers, to form secret military bases, to assassinate village chiefs, to form the National Liberation Front, and to carry out a range of activities aimed at destabilizing the Saigon government? Issues of style and timing aside, did these "moderates" question the Party's right to take control over the South by force? Tuong Vu's and Goscha's scholarship raises the question of whether the natural predilection of scholars to seek out and value complexity has led to an exaggerated sense of possibility in the lead-up to the Second Indochina War.

Another important issue related to the war is the role played by Marxism-Leninism in the DRV victory. Tuong Vu argues that the ideology both helped and hurt the Party leaders:

Finally, ideological concepts, such as correlation of forces and revolution being the work of the masses, helped Hanoi formulate its war strategies. The concepts did *not* help Hanoi make correct war strategies, as the heavy losses of revolutionary forces and the absence of mass uprisings during the *Tet* Offensive and the Easter Offensive attested. In the end, determination, ambition, and fortuitous circumstances proved to be more important than strategies (209).

If they had not been Communist, though, could the Party leaders have led the DRV to victory? Without the coercive power afforded by Communist state institutions, could the Party leaders have ensured that their citizens, the people who were actually fighting, acted with the required "determination" and "ambition" to win?

The overall thrust of my questions in the last two paragraphs—all of which I would answer in the negative—puts me at odds with Tuong Vu's assessment of the Second Indochina War expressed in his epilogue. There he argues that the war was "not unwinnable, nor did the containment of the Vietnamese revolution even require direct US military intervention." South Vietnam and its key ally, the United States, could have exploited "cracks in the Communist state and wedges in Hanoi's relations with its brothers" (293). I agree that the Republic of Vietnam's demise was not a foregone conclusion. And I believe that our field is a healthier, more stimulating place when scholars do not feel morally and professionally obligated to show that the conflict was unwinnable. Such an approach tends to create historical 'no-go zones' that leave an incomplete and unfair picture of the times.

Nevertheless, I think oddsmakers would have to favor the DRV in just about any conceivable military contest against the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). First, as Tuong Vu shows, the Party leaders had spent virtually their entire adult lives on a war footing. Psychologically, these revolutionaries were better prepared for war than were their RVN adversaries. Second, the DRV leaders had gained patriotic credibility and invaluable experience managing the First Indochina War. They were military professionals—their rivals in Saigon, though not without talent, were military amateurs in comparison. And third, the Party leaders' Communist ideology, admiration for Soviet institutions, and practical responses to the needs of war facilitated the construction of a totalitarian state in the North.

---

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 319.

As Tuong Vu shows, that state had critical weaknesses, one of the most important being catastrophic inefficiency as an economic engine. However, in the particular conditions of the Cold War, Hanoi's totalitarian state did not need to earn money to prosecute a war. As long as the Soviet Union and China could be pressured into living up to the ideals of proletarian internationalism (strong motivation for Hanoi to play the role of orthodox disciple), an adequate supply of weapons and food aid could be obtained mostly for free. And the poor results of the Party's socialist economic policies could be attributed plausibly to the destruction brought about by the First and Second Indochina Wars. On the positive side, agricultural collectivization (finished in 1960) enabled the DRV state to seize almost complete control over the meager Northern food supply. This and other Soviet-inspired state structures gave Party leaders a degree of leverage over the North Vietnamese people that could not be matched by the merely authoritarian state of Ngô Đình Diệm and his successors. The totalitarian state built on Marxist-Leninist ideals allowed Lê Duẩn to make strategic miscalculations (such as during the Tết Offensive), to suffer "heavy losses," and to still prevail in the war.

### *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam: 1976 to Today*

*Vietnam's Communist Revolution's* treatment of the period from the SRV's establishment in 1976 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 covers ground that has received less scholarly attention than have the earlier periods. I found it especially fascinating. According to Tuong Vu, in the period from 1976-1979, the Party leaders hoped to reduce their dependence on Soviet-bloc aid by employing a "broad-based" foreign policy. This meant testing trade possibilities with the capitalist bloc and not joining the Moscow-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) (231-234). As the Party leader, Lê Duẩn, stated dreamily at the time, "Japan has no raw materials, but it can produce all kinds of things because it trades with the entire world. Our natural endowments are richer—why can't we trade like Japan?" (214). Tuong Vu argues that trade with capitalist countries did not mean abandonment of socialist principles. "What Le Duan wanted was not so much to make friends with capitalist countries but to make their checkbook and technology serve socialist development in Vietnam according to the Soviet model" (232).

Tuong Vu holds that a "strong sense of entitlement" among SRV leaders made them believe that they could forgo the COMECON, explore the possibilities of capitalist-bloc investment, and still receive generous aid packages from the Soviet bloc (232). The Soviets and East Germans had other ideas. In mid-1977, these allies suddenly scaled back their aid programs to Vietnam. This led the DRV Prime Minister, Phạm Văn Đồng, to abruptly cancel a planned trip to France and to fly instead to Moscow. As Tuong Vu explains, "Vietnam soon agreed to apply for membership in the COMECON and to comply more readily with Soviet interests. Soviet aid quickly resumed afterward" (234).

For Tuong Vu, the episode suggests the importance of ideology. "Hanoi's quick fall back into Moscow's open arms indicated the more powerful pull of ideology compared to the push of the international structure" (235). He argues that, "[if] Vietnamese leaders had valued their national independence more than anything else [i.e., socialist ideals], they must have behaved differently in the face of Soviet pressure in 1977" (234). They might have forgone Soviet aid or agreed to normalization of ties with the United States, which President Jimmy Carter had offered in 1977 without any preconditions (216). To Tuong Vu, the diplomatic course charted by the Party leadership "suggests the poverty of international theories that assume the 'rational' behavior of states" (235).

He sees in a similar light the Party's "swift move [in 1990] to seek Chinese alliance to substitute for the loss of Soviet patronage." According to him, the Party leadership's panicked remarriage with the Chinese Communist Party, after the nasty divorce of the 1970s and 1980s, is "puzzling without taking ideology into account" (296). I would argue that, viewed from the angle of regime preservation rather than national benefit, the above behavior (and the Party's continued reluctance to discard many anachronistic institutional holdovers from the Cold War) could be defended as "rational."

### *Conclusion*

The enormous extent of Tuong Vu's reading, along with his understanding of the nuances of Vietnamese language, give him a level of insight into Party sources and into Vietnam's modern history that exceeds anything we have seen in print. In one place, he notes the "eloquent" literary style of a theoretical piece written by Party general secretary, Hà Huy Tập (72). In another place, he

describes the difference between how the Party leaders announced diplomatic recognition from the Socialist bloc in their newspapers and how they did so over the radio (110). In another place, he points out the significance of Lê Duẩn's having begun a 1960 report with a section on the South. Since Tuong Vu has read every single previous report in the Party's history, he can affirm that Lê Duẩn's was the first to begin with a summary of something other than the "international situation." Elsewhere, Tuong Vu explains the subtle difference in meaning between the Vietnamese words for "assistance" [*giúp đỡ*] and "support" [*ủng hộ*] (170). *Vietnam's Communist Revolution* is full of perceptive observations like these that will help and inspire scholars of Vietnamese Communism for years to come.

I see three main arguments in Tuong Vu's book. First, the Vietnamese state today remains a predictable outcome of ideas held consistently within Vietnam's Communist movement during the colonial period. These ideas include the vanguard role of the Communist Party, state ownership of the press, and the superiority of Soviet institutions. Second, Vietnam's Party leaders benefited from and depended on the Cold War to an extent not fully appreciated by the field of Vietnam studies. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's apparent satisfaction with a divided Vietnam posed an exasperating threat to the Party's goals for the better part of eight years (1956-1963). Third, the legacies of the Party's radical past and of the Second Indochina War continue to haunt and threaten Vietnam's leaders to a remarkable degree. These men and women have, by any reasonable measure, done well managing Vietnam's economic development over the past three decades, bringing material benefits and hope to the vast majority of the population. Yet, despite these successes, it remains doubtful whether the Party could survive an open national discussion of the recent past. In this respect, Vietnam today continues to resemble Spain under the rule of the military dictator Francisco Franco.

Tuong Vu has written what is easily the most important book on Vietnamese Communism. On a few issues, I have raised questions about his interpretations. But the reader should note that my questions are based almost entirely on facts from Tuong Vu's own rich narrative—a sign of his eagerness to present and engage with a range of evidence and ideas. This has not always been a strong characteristic of scholarship on Vietnamese Communism. I hope Tuong Vu's extraordinary book will inspire the field to continue this healthy trend.

**Review by Sophie Quinn-Judge, Temple University**

---

Tuong Vu's *Vietnam's Communist Revolution* is a detailed look at the ideological beliefs of Vietnam's Communist leadership, from the early days in the 1920s until 2010. The author has gone farther and deeper into this topic than any previous writer in English—we do not know what internal analyses may have been produced in Vietnam for a limited readership. Yet his overall argument is a familiar one—that the Vietnamese leadership held fundamentally unchanging ideological views derived from Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism and that its claims to represent Vietnamese nationalism were tactical, designed to woo international and Vietnamese opinion. He uses mainly sources from the many-volume *Documents of Party History* to support his views, as well as articles from the Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) theoretical journal *Hoc Tap* and earlier party publications.

