

## **Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War*.**

**Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xiii, 233; illustrations, plates, map, notes, suggestions for further reading, index.**

**Reviewed by Peter Zinoman; review is presented in cooperation with H-Diplo.**

### Vietnam-Centrism, the “Orthodox” School and Mark Bradley’s *Vietnam at War*

New history textbooks deserve critical scrutiny, especially those written by leading research scholars in their areas of expertise. Unlike specialized monographs, textbooks attract large audiences and shape public opinion outside the walls of academia. For areas of historical enquiry split between conflicting schools of interpretation or undergoing rapid change, textbooks can help to disseminate to a general readership new developments in the scholarly literature and the most up-to-date thinking about controversial issues. They may also provide a service to scholars in the field who are narrowly focused upon specific problems by calling attention to how new research may be confirming or challenging larger interpretive frameworks within which their own work may be embedded.

Mark Bradley’s *Vietnam at War*, a new general history of the conflicts that engulfed Indochina between 1946 and 1975, fulfills all of these criteria. As the author of a number of widely-read studies including the prize-winning monograph *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*, Bradley is an important figure in Vietnam War Studies and the Americanist wing of the field of “international history”.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the study of Vietnam’s wars provides a textbook example of a polarized field. Since the late 1960s, it has pitted an “orthodox” school of left-liberal scholars – opposed to the American intervention, more critical of the authoritarian Republic of Vietnam (RVN) than the communist Democratic of Vietnam (DRV), and convinced of the local origins and relative autonomy of the southern insurgency – against a “revisionist” school of right-leaning scholars who hold opposing views. Finally, owing to a series of developments starting in the late 1980s – the Communist Party of Vietnam’s pursuit of “renovation,” the end of the Cold War, the rise of a post-war generation of scholars and the partial opening of archives throughout Vietnam and the ex-communist world – the field has recently undergone dramatic change. Eschewing an older preoccupation with the causes and consequences of the American intervention, many scholars of the war – or wars – are now pursuing three newer lines of enquiry. They are paying more attention to the global context in which the conflict was waged. They are exploring the complexities of its local Vietnamese dynamics. And they are challenging approaches to the conflict that embrace the entire package of positions typically associated with either the “orthodox” or the “revisionist” school. Indeed, a willingness to embrace a mottled range of arguments about the conflict regardless of whether or

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

not they support the old left-leaning or right-leaning positions may be seen as the most salutatory feature of the new scholarship

*Vietnam at War's* "Prelude" touches upon these important trends. It alludes to the crucial role in the conflict played by "global actors in the Soviet Union, France, Great Britain, eastern [sic] Europe, China, South Korea, and newly decolonizing states in South and Southeast Asia" (p. 5). It laments the "diametrically opposed" positions that have divided the field (p. 4). Most importantly, it criticizes the U.S.-centrism of "prevailing narratives in the West, which have until recently rendered the Vietnamese almost invisible in the making of their own history" (p. 3). In contrast, Bradley pitches his project as an attempt to re-center the Vietnamese experience. "My overarching focus," he insists, "remains on the Vietnamese themselves and their own multiple perspectives on the war" (p. 5)

*Vietnam at War's* engagement with the first of these three important trends is strong. It makes good use of scholarship produced by international and diplomatic historians such as Ilya Gaiduk, Ang Cheng Guan, Chen Jian, Mark Lawrence and Qiang Zhai to situate Vietnam's wars in a broader global context. But its success as a Vietnam-centric narrative is mixed, and it never manages to transcend the "orthodox" temptation characteristic of much of the earlier scholarship. Problems in these two areas come from different sources. The inadequate Vietnam-centrism of *Vietnam at War* derives partially from the limitations of the Vietnam Studies scholarship on which it relies, little of which focuses directly on the war or wars *per se*. But it also stems from a tendency to disregard relevant sources in Vietnamese. Bradley's dated fidelity to the "orthodox" school is harder to explain. But although they arise for different reasons, the inadequate Vietnam-centrism and enduring "orthodoxy" of *Vietnam at War* reinforce each other in the way that Bradley's "orthodox" commitments discourage him from acknowledging some of the most significant contributions of the Vietnam Studies scholarship.

Before any close examination of its substance, this book's high level of craftsmanship deserves recognition. Like all of Bradley's work, *Vietnam at War* is well organized and fluidly written. It manages to pack a huge amount of information into a slightly less than two hundred pages of text. Unusually for a textbook treatment of the topic, it features a serious introduction to pre-war Vietnamese history and a thoughtful "coda" on post-war representations of the conflict. The history of Vietnam's wars themselves is treated in four chapters. Chapter Two, on "The French War," examines the decade-long military confrontation (1946-54) pitting the anti-colonial, communist-led Việt Minh against France and an assortment of Vietnamese allies. It ends with the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, the signing of the Geneva Accords, and a brief account of the early years of DRV rule in the north. The third chapter, "The Coming of the American War," follows three crucial stories unfolding in the southern half of the country between 1954 and 1965: the development of an authoritarian state, the rise of a lethal communist insurgency, and the growth of an overbearing program of American support including, eventually, the introduction of ground troops. Chapter Four, "Experiencing War," surveys the military history of the conflict through 1968, paying special attention to the ruinous social and human consequences of American bombing and counter-insurgency campaigns. In Chapter Five, entitled "War's End," Bradley narrates the eventful final phase of the conflict starting with the 1968 Tết Offensive and ending with the fall of Saigon to communist forces in 1975. A final section of this chapter describes the misrule and return to military confrontation presided over by the victorious communist

leadership during the post-war decade, but it ends on an optimistic note with the onset of “renovation” during the mid-1980s.

Clear, concise, comprehensive, and adorned with revealing photographs and instructive suggestions for further reading, *Vietnam at War* is perfectly crafted for use in an undergraduate course. Among graduate students and professional scholars, however, *Vietnam at War* might be given a more critical reception.

#### VIETNAM AT WAR, VIETNAMESE STUDIES, VIETNAM-CENTRISM

In his introduction, Bradley implies that his central research method entails mining the field of Vietnam Studies in the West for material overlooked in more conventional histories of the long conflict. He praises the field’s “deep engagement with Vietnamese-, French- and Chinese-language sources” and compares it favorably to the best research produced in Asian Studies (p. 4). “In the late 1970s and early 1980s,” he writes (rather optimistically), “some of the most sophisticated and important work in Asian history came from historians studying Vietnam” (p. 4). After tracing the growth of the field under the influence of the reforms of the late 1980s, Bradley announces: “this new work, of which my own research has been a part, drives the analysis offered in this book” (p. 5).

But this source base has its limitations. As one scholar of the conflict has recently pointed out, younger historians of Vietnam in the West have, until very recently, concentrated on other topics and “produced little actual research on the war.”<sup>2</sup> The same goes for much of the recent work in political science, anthropology, and cultural studies. Bradley does what he can with this scholarship (especially in his treatment of the pre-war and post-war eras) but, in the final analysis, it functions more to embellish his narrative of the wars than fundamentally to shape it.

A larger problem is Bradley’s failure to consult many relevant sources in Vietnamese, a language that he knows and has used to good effect in previous studies. Since *Vietnam at War* is a wide-ranging work of historical synthesis, it should not be expected to engage directly with archival collections or material from the Vietnamese press of the period. But its status as a textbook does not explain its neglect of a vast secondary scholarship produced in the communist and non-communist zones of the country or by Vietnamese scholars living overseas. Many of these accounts are marred by biases of one sort or another, but such partisanship should enhance rather than diminish their value for a Vietnam-centric approach, as it may provide a revealing window into local perspectives. For insight into wartime decision-making in the DRV, no source is as valuable as the fifty-four volume collection *Complete Party Documents* released in Hanoi between 1998 and 2008.<sup>3</sup> But *Vietnam at War* never cites this invaluable published resource. Memoirs and fiction represent another useful source, especially given Bradley’s interest in

---

<sup>2</sup> Edward Miller, “War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think About the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* I, 1-2 (February/August 2006), p. 455.

<sup>3</sup> *Văn kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, 54 vols. (Hanoi: Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 1998-2008).

Vietnamese points of view. But although he exploits material from these genres, he almost never strays from the tiny handful of works (or excerpts from works) available in English translation. As a result, *Vietnam at War* misses an opportunity to introduce its audience to an enormous reservoir of Vietnamese perspectives on important episodes in the conflict. The fact that more writings from the tightly controlled communist side have been translated into English than from the RVN furthers skews the presentation. To take one example, Bradley's account of the Tết Offensive, a climactic moment of the conflict for many Vietnamese, cites a single wooden quotation from an English-language version of the memoir of Việt Cộng general Trần Văn Trà while ignoring a rich body of largely uncensored southern memoirs and fiction that reveal how civilians experienced the horrific fratricidal bloodletting of the campaign (p. 153).<sup>4</sup>

Because of the paucity of available translations that provide insight into popular attitudes towards the conflict in the RVN, *Vietnam at War* repeatedly cites Alexander Woodside's brief 1969 article, "Some Southern Vietnamese Writers Look at the War." It excerpts one of Woodside's translations from a newspaper advice column that chastised Saigon women who "threw themselves into an excessively extravagant life" that caused "grave damage" to the family" (p. 122). This interesting example reflects popular disgust with consumer culture in the South but Bradley reduces the complexity of southern sentiments on this issue by not citing the last section of Woodside's translation which includes the final line "...I imagine that we will not imitate the wretched life of the Communists but we must restrict every kind of mindless, excessive extravagance."<sup>5</sup>

Bradley's over-reliance on English-language secondary sources may be partially responsible for an occasional tone-deafness in some of his formulations. For example, he repeatedly conflates "the Vietnamese" with the Vietnamese communists as in the following statement: "Against the hopes of the Vietnamese and Chinese that a negotiated settlement at Geneva would diminish the

---

<sup>4</sup> *VAW*, 153. See, for example Nhã Ca's memoir *Giải khăn xô cho Huệ* [A funeral band for Huệ] and her novel *Tình ca trong lửa đỏ* [Love song in the red flame]. Also, see Thảo Trường's short story, "Viên đạn bắn vào nhà Thục" [A bullet in Thục's house] in the well known collection *Những truyện ngắn hay nhất của quê hương chúng ta: hai mươi năm văn học miền nam, 1954-1973* [The best stories of our homeland: twenty years of southern literature, 1954-1973], (Saigon: Sống, 1973), 557-571 and Nguyễn Mộng Giác's novel, *Mùa biển động, Tập 3* [Season of the stormy ocean, Vol. 3] (California: Văn Nghệ, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Alec [as he called himself for this article, instead of the usual 'Alexander'] Woodside, "Some Southern Vietnamese Writers Look at the War," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* II, 1 (October 1969), p. 57.