Tuong Vu produces many interesting arguments and some little-known documents. Still, I remain unconvinced. My general question about his book is whether or not this documentation is sufficient to make his case about the essential unity and continuity of the VCP leadership's views. For example, the author uses an unpublished memoir by Tran Quynh, at one time a top policy advisor to Le Duan, to show that by 1963 Le Duan, the First Secretary of what was until 1976 the Workers' Party, diverged from Hanoi's other leading ideologist Truong Chinh in his views on Mao Zedong (166-7). Le Duan is quoted as calling Mao's views on the return of capitalism to China a "phony theory" (167). Given this major disagreement, why does the author continue to refer to the 'Le Duan's faction' in the politburo? This and other evidence show that Le Duan was a 'swing voter' in leadership politics and that he was not the undisputed leader of a radical faction. This divergence of views leads to the question of how significant leadership arguments were and whether they are adequately represented in the Party's official documents. I will return to this question below. But first, a few comments on the role of ideology in historical analysis.

My belief is that to take ideology as the root of the conflict between the Vietnamese Communists and their French and American opponents can only provide a partial historical explanation and leads to a tautological analysis. (We were enemies because we were enemies.) It removes contingency as an element in the history of these conflicts and forces the problem of cause and effect into a straitjacket. All of the parties to the Indochina Wars possessed ideologies and those Vietnamese who initially embraced Communism were reacting to the humiliations and privations of colonialism; later in the 1960s many Vietnamese joined the Communist party out of anger at the U.S. occupation of their nation and the massive violence used to subdue the Communist-led resistance. If the Vietnamese leadership viewed the U.S. as an imperialist power bent on policing the world, might there have been more than ideological rigidity behind its view?

In fact, the leadership adopted a unified anti-American analysis in late 1947, after a series of disappointments in its attempts to win U.S. backing. American failure to recognize the revolutionary government of 1945-6 came out of concern for France's role in Europe, a basic underestimation of how central decolonization would become to global politics. The November 1945 directive issued by the Central Executive Committee, cited by Tuong Vu on page 103, shows that one group in the party was ready to condemn an "Anglo-Saxon bloc" for its opposition to the Soviet Union. But at the same time, President Ho Chi Minh was making his pitch to the liberal Roosevelt wing of the State Department for support of Vietnamese independence. If this had materialized, along with post-war aid, Vietnamese Communism could well have developed in a different direction. It seems too deterministic to claim that Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic offers of 1945-6 should not be given "any long-term significance," as Tuong Vu cautions (103), especially as the Communist Party was still a small, divided group within the larger Viet Minh front. On the contrary, the Vietnamese Communists were not born with these anti-American ideas and had the potential to change their views in response to changing circumstances.

Communism was never an unalterable force and Communist ideology was not an unalterable truth. Communist theory was fluid and open to change, especially in terms of the correct path for undeveloped countries to follow. Communist leaders like Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Gorbachev, Deng Xiaoping, and even Pol Pot all developed and changed their ideological positions over the years. But this is not to say that ideology was not important. It was a cudgel to be used in internal factional battles; a leader who wanted respect or absolute power had to prove himself as an ideologist to his peers. It helped if he could be shown to have been always 'correct,' hence the editing and re-editing of documents that occurs in communist states. At times Communist texts reflected such difficult compromises among different factions as to be unfathomable. In external affairs, Third World Communist leaders needed to show deference to their larger patrons by adopting



their ideology. For the Vietnamese this could involve fancy footwork to keep both the Chinese and the Soviets happy. One of Tuong Vu's contributions is to show how creatively Le Duan and his peers solved this challenge, by positing an independent Vietnamese worldview and developing distinct Vietnamese policies on the war (see pages 201, 205).

Perhaps Tuong Vu and others are justified in claiming that all policy disagreements over the years have been minor and that overall, Vietnamese ideology has followed a smoothly orthodox path. Without doubt, the party leadership has followed the Bolshevik rule to reject open factional behavior (with very few exceptions, including the defection of Hoang Van Hoan to China in 1979 and the arrests of 1967, when up to 300 second-ranking party members were accused of engaging in an anti-party plot). Much of the author's evidence for Vietnamese loyalty to Soviet Communism is convincing. But there are many pragmatic reasons for this. Does this loyalty go beyond the utopian theory, to include what most of us have learned to oppose and fear about Communism: rule by strongmen, violent repression, lack of freedom of speech, thought and most kinds of individualism? This question would have different answers for different VCP leaders.

If the encomiums of Vietnamese who had studied in the USSR, such as the series of articles by Tran Dinh Long quoted by Tuong Vu at length (51-59), are to be taken as sincere, we have to conclude that the authors were shielded from Stalinist repression or that they approved of it. Or that their need for support from Moscow was so overwhelming that they were willing to overlook the record of Stalin's various organs of repression. In fact, the author concludes his discussion of Tran Dinh Long's Popular Front-era reporting by saying that, "Like Nguyen Ai Quoc before him, Long was enthusiastic about the Soviet Union not because he found it a perfect country or system. Rather, it was the transformative vision, the radical methods, and the profound promises embodied in the Stalinist revolution that captivated him (59)." Still, in 1950, when Ho made an arduous trip to Beijing and Moscow to ask for recognition of his government in exile, the author claims that this journey "encapsulated the deep Vietnamese yearning for close relations with the Soviet bloc. The wide range of proposed collaboration between the DRV and China/the Soviet Union went far beyond the need to break out of diplomatic isolation (111)." I am not sure how one calculates this, but the VCP was by 1950 in desperate need of support from its Socialist elder brothers. And that "deep yearning" disappeared pretty quickly in 1963, when the VCP swung behind the People's Republic of China's (PRC) international policy line, in severe disappointment with Khrushchev's failure to provide major support for the growing anti-American War. Throughout the 1960s, arguments about Soviet 'revisionism' and Chinese 'dogmatism' split the VCP. The VCP leadership kept its own counsel on military and political issues well into the 1970s, out of a lack of trust of the Soviet Union. Certainly these disagreements over ideology were not minor ones.

Finally, back to the question of patriotism, nationalism and Communism. Scholars have long accepted that Communists can be nationalists, especially following the breakdown of Asian communist relations in 1978-1979. Can they also love their country? The Vietnamese Communists claimed the label of patriots and in fact believed that only those who opposed the American role in Vietnam and the southern Government of Vietnam could call themselves patriotic Vietnamese. Careerists who place power over the good of their nation exist in every system, not only in Communist ones. Such people undoubtedly exist in Vietnam. But joining the Soviet camp in order to receive political and economic support for development and industrialization does not automatically make the VCP leaders unpatriotic. Their adherence to outdated dogmas and economic policies after independence is another question. Yet there is much to debate on this issue as well, in view of Vietnam's limited options when it was trapped in a two-front war in 1978.

As a scholar who has researched and written on many of the same issues as Tuong Vu regarding the development of Vietnamese Communism and the career of Ho Chi Minh, I do not want to run through a point-by-point rebuttal on issues where I have disagreements with him. I stand by my interpretation of Ho Chi Minh's preference for 'united front' policies and the way that Comintern policies of the 'New course' led to his temporary eclipse in the 1930s. That argument is fully outlined in my book: *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years*.<sup>1</sup>

One final thought on Ho's expressions of admiration for the USSR and Stalin: the letter to Stalin of October 1950, gushing with warmth and admiration for the Soviet leader, Appendix A of this book (299), is typical of Ho's efforts to win friends and support.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

He translated Sun Yatsen's writings while he was a prisoner of the Kuomintang (GMD) during World War II, just as he promised to translate the books that Stalin has promised to write—"especially for us" (300). The tone recalls a letter that Ho once sent to the French resident in Hue in 1912, when he wanted to send money to his father from New York: "I don't know what to do, beyond turning to you, the obliging protector of our country," he wrote.<sup>2</sup> That was at a time when he was already set on his path of anti-colonial activism. In 1950, Ho was obliged to deflect criticism that he was a "nationalist, petty-bourgeois element," part of a group that "lacked faith in the revolutionary force of the proletariat."<sup>3</sup> The letter to Stalin seems to be designed to banish any doubts as to Ho Chi Minh's ardor for Soviet Communism. But it was also a plea for military support.

---

<sup>2</sup> Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Quinn-Judge, 254.

**Review by Stein Tønnesson, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)**

---

**D**o I like this book? I am not totally sure. On the one hand I feel admiration for it since it builds on a massive research effort, covers a long and difficult period in Vietnamese history (1917-2010), builds on a clear thesis, is written in precise and easily accessible prose, and has taught me a lot I did not know. On the other hand, it took me a long time to get through it because for some reason I did not enjoy the reading. I have been wondering why I am so ambivalent about it, and shall try to find out in my review below.

The main title of the book is well chosen, since it expresses the author's overall thesis: The Vietnamese Revolution was genuinely Communist and not a national liberation struggle disguised in Communist clothing. Its highly dedicated, ideologically driven leaders saw national liberation as a step towards reaching their Communist goals. They were convinced internationalists. To the extent that they were motivated by patriotism, it was a patriotism geared towards placing Vietnam in the vanguard of a global revolution. His thesis applies, Tuong Vu argues, to all of Vietnam's main Communist leaders and also to lower rank party cadre. Despite their sometimes acrimonious factional struggles about tactics as well as strategy, they were united in their Communist worldview. This was no less the case for President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap than for the Party's ideological watchdog Truong Chinh, Party Secretary General Le Duan, or any other of the top Party leaders. Ho Chi Minh himself was a fully convinced follower of Lenin and Stalin, who once told his comrades that "Stalin is never wrong" (124).