American threat to the Vietnamese revolution, the US commitment to Vietnam vastly accelerated in the aftermath of Dien Bien Phu and Geneva” (p. 71). The language here elides the fact that significant numbers of Vietnamese saw the communists – correctly or not – as a greater threat than the Americans to the realization of a revolution that was both anti-colonial and genuinely emancipatory. Later, he writes: “By the end of 1965 southern and much of central Vietnam was engulfed in a military struggle that Vietnamese would come to call the American War (*chiến tranh Mỹ*)” (p. 78). This kind of formulation erases the perspective of millions of ardently anti-communist Vietnamese, few of whom viewed the war in this way. More significantly, the grammatically clumsy “chiến tranh Mỹ” rings false. It was, indeed, rarely if ever employed by northerners or southern insurgents, whose usage tended to follow an official discourse that labeled the conflict “chiến tranh/kháng chiến chống Mỹ”, (the war/resistance against the Americans) or “chiến tranh/kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước” (the war/resistance against the Americans to save the country).

#### VIETNAM AT WAR AND THE ORTHODOX SCHOOL

Bradley’s effort to foreground the Vietnamese experience must be seen as a relatively novel approach to the conflict. But his understanding of the Vietnamese dimensions of the country’s wars is less innovative, primarily because of his staunch fidelity to the “orthodox” school. This view of the conflict emerged out of arguments advanced by the anti-war movement during the 1960s and 1970s to challenge U.S. military support for the RVN.<sup>6</sup> It features critical appraisals of the methods and motives behind the American intervention, but it also advances arguments about Vietnamese dynamics of the conflict that undermined the case for the American intervention. It argues that Hồ Chí Minh and much of the DRV leadership were nationalists first and communists second. It dismisses the RVN as an illegitimate state propped up by U.S. support and ruling tyrannically over a hastily improvised pseudo-nation. While belittling the RVN as a U.S. puppet, it emphasizes the autonomy of the DRV from its global communist patrons and the autonomy of the southern insurgency from the DRV. Finally, it portrays DRV decision-makers as a broadly popular, moderate, and risk-averse leadership-group forced to take military action in the South by the belligerence of the RVN and the U.S. Although they have always been challenged by right-leaning scholars and politicians, not to mention Vietnamese supporters of the RVN, “orthodox” interpretations have long enjoyed great authority in the Western academy. Over the past decade or so, however, a body of original research has emerged (often in the margins of self-consciously “orthodox” accounts) to call into question some

---

<sup>6</sup> My characterization of the “orthodox school” and the “revisionist school” is admittedly schematic. For more elaborate depictions of the conflict between the two schools, see Andrew Wiest and Michael Doidge eds., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010).

“orthodox” views of the Vietnamese dynamics of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> While the balance of evidence remains insufficient to enshrine a new orthodoxy, it is probably fair to say that the state of our knowledge points in ambiguous directions and that many important issues concerning the history of the conflict should be seen as open, unresolved questions.

### *Hồ Chí Minh: Nationalist or Communist?*

*Vietnam at War* follows the “orthodox” approach by depicting Hồ Chí Minh as an ardent nationalist with only a secondary (and superficial) commitment to class struggle and proletarian internationalism. In the 1920s, according to Bradley, “Ho envisaged progressive elites and peasant masses united through patriotic ties and the desire for social reform coming together to throw off French colonialism” (p. 26). In the early 1930s, he wanted “to build a communist movement shaped by a broad-based patriotic and nationalist coalition” (p. 28). Hồ Chí Minh’s exile in Moscow in the mid 1930s created conditions permitting a hard turn to the left by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) that contrasted with his preference for “inclusive nationalism” (p. 28). The foundation of the Việt Minh during the early 1940s “recalled the more inclusive radical vision for the Vietnamese communist movement that Ho Chi Minh had advocated in the late 1920s, and marked, at least for the moment, the retreat of the class based politics ascendant in the 1930s” (p. 25).