The book's thesis is not just about Vietnam and not even just about Communism. It claims more generally that revolutionary ideology can have a formidable impact on human action. Although the sole subject is Vietnam and its place in the international Communist movement, it is treated as a case of something general. Twentieth-century Communist ideology was not a tool used to disguise actions motivated by national or personal quests for power but a formidable force of its own.

Tuong Vu's remarkable monograph builds on thorough research and impressive erudition. He has worked his way through massive amounts of Communist ideological publications, archival files, and secondary literature in Vietnamese and English (but not French). As of now, the book represents an updated account of the revolutionary aspects of modern Vietnamese history, within an international setting. This will become a significant work of reference, both for its authoritative account of important ideological and political developments in Vietnam and for its exploration of the main thesis: The power and limits of ideology.

The book begins by defining Vietnam as "one of those rare exceptions in modern world history when revolution succeeded and endured" (1) and covers an eighty-year long period from 1917 to 2010. In the 1920s, Communism was but a dream for a small group of Vietnamese activists. After the revolution was given up in the 1990s, following a short-lasting attempt to "save socialism at home and abroad" (1), revolutionary ideology became just a 'legacy.' Yet that legacy plays a role still today, not least in defending the Vietnamese Communist Party's monopoly on power.

Revolutionary ideology plays three main roles: As a guide or compass; a bond among its adherents; and a state-building tool (20-23). It has played all these roles in Vietnam. In the 1930s-1940s, revolutionary ideology created a strong bond among a youthful network of activists, and this helped the Communist movement survive the severe crises of French repression in 1930-1931 and 1940. After each crisis a new leadership had to be formed after the former leaders had been killed or arrested. Tuong Vu relates the ideological debates and radical shifts in strategy and tactics within the Communist movement through the turbulent 1930s. Yet his main point is not that there was dissension or factions or power struggles within the Communist movement but that it was characterized by a strong unity of purpose among all the main leaders, many of whom died at the hands of the French colonial regime.

In spite of its overall thesis, almost every chapter has something to tell about internal disagreements within the Communist movement. In the 1920s-1930s, there was a 'contrast' between the Tan Viet and the Dong Duong factions (41-44) and then a difficult relationship between Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) and Party General Secretary Tran Phu. Yet Tuong Vu does not see any power struggle between the two, only "a mutually accepted division of roles and duties" (48). Unlike some other

historians,<sup>1</sup> he does not see any consistent pattern of disagreement between Ho Chi Minh's doctrinaire critics Tran Phu, Tran Ngoc Danh, Ha Huy Tap, and Le Hong Phong in the pre-World War II period or between Ho Chi Minh and Party Secretary General Truong Chinh during 1941-1956. Tuong Vu expresses disagreement with those historians who have seen Ho Chi Minh and his close followers Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap as representing a more flexible, moderate or nationalist tendency in the party. The tension between Ho and his critics was "bureaucratic but not ideological in nature" (66). All the Communist leaders ascribed to the same Communist ideology.

To me this does not seem convincing. I see the ups and downs of Ho Chi Minh's influence as converging with the international Communist movement's pendulum swings between the most extreme forms of class struggle and search for unity with broader forces in order to fight the main enemy (often referred to as leftist and rightist 'deviationism'). Ho receded into the background when the doctrinaire leftists held sway, and played out his superior leadership qualities in the periods when there was a perceived need for national unity in struggles against fascism, colonialism or U.S. imperialism.

When dealing with all the criticism directed against Ho Chi Minh in the 1930s for various mistakes, the book claims that Ho was not denounced as a person but just for his mistakes, and was allowed to correct himself. Well. Yes. He did of course survive. During 1941-1946 he built himself up to becoming an indispensable national father figure. And when Communism triumphed in China, he used his charms with China and the Soviet Union's top Communist leaders Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin, so Giap could get massive help to build up a modern army. Ho then also condoned a radicalized revolutionary policy with emphasis on land reform. Yet I am not convinced by Tuong Vu's attempt to explain away the ideological differences between a doctrinaire and a more pragmatic tendency among Vietnam's Communist leaders. The fact that Ho Chi Minh survived his so-called mistakes may be due to his endearing personality and ideological flexibility rather than to any basic agreement between him and his many critics.

Concerning the often-debated issue of why Ho Chi Minh did not assume formal leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) either at its foundation in 1930 in Hong Kong or when a new leadership was established in May 1941 at a meeting near the Chinese border, the author offers the plausible explanation that Ho worked for the Comintern (45). He could give advice and issue instructions to national parties, including the ICP, but not assume leadership of any national section himself. This reason lost relevance, of course, when the Comintern was dissolved in 1943. At that time, however, another reason applies. Ho had formed the Viet Minh front in order to cooperate with non-Communist Vietnamese groups in China and to get support or at least be tolerated by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of Nationalist China, and his warlords in Yunnan and Guangxi. In this context it was useful for Ho to play down his Communist attachment and leave the party leadership in the hands of the much younger Truong Chinh. This is also the period when he stopped calling himself Nguyen Ai Quoc and took up the name Ho Chi Minh.

The book's account of the Second World War period makes much out of Ho Chi Minh's admiration for the Soviet Union and its struggle against Nazi Germany as displayed in the clandestine newspaper *Viet Nam Doc Lap*. A later chapter demonstrates Ho's equally strong admiration for the Soviet Union in the 1950s and his contempt for the United States (127-131). It is indeed true that *Viet Nam Doc Lap* provided detailed coverage of the epic battles between the Soviet Union and Germany (sometimes with hand-drawn maps). Yet this is not necessarily, as claimed, an expression of ideological commitment. A more compelling reason might be a need to convince the local population that the Viet Minh was on the winning side of a world-wide struggle against fascism, represented in Indochina by a double Vichy-French/Japanese yoke. *Viet Nam Doc Lap* did not have much to tell about the anti-Japanese struggle of the Chinese Communists. The book does not mention the relative absence of Marxist-Leninist jargon in

---

<sup>1</sup> Historical monographs that in different ways distinguish between Ho Chi Minh's "nationalist communism" and the more class-based communism of those younger party leaders who thrived in the Comintern's class-against-class period from 1928-1934, include David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 135; Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 254-256; William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 217, 569-571; Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémyery 2009, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 314, 318.

Ho's newspaper with its masterful easy-to-read propaganda, which formed a stark contrast to the uninspiring style of Truong Chinh's newspaper *Co Giai Phong* and theoretical journal *Su That*—and even Tran Huy Lieu's bombastic *Cuu Quoc*.

Tuong Vu runs (too) quickly through “an event dubbed the ‘August Revolution’ in Vietnamese history” (91), the 1945-1946 construction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as a new, independent state, and the outbreak of war between the DRV and France in November-December 1946. He does not discuss the attempt made by Ho Chi Minh, as president, to avoid war with France and buy time to construct his new state as an independent actor on the global scene. This allows the author to claim that the DRV leaders “welcomed the Cold War” and that it “was precisely what they had looked forward to” (92). He contends that it was the Vietnamese Communists and not China or the superpowers that brought the Cold War to Vietnam (116). This makes sense, however, only against the background of the war against France. Once the First Indochina War had broken out in December 1946, and once the DRV leaders realized, by May or at least October 1947, that there was no chance to return to the negotiation table, the DRV was engaged in a struggle for its survival. In that situation, the way to win the war was to first hold out through the use of guerrilla tactics, and then align the DRV with the global Cold War so it could get help to build a regular army. China and the USSR's diplomatic recognition of the DRV in January 1950 allowed Ho's government to build that army, and defeat the U.S.-supported French colonial army in military battles.

For this reason the Cold War was ‘welcome,’ but this would hardly have been the case if the DRV had avoided war with France. While Tuong Vu argues that it was Communist ideology that made the Vietnamese Communists welcome the Cold War, it seems more reasonable to assume that the DRV's reliance on the Cold War as a means to defeat the French at the same time reinforced the most doctrinaire tendency among the Vietnamese Communists. The DRV was facing criticism within the international Communist movement for its mistakes in the 1945-1946 period, when it had failed to carry out radical land reform, and had officially dissolved the ICP (against the will of Truong Chinh) in the name of national unity. This must have contributed to the decision to reorganize the Communist Party in the late 1940s and constitute the Vietnam Workers Party (Lao Dong) in 1950, and to carry out radical land reform as from 1953, in conjunction with the 1954 battle for Dien Bien Phu.

Tuong Vu brings up the importance of the Party Central Committee's 4th Plenum in January 1953. By that time, towards the end of Stalin's life and while the battlefield in Korea had frozen in a stalemate, the Vietnamese Communists had established their credentials within the international communist movement, and despite some serious military setbacks in the war against France during 1952, they were making themselves ready for the final onslaught, with massive Chinese support and advice. It was decided to combine the military struggle with a radical land reform that would give land to the soldiers and their families. The book accurately points out the importance of ideological radicalization in this period.