To verify this seamless portrayal, *Vietnam at War* cherry-picks from the secondary scholarship, drawing attention to the significance of material that verifies Hồ Chí Minh’s “inclusive nationalism” while ignoring evidence of countervailing ideological commitments. It also advances a number of unsubstantiated claims and interpretations, virtually all of which bolster the “orthodox” approach. Viewed in isolation, these missteps appear relatively minor (and some are clearly “judgment calls” or innocent mistakes), but together they suggest a purposeful effort to air-brush the portrait of the communist leader. To root Hồ Chí Minh’s anti-colonial nationalism in a family tradition, Bradley describes his father, Nguyễn Sinh Huy, as “a minor scholar-official deeply involved in anti-colonial activities” (p. 25). But the relevant archives disclose scant evidence of his anti-colonial activism. According to Sophie Quinn-Judge, Nguyễn Sinh Huy ran afoul of the colonial administration after it found him “guilty of brutality under the influence of alcohol” for presiding over the “caning of a man in his jurisdiction who died

---

<sup>7</sup> To be clear, my reference here is to the work of scholars conducting primary research on the Vietnamese side of the war and/or relevant aspects of modern Vietnamese political history. The scholarship to which I refer does not include Mark Moyar’s *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), which relies on select translated sources in order to substitute tendentious revisionist arguments about the Vietnamese dynamics of the conflict for tendentious orthodox ones.

sometime later.”<sup>8</sup> In the absence of concrete (much less deep) evidence of anti-colonial activism, Quinn-Judge concludes that Nguyễn Sinh Huy “had no overt involvement in the ferment that led to the tax revolts of 1908” and that the nature and intensity of his sympathy for the reform movement “is not known.”<sup>9</sup>

Bradley finds additional evidence for Hồ Chí Minh’s ardent nationalism in the priority that he accorded to the national revolution rather than the world revolution in *Road to Revolution*, a training manual that he produced for the Revolutionary Youth League in 1927. After acknowledging the influence of Leninism on the ideas found in the pamphlet, Bradley writes: “But in the *Road to Revolution*, Ho emphasized the immediate imperative of the ‘national question’ rather than ‘social revolution’ or class issues, borrowing as much from indigenous political discourse and the ideas of Jefferson, Gandhi and Sun Yixian as he did from Marx and Lenin” (p. 26). In contrast to this claim that the priority accorded the national revolution in the *Road to Revolution* runs against the grain of classical Leninism, it is more likely that the “two-stage revolution” endorsed in the pamphlet was lifted directly from Lenin’s *Thesis on National and Colonial Questions*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, although *Road to Revolution* quotes two lines from the *Declaration of Independence* in a brief discussion of the shortcomings of the American Revolution and chides the “Annamese” for being less revolutionary than their less heavily exploited colonial American counterparts, it never mentions Jefferson, Gandhi or Sun Yixian. Nor does it address, much less seriously entertain, their political ideas. Pierre Brocheux reaches a different conclusion about the treatment of some of the same non-Marxist thinkers in Hồ Chí Minh’s writing for the Youth League, noting that it “discussed reformism, anarchism, Gandhism, and the Three People’s Principals of Sun Yat-Sen – in order, of course, to point out their limitations.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: the Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22 and 23.

<sup>10</sup> Most scholars support this view. See, for example, Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution In Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 1976), pp. 168-171; Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 85, and Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh*, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* [translated by Claire Duiker] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 38.

*Soviet and Chinese Connections*

To further diminish Hồ Chí Minh's commitment to international communism, *Vietnam at War* emphasizes tensions between Hồ Chí Minh and Stalin and the Soviet political establishment. For example, it notes that, while living in Moscow during the late 1930s, Hồ Chí Minh "underwent severe criticism for his alleged nationalist proclivities and sympathy with the bourgeoisie" (p. 59). But although Vietnamese rivals challenged Hồ Chí Minh's communist credentials during the decade as part of a power struggle within the ICP, Soviet records indicate little more than the possibility that Russian officials targeted him for committing "mistakes in security procedure" that led to the arrest of comrades during the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Bradley traces the endurance of putative tensions between Hồ Chí Minh and Stalin into the 1950s by highlighting the Soviet leader's "cool reception" of the Vietnamese communist leader at the start of the decade (p. 59). But the evidence for this interpretation – derived mostly from the memoirs of Khrushchev and French Stalinists – is thin, and recent scholarship on the written correspondence between them during this era notes that "the tone between the two leaders was extremely polite, and even to a certain degree loving, this in spite of accusations that Stalin distrusted Ho Chi Minh."<sup>13</sup> Additional research may not support this interpretation, but readers should be made aware that the current state of our knowledge includes this kind of countervailing evidence.

The failure of *Vietnam at War* to cite primary sources or secondary scholarship that point to Hồ Chí Minh's affinities for Stalinism and communist internationalism makes these claims even more questionable. It makes no mention of his founding membership in the ultra-Stalinist French Communist Party or of the partisan anti-Trotskyism and pro-Stalinism of his published writings between the 1930s and the 1950s. It also ignores Christopher Goscha's research on Hồ Chí Minh's role as the Comintern's point-man for the creation of the Malayan Communist Party, the Thai Communist Party, and the Laotian Communist Party and on his efforts to create a transnational Indochinese communist bloc.<sup>14</sup> Nor does it cite the "fairly crude anti-Trotskyist propaganda" and endorsement of the Moscow show trials that Hồ Chí Minh penned in the ICP newspaper *Notre Voix* during 1938.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it disregards Hồ Chí Minh's extensive published writing about the Soviet Union during the 1950s which, according to one recent study,

---

<sup>12</sup> Quinn-Judge, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>See Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1995), and *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (Richmond, U. K.: Curzon Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Quinn-Judge, p. 233.