In 1955, while the radical land reform was taking its toll among North Vietnam's landowners, an interesting disagreement developed between President Ho Chi Minh and Party General Secretary Truong Chinh. While Ho thought the USSR and the U.S. were almost equally powerful players on the world scene, so there might be a need to uphold a peaceful co-existence of the kind promoted by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, Truong Chinh felt that the Soviet Union was far more powerful and that it was urgent to push for more revolution. Tuong Vu does not, however, see this as part of any consistent pattern of disagreement. Instead he emphasizes that both Truong Chinh and Ho Chi Minh showed little interest in the new non-aligned movement, with its call for neutralism, and stuck to a “two-camp worldview” (133). Even with regard to the following year, when Truong Chinh was forced to step down as Party Secretary General and take the blame for the disastrous land reform, so Ho could assume the role of party leader on a temporary basis until Le Duan was ready to take over, the book holds that there was no basic difference between factions. Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh and Le Duan all shared the same worldview, and Le Duan now took upon himself the role to prepare the Communist Party for sustaining a new armed struggle in South Vietnam, with an obvious risk of becoming involved in a war against the United States itself.

In 1959, Communist North Vietnam decided, following Le Duan's revolutionary strategy, to orchestrate an insurgency in South Vietnam “against the wishes of not only the United States but also the Soviet Union and China, eventually drawing all three into the conflict” (4). Le Duan's aim, Tuong Vu argues, was not just or not even primarily to obtain national unification, but to place Vietnam at the vanguard of the global revolution at a time when both the USSR and China were failing to lead. After their victory

in 1975, the Vietnamese Communist leaders “thought of themselves as the vanguard of world revolution and snubbed not only the United States but also China and the Soviet Union” (9).

Although there were different views in Hanoi during 1956-1959 concerning the question of actively fostering a south-based insurgency, the book does not see any basic disagreement between Le Duan and those leaders who tended to prioritize socialist construction in the north. The south-based revolution and the socialist reforms in the north were just two parallel tracks in the pursuit of revolution, it claims (138). There was not much difference between Le Duan’s call for a south-based revolution and Pham Van Dong’s claim that “to be patriotic is to develop socialism” since the revolution in the south was not just for national unification but was also a “civil war and a class struggle (...) Patriotism was made to serve socialism, not vice versa” (147).

In the early 1960s, while the southern revolution was scoring its first successes, Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime fell, and the U.S. military involvement began in earnest. Meanwhile, a big controversy over revisionism developed in Hanoi. Two factions clashed in 1963, resulting in “a new radical phase of the Vietnamese revolution” (151). A decision was taken in December 1963 to side with China in its struggle with the Soviet Union. The most eager proponent of this decision was Truong Chinh, who developed an intense admiration for Mao Zedong. Le Duan was less impressed. Vietnam’s pro-Chinese phase lasted only for a short while, however. Once Khrushchev was deposed and Leonid Brezhnev came to power in the Soviet Union, and particularly when Mao launched his Cultural Revolution, the Vietnamese communists lost much of their admiration for Mao and again turned to the USSR for help and advice. The Chinese Cultural Revolution was seen to divert it from its internationalist duty to support the Vietnamese revolution. By the mid-60s, when the escalation of U.S. warfare took place in Vietnam, the Hanoi leaders no longer trusted their socialist brothers absolutely but managed to strike a balance in their intra-camp diplomacy, fostering a beneficial competition between Moscow and Beijing to assist the Vietnamese Revolution. The self-confidence of the Vietnamese Communists grew through this experience and led to the extremely risky decision to launch the 1968 Tet offensive.

Following the findings of Pierre Asselin, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and others,<sup>2</sup> the work under review emphasizes that the Tet offensive was not just—or not even primarily—a military offensive to obtain national unification. It was an attempt to unleash a mass uprising in the southern cities as part of a worldwide struggle for socialism. As such it was an expression of “vanguard internationalism” (177). Its goals were to defeat the American will to fight and to set up a new government in the South. Le Duan had harbored the idea of launching such an offensive since 1965. By January 1968, on the eve of the offensive, he envisaged a decisive victory that might bring an end to the war (192). He expected to both defeat some important American units militarily and unleash popular uprisings in the southern cities, which would allow the revolutionary forces to hold them for a considerable amount of time. Tuong Vu claims that Le Duan’s (erroneous) assessments of U.S. intentions before the Tet offensive were “infused with ideological concepts,” (193) and that this helps explain his excessive confidence.

The Tet offensive was of course a military failure. No uprising occurred, and no American units were defeated. Instead the U.S. Army launched its successful counter-offensive far more quickly and decisively than expected, leading to heavy losses on the side of the revolution. Yet, probably to Hanoi’s surprise, the offensive did make the intended impression on U.S. public opinion, so negotiations could begin in Paris shortly after, and the Vietnamese communists could gain time to reorganize and launch their next failed offensive in 1972, which in turn paved the way for the 1973 Paris agreement. According to Tuong Vu’s narrative, the strategic offensives, carried out under Le Duan’s leadership, were unsuccessful and cost Vietnam dearly. When “vanguard internationalism” was vindicated by the fall of Saigon in 1975, this was due to “determination, ambition, and fortuitous circumstances” rather than to strategy (209). The book’s epilogue controversially suggests that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s major mistake was to “de-escalate in 1968 following the *Tet* offensive” (294).

---

<sup>2</sup> 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); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Edwin Moise, *The Myths of Tet* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017); Lien-Hang T. Nguyen *Tet 1968: The Battles that Changed the Vietnam War and the Global Cold War* (New York: Random House, 2018).



The 1975 victory in turn created an excessive ideology-based self-confidence in Hanoi, leading to erroneous assessments of the international situation, economic and diplomatic isolation, and dependence on Soviet aid. Determination and ambition could no longer help Vietnam out of its predicament. Eventually, after ten years of economic and international failures, the revolution petered out and left only a legacy behind. Yet that legacy remained sufficiently forceful to delay Vietnam's bilateral trade agreement with the U.S. in 2001 and its World Trade Organization (WTO) membership in 2007. Tuong Vu's harsh judgment of Vietnam's failures after 1975, which of course includes its 1978 invasion of Cambodia, is convincing, and it seems plausible that not just the toxic effects of the military victory in 1975, but the power of "vanguard internationalist" ideology as well, played a role in generating Hanoi's over-confidence. I also tend to agree with the book's claim that Vietnam's behavior in that period "suggests the poverty of international theories that assume the "rational" behavior of states" (235). Ideologically motivated arrogance may prevent rational behavior in governments intoxicated by recent victories.

In the second half of the 1980s, however, the Vietnamese leaders were forced to face the realities. Tuong Vu recognizes the paradox that the rigid ideologue Truong Chinh now became the champion of market economic reforms, before his untimely death in 1987 (246). Perhaps because he had the ability to listen, combined with influence from his children, he turned out to be more able than his comrades to rationalize tactical concessions to capitalism when his country's economic crisis became deep enough.

Over the next two decades, when the Soviet Union fell apart, the worldview of the Vietnamese Communists lost ground as if it had been built on quicksand, and Truong Chinh's tactical concessions became a permanent feature of a post-ideological Vietnam. In his analysis of this period, following his main thesis, the author does not pay much attention to Vietnam's economic and diplomatic successes, its normalization of ties with China and the U.S., its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its dramatic economic growth but dwells instead on the negative effects of Vietnam's revolutionary legacy, which has sometimes delayed necessary reforms and allowed the Vietnamese Communist Party to retain its name and power.

The epilogue, entitled "Ho Chi Minh's last wish," draws down on the general quality of the work under review. While the book retains a certain level of normative detachment in its foregoing historical analysis and sometimes even displays some acerbic admiration for the ideological ardor or sophistication of some of the Communist leaders, the epilogue presents an ahistorical anti-revolutionary credo. Ho's last wish referred to in the chapter title is not the one that the Vietnamese people should be exempted from taxes or that Ho's ashes should be divided in three heaps so they could be buried under a hill in each of Vietnam's three main regions as symbols of national unity. Instead the epilogue refers to Ho's wish for the socialist countries to overcome their divisions and unite under a common purpose. While this wish was fully relevant in 1969, when Ho Chi Minh's funeral provided Soviet and Chinese leaders with the first occasion to meet after the Sino-Soviet border war, the wish for a socialist fraternity is hardly of much relevance for Vietnam's current attempts to carry out a realist balancing act between China and the United States.

So, what is it that pleases me and what is it I do not appreciate in Tuong Vu's book? There is much to learn from it and much to discuss. It serves as a reminder of how strongly the twentieth century was influenced by ideology, and how ideology was anchored in the idea of progress, and the assumption that progress happens through the success of a sequence of revolutions. The Marxist idea that human progress moves from one stage – or mode of production – to another, from feudalism to capitalism to socialism and then to Communism as the end goal, was immensely influential. Revolutionaries in many countries competed with each other to be in the vanguard of transitioning from one stage to the next.

The transition from capitalism to socialism would by necessity occur in one nation after the other. Those who made it first – but not too early to be able to do it successfully—would be in the forefront of development. Any step back from the road to socialism would be conceived as a temporary tactical maneuver. Socialists would then prepare for the next chance to move forward. I value Tuong Vu's attempts to show how fixed ideas influence political behavior in both positive and negative ways. This forms an essential background for understanding the Vietnamese Communist Party's approach to economic and political reform after 1986. The first generation of reformers stuck to their belief that the reforms were a temporary remedy. The Communist Party had to be preserved as the leading force in state and society so it could take the lead once the world situation allowed new steps toward socialism. A whole new generation had to take over before the market economy could be considered as something that would remain desirable.