“conveyed the happy life, advanced technology, economic success and progressive society there.”<sup>16</sup> *Vietnam at War* overlooks Hồ Chí Minh’s personal obituary for Stalin published in March 1953 and entitled “Comrade Stalin: Glorious Friend of the Vietnamese People.”<sup>17</sup> These well-documented, easily accessible items from the historical record may not tell the whole story, and additional context may raise questions about the conclusions towards which they seem to point. But the wholesale neglect of them in *Vietnam at War* seems unwarranted, given the relevant light that they shed on this crucial figure.

Bradley’s treatment of relations between the DRV and communist China is more nuanced, but his approach exhibits a tendency, typical of “orthodox” accounts, to emphasize tensions and disagreements between the two sides and to blame Chinese advisors for errors and excesses committed by the DRV. This tendency reinforces the “orthodox” position by stressing the independence of the DRV from Chinese influence and diminishing the culpability of the Vietnamese communist leadership for the failure of its policies. Consistent with this approach, Bradley attributes the early setbacks and high casualty rates suffered by DRV forces at Điện Biên Phủ to bad Chinese advice regarding the efficacy of a strategy based on human wave attacks. It was only after “heated disputes with the Chinese,” Bradley insists, that the Việt Minh leadership shifted to more successful siege tactics (p. 66). In a similar vein, Bradley holds Chinese advisors partially responsible for the failures of the land reform of the mid-1950s. He writes: “The disastrous experience with land reform, in which Chinese advisers had been central to its conception and implementation, heightened Vietnamese concerns about Chinese aims and motives” (p. 72). Such speculative interpretations have been recycled repeatedly in “orthodox” accounts, but the available documentary record provides only weak support for them. The most recent research, on Điện Biên Phủ for example, clearly points in different, indeed contrary, directions.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Tuong Vu, “‘To Be Patriotic is to Build Socialism’: Communist Ideology in Vietnam’s Civil War,” in Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Đồng Chí Sta-Lin: Người Bạn Vĩ Đại Của Nhân Dân Việt Nam,” *Văn Nghệ* XL (March 1953), pp. 1-3; reprinted in *Sưu Tập Văn Nghệ, 1948-1954, Tập 6 (1953)* [Compilation of *Literary Arts*] (Hanoi: Hội Nhà Văn, 2005), pp. 71-73.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Goscha has surveyed the Vietnamese sources on the alleged disagreements between Chinese advisors and Việt Minh commanders at Điện Biên Phủ over the cancellation of the wave attacks. He concludes that “Giap’s decision was thus not necessarily taken ‘against’ Chinese advice.” See “Building Force: Asian Origins of Twentieth-Century Military Science in

To further emphasize connections between Hồ Chí Minh's project and indigenous Vietnamese traditions, *Vietnam at War* rehashes an argument put forward by the DRV propagandist Nguyễn Khắc Viện (and elaborated in many "orthodox" accounts) suggesting that the Việt Minh promoted Confucian virtues and frames of reference in its public discourse during the Second World War. "The decision to do so was more than simple expediency," Bradley contends, since the Marxist and Confucian world view "shared an emphasis on the problems of social organization, the need for the elite to guide the masses and the primacy of self-sacrifice for the collective" (p. 36). There may be something to this argument but the failure to consider a much more explicit strain of anti-feudalism and anti-Confucianism in Việt Minh and Vietnamese communist discourse makes the treatment of the issue seem strained and transparently one-sided.

### *DRV Repression*

Unlike the most partisan "orthodox" accounts, *Vietnam at War* discusses at some length a series of radical and repressive domestic campaigns launched by the communist party when it was under Hồ Chí Minh's leadership during the 1940s and 1950s. These included the intimidation and murder of large numbers of domestic political opponents during 1945-46, the violent land reform of the mid-1950s, and the crushing of the reformist *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm* movement towards the end of that decade. But Bradley's preferred mode for framing and describing these brutal campaigns functions to re-direct responsibility for them away from the DRV leadership. Admitting that "the party's activities could involve intimidation, coercion and sometimes assassination," he points out that "these practices re-emerged in 1945 and 1946 when agents of the DRV killed hundreds of its domestic political opponents" (p. 46). However, his brief analysis of the repression blurs the issue of accountability: "To an extent, the political killings in this period were less the official policy of the state than a reflection of its continuing inability to control local forces associated with it" (p. 46). Not only does he fail to cite evidence in support of this position, but he ignores important recent research on the episode by François Guillemot that employs local histories of the DRV security police to place the likely number of victims of the campaign in the tens of thousands.<sup>19</sup>

To establish that the notorious land reform was a rational response to "war induced" hardship, *Vietnam at War* prefaces its brief narrative of this episode with a description of the "destructive impact of the war on the Vietnamese economy" (p. 69). It then contrasts the radical nature of

---

Vietnam (1905-54)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* XXXIV, 3 (October 2003), p. 558, note 65.