One major advantage of the book's perspective is that it assigns individual agency to the Vietnamese Communists. It does not see them as tools being used in a Cold War play of dominos. The Vietnamese leaders were not primarily driven by loyalty to the Soviet Union or to China but to Marxist-Leninist ideology as such. They were not mere pupils or disciples, and at a stage where both the USSR and China were seen to deviate from the right course, the Vietnamese Communist leaders saw it as their unique duty to push the world revolution forward. They were self-conscious Marxist-Leninists who sometimes leaned to Moscow, sometimes to Beijing, mostly trying to strike a balance between them, while forging their own way forward. The book's perspective here conforms to my own impression.

I appreciate Tuong Vu's admission, at least in principle, that the power of ideology is limited (cf. the book's subtitle) and can have both negative and positive effects from the perspective of the revolutionaries themselves. Although ideology is a powerful motivating force, it may lead to results that do not benefit the revolutionary cause. Thus, the book does not just use ideology to explain the successful seizure of power in August 1945, the victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and the successful Ho Chi Minh offensive of 1975. It claims that ideology led to major mistakes and setbacks, such as in the land reform of the 1950s, the failure of the Tet Offensive in 1968, the invasion of Cambodia in 1978, and the stubborn pursuance of a centrally planned economy in the period 1976–85, which made Vietnam dependent on Soviet aid. Vietnam was forced to give up its revolutionary aims once it lost Soviet support, and instead adapt itself to a capitalist East Asia.

Yet another thing I like about the book is that there are not many mistakes or misleading factual statements. The few I want to mention are about the South China Sea. Tuong Vu says that China "seized parts of the Paracel Islands ... from the French in May 1950" (30). In fact that northern part (mainly Woody Island) was seized by the Republic of China in December 1946 at a time when it was unoccupied. What the People's Republic of China (PRC) did in May 1950 was to take it formally over from the Guomindang. After that, several years passed before the PRC established a permanent presence in Woody Island. On page 257, Tuong Vu asserts that a clash in the Spratlys between Chinese and Vietnamese navies led to Vietnam's loss of seventy-nine sailors "and several islands," while on pages 296-297 he writes that in the same clash, China "had seized from Vietnam some islands ... in a naval battle resulting in sixty-four Vietnamese casualties." The figures differ in the South China Sea literature, but 64 is more frequently cited than 79. I would like to emphasize a point of some legal importance, however, that China did not seize any *islands* physically occupied by Vietnam. What it did was to establish a physical presence on several previously unoccupied underwater reefs (where huge artificial islands would be built in 2015-2017). The 1988 clash occurred when Chinese forces set out to occupy a reef in the vicinity of an island held by Vietnam.

So there is much that I appreciate and admire in this remarkable monograph. Why then have I not enjoyed reading it? It is not because I disagree with its overall thesis. Indeed I find it compelling. Although I would assign less explanatory power to revolutionary ideology, I find the attempt to explore the impact of ideological conceptions stimulating. One thing I miss in the book though is attempts to explore evidence pointing at alternative explanations. This goes primarily for internal disagreements among the Vietnamese Communist leaders. Tuong Vu's research has led him to discover many such disagreements, which could have warranted more reflection: Was there a pattern? What led one view to prevail over another? Such reflection could potentially challenge the thesis that all the Communists held the same worldview. I would not expect the author to give up his thesis, but I regret that he has not been more open to considering alternative explanations.

The following is more about disagreement than dislike. I remain skeptical about the key claim that the Vietnamese Communist leaders were internationalists using nationalism as a vehicle to advance their global aims. One of the book's chapters carries the title "Patriotism in the Service of Socialism" (117). If I were forced to say whether patriotism or socialism carried the greatest normative weight for Vietnam's Communist leaders, I would say patriotism. If there were a clear conflict between Vietnam's national interests and the dictates of ideology, those leaders would choose the national interest. The patriotism of the Vietnamese Communists was, however, as Tuong Vu rightly shows, linked to a conviction that the world was heading towards socialism and that the Vietnamese nation should be in the vanguard of that movement. In most cases, therefore, nationalism and Communism were not in conflict, so there could be a "both and." Many, if not most, of the first generation Communists started out as patriots seeking national liberation from France and saw Communist ideology, strategy, and tactics as the best way to reach their nationalist goals. As Tuong Vu concedes, the path from patriotism to Leninism was a common experience shared by Ho Chi Minh as well as Truong Chinh (31). This did not mean, however, that their dedication to Communist ideology remained shallow.

Some, like Truong Chinh, let their whole thinking and way of expressing themselves be penetrated by doctrinaire Marxist language, while others—above all Ho Chi Minh—showed little interest in doctrine and expressed themselves in evocative nationalist language, aimed at fostering national unity. After reading Tuong Vu's work I am not prepared to give up my old attachment to the organic metaphor proposed by Huynh Kim Khanh to characterize the relationship between nationalism and Communism in Vietnam: Grafting.<sup>3</sup> Communist branches were grafted onto the nationalist tree, growing quickly to become thick and strong, and for some decades carrying flowers and fruits, although some were sour or poisonous. Eventually, these branches began to rot. They no longer carried fruits and their leaves turned yellow but the national tree continued to grow from below and shot out new, young capitalist branches, aiming for the sky but being hampered by rotten apples.

I see it as a flaw that the book's main argument tends towards the teleological. The author seems to dismiss the possibility that Vietnamese Communism could have evolved differently if there had not been war. He totally dismisses the possibility that Ho Chi Minh or his companions could have become 'Asian Titos' (176, 291). In 1951, Tuong Vu argues, Ho denounced Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito as "America's running dog" (108; for Le Duan's later denunciation of Tito, see 167-168, 176). The question is not, however, about what the Vietnamese leaders said or thought about Tito in the 1950s or 1960s, but about the role the DRV would have assumed in the Cold War if it had been placed before a situation similar to that of Yugoslavia in 1948. The book's general argument about ideology may in fact be used in favor of the idea that Ho could have become an 'Asian Tito.' Tito was also a dedicated Communist. He did not abandon Marxism-Leninism but fell out with Stalin when pursuing his internationalist aim for a Balkan Federation. And Tito did not depend militarily on the USSR. He had military strength of his own. The Western powers realized the potential for an independent, Communist Yugoslavia and carefully nurtured it. If France, with U.S. and British encouragement, had made a lasting deal with Ho Chi Minh in 1946 or 1947, the Vietnamese Communists could have built their own military strength within an Indochinese Federation, and would not have become dependent on China and the USSR. In that case, given that the Vietnamese Communists were driven by Marxist-Leninist ideology as such and were not blindly loyal to Moscow or Beijing, Vietnam or an Indochinese Federation might have become an independent communist actor in Southeast Asia, navigating through the era of the Cold War without any large-scale war. What prevented this counterfactual scenario in the years 1946-1948 was not primarily the ideology of Vietnam's Communist leaders, but internal French politics and the Cold War system in Europe, which aligned the UK and the USA behind the doomed French attempt to foster a non-Communist Vietnam.

Tuong Vu's book is in many ways impressive, so in spite of my disagreements I ought to admire and enjoy it. Yet every chapter in the book leaves me with a feeling of unease. It took me an inordinate time to read through it. As mentioned, I have wondered why. Now, after completing my reading, I think perhaps I know the answer: the book's style is monophone.

Professor Johan Tønnesson, University of Oslo (my brother) has developed a musical theory about non-fiction texts, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975).<sup>4</sup> In some texts there are two or more voices speaking with each other in dialogue or opposition. Such polyphone texts allow for exploring competing accounts, views or explanations through an intra-textual conversation. The interplay of voices makes such texts exciting but if there are too many voices, they may be cumbersome to decipher. After reading them you sometimes feel that you have reached a higher level of confusion but are left just as bewildered as you were at the start as to how the matter at hand should be understood or explained. This is not the case for homophone texts, where one voice is dominant and the others just fill it out, as when various instruments are used to accompany a singer. One essential genre in academia is polyphone with two-three voices in dialogue with each other. These allow the reader to weigh contrasting approaches or hypotheses against each other. The classic model begins with a research question (e. g., "what is the power of communist

---

<sup>3</sup> Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Johan L. Tønnesson, "På leting etter sakprosaens skjulte partitur - lesninger av fire sakprosaartikler med vekt på stemmemangfold (In Search of Non Fiction's Hidden Scores: Readings of four Non Fiction Articles with Emphasis on Polyphony)," in Kjell Lars Berge, Kjersti Breivega, Thore Roksvold and Johan L. Tønnesson, eds., *Fire blikk på sakprosaen (Four Perspectives on Non Fiction)* (Oslo: Institutt for nordistikk og litteraturvitenskap, Sakprosa, skrifter fra Prosjektmiljøet norsk sakprosa No 1, 2001): 137-168.

ideology in modern Vietnamese history?”), then explores alternative hypotheses (e.g., it “had an immensely powerful influence on a number of key decisions” versus “served as a rationale for actions that in reality were carried out with other goals in mind”), tests these hypotheses against available evidence, and concludes by resolving the matter at hand on the basis of certain explicit premises. Polyphone texts are often built on a sense of curiosity. A curious author invites an audience into an exploratory journey for the purpose of resolving a mystery. It may be unjust to now resort to a novel in order to demonstrate my point but Viet Thanh Nguyen’s ambiguous and explorative *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2015) provides a quintessential example of a fascinating polyphone text. The novel’s protagonist presents himself (on p. 1) as being “simply able to see any issue from both sides,” and is advised by his communist interrogator (p. 314) that he would be better off if he “only saw things from one side.”<sup>5</sup>

Then there are the monophone texts. We know them from manuals, catechisms, textbooks, and ideological doctrines. An expert author, knowing all the answers, sets out to explain or demonstrate the truth to an audience. This, I believe, is what bothered me most when reading the volume under review. I did not sense enough curiosity. The book sometimes left me with the same kind of feeling I get when reading a treatise by Truong Chinh.

Do not let this deprive you of the benefit you can get from reading this book. There is so much to learn from it. Just read the book along with other texts about Vietnam’s revolutionary predicament.

One question you may then ask yourself is implicitly mentioned on the first page of *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution* but then left without being discussed: “This book focuses on Vietnam as one of those rare exceptions in modern world history when revolution succeeded and endured.” What made Vietnam an exception to the general failure of revolutions? What made its revolution so successful and durable? Since Marxist-Leninist ideology was available in virtually every corner of the world, its inherent power can hardly explain the Vietnamese exception. Must there not be something about Vietnam or its situation that made it particularly receptive to communist ideology? What would that be?

---

<sup>5</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove Press, 2015), 1, 314.

## Author's Response by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon

---

Until recently, historians of the Vietnam War and modern Vietnam commonly dismissed ideology as an explanatory factor for Communist policies in Vietnam. They refused to take seriously ideological claims by revolutionaries, essentializing them as patriots who did not have the ambitions of their counterparts in other countries and who were mere victims of imperialist powers. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution* is a response to these entrenched notions in scholarship. I am also interested in placing the Vietnamese revolution, together with other radical movements of the 20th century, in the context of world history.

I would like to begin by thanking Thomas Maddux, Diane Labrosse and the editors of H-Diplo for making this Roundtable possible. I thank Peter Zinoman for chairing the Roundtable, and all the reviewers for spending time reading and commenting on the book. Among the four reviewers, Stein Tønnesson finds the overall thesis “compelling” and praises the book as a “remarkable monograph builds on thorough research and impressive erudition.” At the same time, he “did not enjoy reading” the book, dislikes its tone, and challenges some key points. Sophie Quinn-Judge, whose work on Ho Chi Minh I engage extensively in my book, remains similarly unconvinced. Christopher Goscha, who has had a strong influence on my thinking, generously approves the book's central argument. So does Alec Holcombe, whose research on Vietnamese Communism has greatly enriched my understanding. Below I will address one by one the main criticisms and questions from the reviewers.

### *Ideology and Tautology*

In *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, ‘ideology’ broadly explains the foreign relations of Vietnam, but is itself the object of analysis as I trace how it evolved over time through the twentieth century and beyond. Contingencies in the sense of unexpected real-world events are at the heart of my narrative, as I seek to demonstrate how international and domestic situations generated debates among revolutionary leaders, challenged their ideological understanding, and shaped their thinking and policy.

For example, the young Ho Chi Minh first had a compartmentalized view of how the Vietnamese revolution was connected to world revolution, but this view became more sophisticated during the time he worked in southern China. The position of Le Duan, First Secretary of the Vietnam Workers Party (VWP), in the Sino-Soviet dispute was sharply clarified after he participated in the Moscow Conference of 1960. Politburo member Truong Chinh first leaned toward Moscow in the Sino-Soviet dispute, but supported the Maoist line after his meeting with Mao in mid-1963. Following the Tet Offensive, the outpouring of world's support exhilarated Hanoi leaders, who began to imagine themselves as being the vanguard of world revolution. The end of the Cold War saw Hanoi's leaders reassert ideological loyalty while they restored a strategic relationship with China.

These were some critical historical contingencies that tested my claim that Vietnamese Communists were committed internationalists. These events may well have proven me wrong, but they turned out to confirm my argument. My approach, which is based entirely on documented evidence, is not tautological but fully falsifiable. Nowhere in my book is Communism treated as ‘an unalterable force’ and Communist ideology an ‘unalterable truth.’ Nowhere in the book do I argue that “Vietnamese ideology has followed a smoothly orthodox path,” as Quinn-Judge alleges.

### *Ho Chi Minh and the Comintern*

Tønnesson believes that “the ups and downs of Ho Chi Minh's influence [converged] with the international Communist movement's pendulum swings between the most extreme forms of class struggle and search for unity with broader forces in order to fight the main enemy... Ho receded into the background when the doctrinaire leftists held sway, and played out his superior qualities in the periods when there was a perceived need for national unity...”

While I argue in the book that the fate of the Vietnamese revolution was closely tied to Moscow in certain periods, the idea of such a convergence between Ho's personal influence and the swings in the international Communist movement is factually wrong. During the radical phase of the Comintern (1928-1935), Ho in fact did not “recede into the background,” as he was busy



setting up Communist parties in Siam and Malaya. Moscow's decision to send Tran Phu and Ngo Duc Tri to Hong Kong to establish the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 had nothing to do with Ho (who was thought to be in Siam at the time). Ho did not desire the position of leader of the ICP, but subsequently, and over Tran Phu's objections, continued to issue instructions to the ICP's regional committees in his capacity as a Comintern representative. These instructions were in fact aimed to bring the regional branches of the ICP more in line with the Comintern policy of class warfare at the time.

Ho remained trusted by the Comintern until his arrest in 1931 in Hong Kong. When he returned to Moscow in mid-1934, he was placed under an official investigation by Comintern officials (Le Hong Phong was a member of the investigation committee). The reasons for the investigation were, first, Ho's unaccounted-for disappearance of 18 months following his release from prison in Hong Kong in January 1933, and, second, his apparently close relationship with Lam Duc Thu, another ICP leader, who had by then been discovered to be a French spy (81-82).<sup>1</sup> These were specific issues of Ho's possible misconduct and betrayal in China—they clearly had nothing to do with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's purges. Ho was finally cleared of any wrongdoing in February 1936. By 1938 he was sent back to China, from where he instructed the ICP that they must eliminate Vietnamese Trotskyists politically. His letters also praised the Stalin trials for uncovering and purging Trotskyists. In 1944-1945, Moscow's policy was to collaborate with Washington, and Ho was doing exactly that with the full support of Truong Chinh. Unlike Tønnesson, I argue that Ho survived and thrived not because of his ideological flexibility but thanks to his ideological loyalty, as fully documented in the book.

### *Vietnamese Communism and the Cold War*

Until recently, Vietnamese history has been monopolized by what Goscha calls “one-dimensional” accounts which are “driven by the views of those who coveted, occupied, and fought over this country,” and in which “Vietnam was acted upon by the big powers; it was not quite an actor itself.”<sup>2</sup> As Vietnamese sources are few and Vietnamese language skills are difficult to acquire, it is no wonder that English, French, and more recently, Russian and Chinese views dominate the interpretation of Vietnamese history, including the relationship between Vietnamese Communism and the Cold War.

In the conventional view which largely denies Vietnamese agency, Ho and his comrades were forced to join the Soviet bloc in 1950 because the U.S. did not support their struggle against France for national independence. Sophie Quinn-Judge thus asserts that “the [Vietnamese Communist] leadership adopted a unified anti-American analysis in late 1947, after a series of disappointments in its attempts to win U.S. backing.” Tønnesson acknowledges my claim that leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) welcomed the Cold War, but argues that “this makes sense... only against the background of the war against France... Once the First Indochina War had broken out..., the DRV was engaged in a struggle for its survival.”

These are familiar ‘one-dimensional’ arguments in scholarship that downplay Vietnamese Communists’ ideological commitments. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution* presents unambiguous evidence that Vietnamese revolutionaries did not lack imagination and ambition. It is impossible to deny the rich documented record of two decades of radical activism by Vietnamese Communists, including Ho Chi Minh, prior to 1945. The significant available evidence in *Vietnamese* sources amply suggests that more than survival was at stake for Vietnamese Communists during 1945-1948.<sup>3</sup> While they reached out for international recognition, throughout the period Vietnamese leaders did not shy from advocating and implementing radical policies when politically feasible. By 1948, the military situation was a stalemate and the DRV's survival was not in danger. Rather than survival, the radical

---

<sup>1</sup> On this I cite Ba Ngoc, “Ban tham tra vu viec Nguyen Ai Quoc o Quoc te Cong san,” *Xua Va Nay* 438 (October 2013), 3-7, which in turn cites documents from Soviet archive.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> For the politics of this period, see my earlier works: “It's Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colors: The Radical Turn in Vietnamese Politics in 1948,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:3 (October 2009): 519-542; and *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapters 5, 6, and 8.



turn of Vietnamese politics in 1948 was a result of Vietnamese revolutionaries reaching out and aligning their vision with Moscow's confrontation with Washington in the Berlin blockade of 1948-1949, and with the emerging victory of Chinese Communists on mainland China in the same period.

Quinn-Judge blames the U.S. but fails to ask why Vietnamese leaders did not adopt an anti-Soviet analysis after having tried in vain to appeal to Stalin for support during the same period. Logically the Vietnamese must have been even angrier at Moscow's betrayal, given the ICP's membership in the former Comintern and Ho's past contributions to the global Communist cause as a Comintern agent in Southeast Asia. Unless one assumes that the Vietnamese were schizophrenic, their decision to join the Soviet bloc had little to do with earlier U.S. policy.