<sup>19</sup> François Guillemot, "Au Coeur de la fracture vietnamienne: l'élimination de l'opposition nationaliste et anticolonialiste dans le Nord du Vietnam (1945-1946)" in Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé, eds., *Naissance d'un État-parti: Le Vietnam depuis 1945* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), pp. 175-222.

land reform during the 1950s with more “moderate efforts to redistribute land in the late 1940s,” a move that emphasizes the exceptional character of the later policy (p. 69). Moving to the event itself, the book insists that the land reform of the mid-1950s was “initially popular among poorer peasants” before allowing that “the process was divisive and often violent and its excesses unleashed further chaos in the countryside” (p. 69). The absence of a concrete subject in this formulation is characteristic of Bradley’s language when discussing episodes in which the communist party initiated political repression or extra-judicial killing on a large scale. Rather than holding specific political leaders or institutions to account, he identifies “the process” and “its excesses” as the primary culprit. His consistent use of the passive voice to describe the sinister consequences of the policy functions in a similar way. “Land reform teams were instructed [*by whom?*] to identify abusive landlords and rich peasants even when a village had none” (pp. 69-70). “Many households were wrongly classified and punished [*by whom?*]” (p. 70). “A campaign of terror against rural people identified as “wicked and tyrannical” landlords [*by whom?*] led to public trials and executions [*staged by what body?*]” (p. 70). In regard to the vexed issue of the killings mandated by the policy, Bradley gets slightly more specific, fingering “agents of the state” as the primary executioners (p. 70). But his categorical declaration that “between 3,000 and 15,000 people” were put to death as a result of the policy seems low; publically available party documents indicate that the state was prepared to kill roughly 8,000 individuals during the preliminary rent reduction campaign leading up to the formal start of land reform.<sup>20</sup>

*Vietnam at War* commits numerous errors in its discussion of the reformist movement known as *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm*. It alleges that the movement “raised the banner of ‘arts-for-arts-sake’” but its leaders never promoted apolitical art; they merely demanded freedom for artists and intellectuals to pursue a range of agendas free from state control (p. 70). It claims that Trần Dần was arrested for publishing “We Will Win” (p. 72), but this controversial poem first appeared in the Spring issue of *Giai Phẩm* – during, that is, the period of his imprisonment. More significantly, the book’s preoccupation with Trần Dần’s novel about the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, *Men, Men, Waves, Waves* leads to the conclusion that “the affair was shaped by contestations over the meaning of the French War,” despite the fact that the movement’s key publications were silent on this particular topic (p. 71). Rather, *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm* focused overwhelmingly on the repressive character of the DRV’s cultural policies while voicing support for movements of de-Stalinization gaining strength throughout the communist world. Moreover, given the wide range of issues raised by the historians, philosophers, musicians, journalists, critics, and lawyers that participated in *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm*, the exclusive focus on the story of Trần Dần (no other member of the movement is mentioned) conveys an overly narrow picture of intellectual opposition to the party-state during the era.

---

<sup>20</sup> “Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị về mấy vấn đề đặc biệt trong phát động quần chúng, 4/5/1953” [Politburo Directive on a few special Issues in mass mobilization, May 4, 1953], *Văn kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, Vol. 14, pp. 201–206.

*The RVN*

Bradley's account of the origins of the RVN acknowledges recent scholarship that challenges the "orthodox" assertion that its leadership was handpicked by the United States.<sup>21</sup> But it conveys a general impression of the southern state that conforms closely to the "orthodox" view. Unlike Peter Hansen, whose recent research reveals the complex regional, sociological, and motivational dynamics behind the mass migrations from communist territory in 1954-55, Bradley emphasizes how the "initial fears" of Catholic migrants were "inflamed by propaganda campaigns" (p. 79).<sup>22</sup> *Vietnam at War* concedes that Ngô Đình Diệm possessed nationalist credentials, but its assessment of the RVN leader is uniformly uncharitable. The treatment of the RVN catalogues a familiar list of sins including nepotism, corruption, rigged elections, media censorship, failed land policies, over-reliance on American aid, anti-communist witch-hunts, and the repression of the regime's political opponents, including segments of the Buddhist church. But it fails to consider one of the liveliest and most Vietnam-centric bodies of research in the field that is reassessing the political project of Ngô Đình Diệm and the complexity of southern Vietnamese politics and society.<sup>23</sup> While scholars in this field disagree about the character of the Ngô Đình

---

<sup>21</sup> In particular, Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-1954," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* XXXV, 3 (October 2004), pp. 433-48.

<sup>22</sup> For Peter Hansen's argument, see "Bắc Di Cư: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* IV, 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 173-211.