### *Tito and Teleology*

Tønnesson mistakenly claims, based on a misreading of my thesis, that "The book's general argument about ideology may in fact be used in favor of the idea that Ho could have become an 'Asian Tito.'" In his view,

If France, with U.S. and British encouragement, had made a lasting deal with Ho Chi Minh in 1946 or 1947, the Vietnamese Communists could have built their own military strength within an Indochinese Federation [as Tito did with his Balkan Federation], and would not have become dependent on China and the USSR. In that case, given that the Vietnamese Communist were driven by Marxist-Leninist ideology as such and *were not blindly loyal to Moscow or Beijing* [italic added], Vietnam or Indochinese Federation might have become an independent communist actor in Southeast Asia, navigating through the era of the Cold War without any large-scale war.

My sources indicate that Vietnamese revolutionaries were still deeply loyal to the Soviet Union during the 1940s, despite Stalin's betrayal. They remained so throughout the early 1950s, began to have misgivings in the late 1950s, and became "not blindly loyal to Moscow or Beijing" *only in the 1960s*. This gradual decline of trust and loyalty resulted from a series of momentous events, including Stalin's death, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's criticisms of Stalin, and the Soviet disputes with China and Albania. Tønnesson's argument is teleological, based as it is on his knowledge of the Vietnamese attitude during the Sino-Soviet conflict of the 1960s. My rejection of the Tito possibility is not teleological since it is based on a close reading of the documents produced up to the late 1950s, not on my knowledge of the subsequent change in Vietnamese attitude toward Moscow.

In my sources, the only time I found a more benign shift in the general attitudes of Vietnamese revolutionaries toward the United States was in early 1945 (100). This turned out to be ephemeral. For the entire length of the revolution, in all of the sources I consulted, I discovered not even the slightest of a hint about Vietnamese revolutionaries considering taking Vietnam out of the Soviet bloc or becoming a neutral country. Even if official documents on this are still kept secret, the issue is so critical that if it had been discussed, we must expect to find traces of those discussions in accounts such as those by Le Van Hien, Hoang Van Hoan, Bui Tin, Nguyen Van Tran, or Tran Quynh. Historians must let their sources, not their emotions or hopes for certain outcomes, guide their research.

### *Nationalism and Communism*

A long-standing but stale debate in Vietnamese history concerns the question as to whether Vietnamese Communists were nationalists first or Communists first. This debate was once part of the broader debate about U.S. intervention in Vietnam,<sup>4</sup> but both sides tended to assign an essential quality to Vietnamese Communists and neglected their complex thinking about the subject. In my book I argue that Vietnamese Communists started their activist careers as patriots but later redefined nationalism

---

<sup>4</sup> See Tuong Vu, "Vietnamese Political Studies and Debates on Vietnamese Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2:2 (August 2007): 175-230.

and patriotism in keeping with their understanding of Communism (14-18). If we accept this new definition, no dilemma existed: nationalism became united with Communism. The first two chapters of my book show how the worldview of Vietnamese Communist leaders grew out of anticolonial tenets to crystallize into a new organic vision of world revolution of which the Vietnamese revolution was an integral part.

Tønnesson asserts that “if there were a clear conflict between Vietnam’s national interests and the dictates of ideology, [Vietnamese Communist] leaders would choose the national interest.” This question sets up a false dilemma for them and is based on a one-dimensional assumption about their thinking. Regarding Ho Chi Minh in particular, Tønnesson claims that Ho “showed little interest in doctrine and expressed [himself] in evocative nationalist language, aimed at fostering national unity.” Yet Tønnesson does not engage at all with the new and extensive counterevidence presented in *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution* (34-40, 127-131, 299-302).

At the same time, Tønnesson remains attached to the outdated metaphor of Communist branches being ‘grafted’ onto the patriotic tree developed by Huynh Kim Khanh in his book four decades ago.<sup>5</sup> In this analogy, Vietnamese are essentialized and romanticized as a people who resisted foreign domination with a timeless and indomitable patriotic spirit. Yet Vietnamese have been colonizers as often as colonized in their long history.<sup>6</sup> By organically linking the Communist movement to an imagined national tradition, Huynh’s analogy overlooks the intense challenges against the legitimacy of Communism as a foreign doctrine by other Vietnamese political groups. Finally, the analogy also obscures the Communists’ heavy dependence on foreign support and belittles their systematic attempts to impose a foreign ideology on Vietnamese minds and bodies for decades. The legacies of such attempts still await future research, but they are certainly not just a few “rotten apples” as Tønnesson claims.

### *Factional Struggles*

Christopher Goscha endorses my position about the importance of ideology but wonders about Le Duan’s rise to power and factional struggles within the Communist Vietnamese leadership. Le Duan’s ascendancy had to do with the land reform debacle and Khrushchev’s criticisms of Stalin, but his standing in the Vietnam Workers Party then made his rise to the top a logical event. The Politburo of the VWP during 1951-56 had seven members in the following order, from the highest ranked to the least: Ho Chi Minh, Truong Chinh, Le Duan, Hoang Quoc Viet, Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, and Nguyen Chi Thanh—with Ho being the Chairman and Truong Chinh the General Secretary (Le Van Luong was an alternate member).<sup>7</sup> Truong Chinh, Hoang Quoc Viet, and Le Van Luong were in charge of land reform and had to resign in the face of intense criticisms within the Party for the policy’s excesses (the critics were greatly emboldened by Khrushchev’s attack on Stalin). Le Duan was next in line after Truong Chinh and was not tainted by the land reform; his ascendancy was expected. The fact that he offered a new strategy for the revolution in the South certainly helped, but his existing rank in the party hierarchy must have been sufficient.

Le Duan’s ascendancy would have significant consequences but this, again, is not too surprising if we consider the entire leadership and not just Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap (although these two were not ideological moderates, as they are often portrayed). Le Duan’s militant line took the Vietnamese revolution to a new height of radicalism, but he shared the same outlook with Truong Chinh, Hoang Quoc Viet, Pham Van Dong, and Nguyen Chi Thanh, and those who would join the Politburo in the late 1950s: Le Duc Tho, Pham Hung, Hoang Van Hoan, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Le Thanh Nghi, Van Tien Dung, and Tran Quoc Hoan (the last two were alternate members). None of these can be considered ideologically ‘moderate,’ whether their primary areas of activity were in agriculture (Truong Chinh, Hoang Quoc Viet, Nguyen Chi Thanh), industry (Le Thanh Nghi), unions (Hoang Quoc Viet), party organization and security (Le Van Luong, Le Duc Tho, Tran Quoc Hoan), diplomacy (Nguyen Duy Trinh), military

---

<sup>5</sup> Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 21.

<sup>6</sup> On this point see Goscha, *Vietnam*, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap*, v. 12 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2004), 521.

(Nguyen Chi Thanh, Van Tien Dung), relations with China (Hoang Van Hoan), or culture (Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong with the assistance of To Huu).

To assess the extent of the factional struggles in Vietnamese Communist leadership, it is necessary not to focus only on Ho, Giap and their personal relationships with Le Duan. A more complete look at the full Politburo during 1951-1975 suggests that any factional struggles within the leadership on fundamental questions involving revolutionary goals and strategies must have been very limited. We should not talk of 'faction' or 'factions,' but 'minority opinions' and 'dissent' instead. Given the radical character of the entire Politburo, it was likelier for dissenters on any issues either to yield to the majority (Ho and Giap at the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenum in December 1963) or to run for their lives (Hoang Van Hoan after 1975), than to form their own factions. And dissenters need not have been ideologically 'moderate.' Hoang Van Hoan certainly was not. Ho and Giap's dissent in 1963 could have simply been about military strategy. No cautious leaders would want to throw thousands of troops into a battle without an exit strategy as Le Duan did. Yet concern about an exit strategy alone does not make one ideologically moderate.

Besides military strategy, another source of disagreement among Hanoi's leaders in 1963-64 was North Vietnam's stand in the Sino-Soviet dispute. Ho, Giap and many others (not in the Politburo but in the Central Committee such as Duong Bach Mai, Bui Cong Trung, Ung Van Khiem, Dang Kim Giang, and Le Liem) presumably supported a neutral stand in the dispute, not the Maoist line that the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenum eventually adopted. In *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, I argue that the dissenters were not ideologically 'moderate,' but were just as internationalist as Le Duan was (158-164). As disciplined Communists, Ho and Giap yielded to the majority at the 9<sup>th</sup> Plenum in December 1963 despite their initial dissent. Ho led the Special Conference in early 1964 as a symbolic gesture to rally people behind the new Party line, while Giap continued in his role as a military strategist despite the subsequent arrests of many of his assistants. They were not doves but might have preferred a more cautious military strategy that also kept a neutral stance between Moscow and Beijing.

While there were few ideological disagreements, there were, of course, endemic status rivalries. These are not the subject of investigation in *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, but I will offer a brief comment here. After the victory at Dien Bien Phu, Giap gained great international and domestic stature, second perhaps only to Ho, as the father of the regime with thirty years of activism in the international Communist movement. Ho and Giap's national and international prestige could have been a source of envy among their comrades. Their caution certainly frustrated the more reckless members in the Politburo. Giap was the most educated member of the Politburo with few revolutionary credentials, but he also had a close relationship with the French Sûreté director Louis Marty to defend; all these could have been sources of status envy and resentment. Several members of the Politburo in this period, including Le Duan, Nguyen Chi Thanh, Nguyen Duy Trinh, Le Thanh Nghi, Van Tien Dung and Tran Quoc Hoan, came from low social classes, had little formal education, and spent years in colonial prisons. They certainly lacked Giap's fluency in French, his flamboyant good looks, his knowledge of Western history, and his skills in making intellectual arguments. If the Tet Offensive had been a military success, Giap might have been dispensed of completely. But its failure allowed him to return to plan for subsequent campaigns, in particular the 1975 campaign that showed great caution in its strategy.

### *The War's "Unwinnability"*

*Vietnam's Communist Revolution* is strictly not a study of the Vietnam War, which is the focus of only two out of 10 chapters in the book. Yet it is still possible to glean from the documents I read the strategic calculations of Vietnamese Communist leaders during that event. This enables me to argue in the Epilogue of the book that "the war was not unwinnable, nor did the containment of the Vietnamese revolution even require direct US military intervention." American analysts have long written off the war as 'unwinnable' based on American documents,<sup>8</sup> and perhaps that is true from the American standpoint. North Vietnamese documents, however, point to a much more ambiguous conclusion. It is my hope that information garnered from Vietnamese documents can help make the study of the war less American-centric and teleological.

---

<sup>8</sup> A recent example is John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013).

By 'not unwinnable' or 'winnable,' I mean not the defeat of the DRV itself, only its strategic objective—namely, the unity of Vietnam under Communist rule or, in simple military terms, the conquest of South Vietnam. This phrasing is similar to saying that the U.S. 'lost' the war in Vietnam; what is meant in the latter case is that the U.S. failed to achieve its strategic objective of defending its South Vietnamese ally. In this limited sense, North Vietnamese documents indicate several American blunders or missteps that led to an unwinnable situation for them. These missteps, *viewed from Hanoi's perspective*, included the concessions at the Geneva Conference on Laos, the CIA-backed and Kennedy-condoned coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem, President Johnson's statement following the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, and his decision to de-escalate the war in the wake of the Tet Offensive.

There are three reasons why direct U.S. military intervention (as opposed to mere U.S. aid and advisors that matched the level of Soviet and Chinese aid to Hanoi) was unnecessary. First is the general unwillingness of Moscow and Beijing to support Hanoi's war in the South up to the mid-1960s. By mid-1963, Beijing was more willing, but still not ready to support an all-out war. Moscow was unwilling until the ouster of Khrushchev and the beginning of sustained U.S. bombing of North Vietnam in 1965. Moscow's and even Beijing's full-scale support for Hanoi was in an important sense a direct result of U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam and U.S. bombing of North Vietnam since 1965. This intervention, which was only necessary following the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem that led to the collapse of central authority in Saigon, was a game-changing event. Without this intervention, North Vietnam would likely have been forced to keep the war a guerrilla one that might have dragged on but that never would have turned into a conventional war and threatened the survival of Saigon (but Saigon could have collapsed for its own reasons).

Second, it was not just the U.S., the Soviet Union, and China that feared a replay of the Korean War. North Vietnamese leaders did too. Having watched Kim Il-sung make a bold move, nearly achieve his objective, only to be pushed back to a permanent stalemate (not to say almost lost if China had not intervened), by U.S. intervention, the lesson for Hanoi's leaders was absolutely clear. They feared a ground invasion by U.S. forces into the North (as opposed to mere bombing). A direct Soviet and Chinese intervention (should it take place) could save them in that case, but even so their objective of establishing Communist rule all over Vietnam would likely be forever thwarted—as it was in Korea.

The third reason is related to the second, being that the North would have had to remain ready for such an invasion. Given such fears, a deceptively simple strategy for the U.S. and its allies would have been to keep the threat of that invasion credible. This would have forced Hanoi to maintain a large regular army in order to defend the North, leaving the Saigon government to cope primarily with National Liberation Front troops. Of course, it would not have been easy to have kept that threat credible without engaging in actual war, as the Gulf of Tonkin event attested to. Still, this strategy would have required far less actual commitment of resources and would have involved much less political risks for Washington than direct military intervention.

In a recently published memoir, former Colonel Bui Tin recalls his 1977 conversations with General Giap and his deputy, General Le Trong Tan, that generally dovetail with my arguments above. We do not have to trust his account, but the information is specific enough, and there are North Vietnamese documents that were produced during the war that hint at what he said:

General Giap told us that back in 1964-65 he was extremely worried that the Americans and the South Vietnamese would carry out a combined invasion by sea and air to establish a beachhead in the North. He was not at all sure that the Soviet Union would act in our defense if they did, being so far away, and the Chinese had already told Vietnam that they would not budge. The Americans could easily carry out such an operation because it required so little expenditures and materiel: just a couple of divisions and part of the Seventh Fleet... Such an invasion would totally dislocate the support system that we had put in place for fighting the war in the South and force us to consider keeping the bulk of our troops in the North to defend it since no fighting could go on [in the South]

without a secure rear area. It was our good luck that this event, our worst nightmare, did not materialize.<sup>9</sup>

When Bui Tin asked jokingly how General Tan would have managed the war if he were the American commander, he answered that

[The Americans] had tremendous capabilities, especially high mobility, but they did not have the habit of hitting where it counts. If I had been in command of the South's forces back in 1964-65, I would have attacked and secured a chunk of the Ho Chi Minh trail and simultaneously have sent a landing invasion to take part of the North in the Dong Hoi-Quang Binh area. These two operations could have followed each other in a short time, or they could even have been done simultaneously. That is what I would call hitting where it counts. Of course, it's not a given that they would win, but at least they could have avoided the terrible defeat that left them with nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, much more research is needed to assess Bui Tin's recollections. At the very least, they suggest that blanket claims about the war as unwinnable based solely on American sources need to be placed into proper perspective.

If we put aside the role of the U.S., claims of 'unwinnability' depend in part on how the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) measured up against the DRV. Alec Holcombe, whose deep knowledge of North Vietnamese sources I admire, argues that "odds-makers would have to favor the DRV in any conceivable military contest against the RVN." The latter would lose given the North's superior war-making experience, psychological preparedness, patriotic credibility, and totalitarian state. This is true, but his comparison is a static but not a dynamic one. The North Vietnamese documents I read suggest that the war that took place over two decades was an interactive and dynamic process.

It is easy to overlook the weaknesses of North Vietnam. Since 1960, long before U.S. bombing, agricultural production had already declined and did not keep up with population growth throughout the war years. Despite significant food aid, peasants' minimal needs for subsistence were frequently not met, leading to famines in certain areas for some years.<sup>11</sup> Manpower was not unlimited: in the late 1960s, recruitment began in Catholic communities, and by 1971, college graduates were drafted for the first time (197-198, fn. 61 and 62). By then, the North's social fabric and political control seemed to be in disarray, as sustained bombing and abject poverty began to exert an impact.<sup>12</sup> Crimes and the black market thrived while war weariness spread.

---

<sup>9</sup> Bui Tin, *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War*, transl. from Vietnamese by Nguyen Ngoc Bich (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2002), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Bui Tin, *From Enemy to Friend*, 82-83.

<sup>11</sup> The best available account is Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> See the diary of Vuong Tri Nhan, a perceptive social and literary critic, e.g., entries on 10 September and 29 December 1972, <http://vuongtrinhan.blogspot.com/2012/10/nhat-ky-ha-noi-thang-9-101972.html> and <https://vuongtrihai.wordpress.com/2011/03/06/d%E1%BA%BFn-v%E1%BB%9Bi-kham-thien/>.

It is also easy to underestimate the RVN. Recent research on the RVN suggests that it was a resilient polity. In 1954, few would have expected then-Premier Ngo Dinh Diem to survive longer than a couple months; yet his regime did for nine years.<sup>13</sup> After the surprising surge of Communist insurgencies in 1959, Saigon quickly regained the military initiative in 1962.<sup>14</sup> The Tet Offensive witnessed the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) repulse and inflict heavy casualties on attacking Communist forces. Communist violence antagonized many Southern urbanites, leading to a surge in volunteers for the ARVN. In 1972, the ARVN largely held its ground during the Communist Easter Offensive. The strength of the RVN during certain periods was conveyed by none other than Hanoi's leaders. Available documents suggest that they were contemptuous of the Bao Dai government yet apprehensive of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime.<sup>15</sup> They were dismissive of the military governments in Saigon only up to the Tet Offensive.<sup>16</sup> They were themselves surprised at how quickly Saigon collapsed in early 1975—evidence of a dynamic situation not reflecting the balance of force on the ground.<sup>17</sup>

A dynamic comparison suggests that the outcome of a civil war between North and South Vietnam was by no means a forgone conclusion in 1963 or 1973. Much research needs to be done about how the war strengthened or weakened each regime over time and in different aspects.

In conclusion, let me thank the editors and all the Roundtable participants for a productive exchange and a true learning experience. I fully share with Goscha and Holcombe their optimism about a future of Vietnamese studies that moves beyond entrenched misperceptions, outdated analogies, and counterfactual arguments that “do not really get us anywhere.”

---

<sup>13</sup>The best account of the First Republic is Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>15</sup>Le Duan, “Duong loi cach mang mien Nam,” August 1956. *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* 17 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2003): 783-825.

<sup>16</sup>“Bai noi cua dong chi Le Duan tai Hoi nghi Trung uong lan thu 14,” January 1968, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* 29 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2004): 10-11.

<sup>17</sup>George Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973-1975* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012).