<sup>23</sup> Nu-Anh Tran, "South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention and the Newspaper *Chính Luận* [Political Discussion], 1965-1969," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* I,1-2 (February/August 2006), pp. 169-209; Mathew Masur, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954-1960," *Diplomatic History* 33,2 (April 2009), pp. 293-313; Jessica Chapman, "The Sect Crisis of 1955 and the American Commitment to Ngô Đình Diệm," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5,1 (Winter 2010), pp. 37-85, Jessica Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Diplomatic History* 30, 4 (September 2006), pp. 671-703, Edward Miller, "The Diplomacy of Personalism: Civilization, Culture, and the Cold War in the Foreign Policy of Ngo Dinh Diem," in Goscha and Osterman, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962*

Diệm government, they all endow it with superior agency and internal dynamism than *Vietnam at War*. Bradley is doubtless correct to depict the RVN as “an authoritarian government intolerant of dissent that was willing to suppress its opponents brutally,” but he fails to notice (or perhaps to concede) that a slightly modified version of this portrait might just as easily be applied to the DRV (favoritism, corruption, no elections, no independent media, botched land reform, failed collectivization, over-reliance on aid from China and Eastern Europe, and the silencing of all political opponents) (p. 87). In a similar vein, Bradley may be right to dismiss the official development goals behind the RVN’s agrovillage program – “the real motivation,” he insists, “was rural security and population control” – but his skepticism of the government’s stated objectives for the program is inconsistent with his naive defense of the DRV’s equally weak economic justification for its land reform (p. 87).

### *The Southern Insurgency*

On the extremely complex question of the rise of the insurgency in the RVN, *Vietnam at War* follows the “orthodox” line, a narrative emphasizing the indigenous roots and relative autonomy of the southern insurgents. The basic story concerns a partnership between two political groupings – the southern communists and the DRV leadership – that shared a desire for national reunification under communist leadership but disagreed about the pace and method for bringing it about. Besieged by Ngô Đình Diệm’s ruthless security services, the southern communists pressured the DRV leadership to sanction violent measures against the RVN. But the risk-averse and war-weary DRV dragged its feet. In Bradley’s telling, the DRV’s policy during this period (1954-1960) was marked by a preference for “peaceful if protracted struggle,” “a northern reticence,” and an “inclination to go slow” (p. 90). Eventually, however, politburo member Lê Duẩn took up the cause of the southern revolutionaries, prompting the DRV to support a “more forceful response to the actions of the Diem government” (p. 91). What followed, in Bradley’s account, was a series of (subject-less) initiatives: “local southern militias *were formed* in the Mekong Delta,” and “campaigns of terror against local provincial Diem officials *were also initiated*” (p. 91; italics added). Subsequently, “*efforts were made* to unify the scattered military forces of the insurgency” and a “new military organization *was given* the name the People’s Liberation Armed Forces” (p. 94; italics added). Moving from the subject-less formulation to one with a double-subject, Bradley describes how the “DRV and the southern insurgency drew on the principles guiding the broad-based Viet Minh front ... to found the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam on 20 December 1960” (pp. 94-95). At the center of this new organization was “COSVN, which made political and military policy along with the party and state leadership in Hanoi” (p. 95). To account for Hanoi’s leading role in the southern conflict

---

(Stanford University Press, 2009), 376-402; *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Stan B-H Tan, “Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarization and Villages”: State Formation among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam under the First Republic, 1955-1961,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* I,1-2 (February/August 2006), pp. 210-252.

by the early 1960s, the narrative describes how the collaborative partnership at the center of this tale morphed gradually into a hierarchical relationship marked by the command and control of the DRV leadership over the insurgents. This process climaxed following the end of the war in 1975, when the DRV elbowed aside the southern communists, disbanding them as an organized force.

The narrative tics marring this story reflect the political imperatives that shaped the “orthodox” account when it was first put forward by anti-war scholars during the 1960s. Chief among these was a desire to challenge the official U.S. view that the insurgency was a creation and tool of the northern Vietnamese communists. This imperative explains why *Vietnam at War* repeatedly emphasizes the existence during the mid 1950s of what it calls an “embattled regional and local communist leadership in the South” capable of lobbying the DRV politburo to champion its agenda (p. 91). The assertion that the “southern communist insurgency reconstituted itself in the late 1950s and early 1960s” serves to underline this point still further, as does the depiction of the movement as a purposeful agent with its own regionally specific policies and points of view (p. 140). With this emphasis in mind, one striking omission in Bradley’s treatment of the insurgency is its lack of any consideration of the identity of its indigenous southern leadership during the period when it was allegedly relatively independent of the DRV. While he refers briefly to the twin figurehead-spokeswomen of the movement, Madam Nguyễn Thị Định and Madam Nguyễn Thị Bình, as well as the famously powerless Minister of Justice in the Provisional Revolutionary Government, Trương Như Tảng, Bradley does not name a single operational leader of the southern insurgency. Moreover, while his language suggests the enduring presence of a partially autonomous (but typically anonymous) southern leadership through the mid 1960s, this shadowy force vanishes during the planning of the 1968 Tết Offensive, which involved “vigorous debates among the top Hanoi leadership in 1967” (p. 148).

The omissions and misplaced emphases at the heart of Bradley’s account call out for a consideration of a modified narrative in which the DRV channeled and inflamed popular grievances in the South, transforming them into an institutionally coherent insurgency by initiating the formation of the NLF and outfitting and training its armed units. In addition to accounting for the absence of an indigenous leadership of the insurgency, a virtue of this version of events is that it explains the remarkable fact that the three dominant figures at COSVN during the course of its existence – Nguyễn Văn Linh, Nguyễn Chí Thanh, and Phạm Hùng – were also members of the DRV politburo. The fact that the leaders of COSVN and the leaders of the politburo were essentially one and the same raises questions about Bradley’s central story of two coherent but unequal political groupings acting in concert to build and set policy for the insurgency. It also undermines the “orthodox” notion that the leaders of the southern insurgency were sidelined after the war since Nguyễn Văn Linh became the secretary-general of the VCP only a decade after the war’s end.

## VIETNAM CENTRISM AND THE “ORTHODOX” SCHOOL

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of *Vietnam at War* is its tendency to cite approvingly new Vietnam-centric scholarship but to overlook major conclusions of that scholarship when they fail to support the “orthodox view.” Two additional examples of this recurring pattern include the discussion of the strategic hamlet program and the Tết Offensive.

*Vietnam at War*'s treatment of strategic hamlets relies on Philip Catton's ground-breaking recent history of the program in his important book *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*.<sup>24</sup> Based on a reading of newly unearthed RVN documents from National Archive No. 2 in Hồ Chí Minh City, Catton demonstrates that the program was conceived by Ngô Đình Diệm's brother Ngô Đình Nhu to embody values like self-reliance and collective security promoted by the RVN state ideology of Personalism. Catton's thesis challenges the argument widely promoted in "orthodox" accounts that the program was strongly shaped by Robert Thompson's draconian blueprint for defeating the communist insurgency in British Malaya. "This proposal," Catton writes, referring to the British experience, "is often credited with exerting a formative influence on the emergence of strategic hamlets but the latter owed much more to the evolution of the regime's own thinking than to any imported blueprints."<sup>25</sup> The Vietnam-centrism of Catton's thesis here should appeal to Bradley but he ignores it, emphasizing instead the bellicose security objectives behind the program and the example provided by British efforts to crush the communist insurgency in Malaya (pp. 96-97).

In a similar vein, *Vietnam at War*'s discussion of the DRV decision to launch the Tết Offensive in 1968 touts the significance of Lien-Hang T. Nguyen's pioneering research article about the topic while disregarding its most important conclusions. Entitled, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive," the article reviews debates between DRV military strategists and Chinese and Soviet attitudes towards the campaign, but it breaks new ground by suggesting that planning for the offensive may have been shaped by bitter factional politics within the politburo (manifested in large-scale purges of dovish policy intellectuals from the communist party elite in 1963 and again in 1967) that were themselves linked to the troubled social and economic situation in the North. This emphasis on "the intersection of Hà Nội's foreign and domestic policies" departs from conventional approaches that tend to view DRV military policy as the exclusive product of strategic imperatives, on the one hand, and the ebb and flow of Chinese and Soviet influence, on the other.<sup>26</sup> It also aligns the dynamics of DRV military policy with standard interpretive approaches to military policy in

---

<sup>24</sup> Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96. In a footnote, Catton lists the influential "orthodox" scholars who subscribe to this view. They include Frances Fitzgerald, George Kahin, George Herring, Marilyn Young, and David Kaiser.

<sup>26</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tet Offensive," in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1/1-2 (Feb.-Aug.2006), 27. Bradley calls the article "the best introduction to Vietnamese decision-making on the Tet Offensive and its impact"; *Vietnam at War*, p. 201.

the RVN and the United States that have long emphasized the significance of complex entanglements between war-making and domestic politics. Nguyen's analysis undermines the spirit of "orthodox" accounts in its suggestion that the DRV's decision to launch one of the most lethal campaigns of its long wars was determined by an unusually ruthless episode of communist bureaucratic infighting. It also hints that some members of the communist leadership may have supported military escalation in the South as a means to cope with the political consequences of the shortcomings of the DRV's economic and social policies in the North. It is perhaps for this reason that *Vietnam at War* ignores the crucial domestic dimension of Nguyen's argument, focusing instead on her more familiar account of the impact of the Chinese and Soviet posture towards the Tết Offensive and disagreements between the Generals Võ Nguyên Giáp and Nguyễn Chí Thanh over military strategy. Here, again, *Vietnam at War* neglects the most significant, innovative and, arguably, the most Vietnam-centric aspect of an important new piece of research about the conflict.

In each of these cases, Bradley's fidelity to the "orthodox" view clashes with his stated aspirations towards Vietnam-centrism. On one level, this clash is not surprising; nothing inherent in the Vietnam-centric approach leads it to provide support for either the "orthodox" or the "revisionist" school. However, as *Vietnam at War* demonstrates, dogmatic fidelity to either one of these schools in Vietnam War studies can pose a real threat to the achievement of Vietnam-centrism and to the production of a truly innovative and up-to-date history of the conflict.

*Peter Zinoman is associate professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley. This review was jointly commissioned by the TLC/New Mandala book review series and H-Diplo: Diplomatic and International History Discussion Network. We thank Diane Labrosse and George Fujii for making this cooperation possible. The H-Diplo roundtable in which this review also appears may be accessed at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-22.pdf>. That roundtable includes Mark Bradley's responses to Peter Zinoman's review and to those of several other scholars.*