



David Hunt. *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959-1968*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. x + 272 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-691-0; \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-692-7.

Reviewed by Edwin Moise (Clemson University)

Published on H-Diplo (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball



Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up

Most American scholarship on the Vietnam War deals with the actions of Americans, and to the extent that it looks at the Vietnamese, tends to focus on the organized forces and leaders of the two sides. In *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*, Professor David Hunt (University of Massachusetts, Boston) looks at the way the revolutionary movement in one province southwest of Saigon was experienced by actual participants at the local level. He argues that this bottom-up view is vital to an understanding of the revolution, because there was more low-level initiative, and less control by top leaders, than is usually acknowledged.

What has made this possible was the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project, run by the Rand Corporation (today, the RAND Corporation), a "think tank" financed by the U.S. military. During the war, Rand interviewers questioned a large number of defectors from the revolutionary movement, and a smaller but still significant number of prisoners who had been captured by U.S. or South Vietnamese government forces. They asked more open-ended questions than military interrogators usually would have, seeking not tactical intelligence but opinions, personal experiences, and life stories.

The project had a particular focus on the province for which Hunt uses the traditional name My Tho (called Dinh Tuong on the Saigon government's maps), where it interviewed 285 people between 1965 and 1968 (p. 1). David Elliott has already published a hugely im-

portant (and just plain huge) study of the revolution in this province, using the Rand interviews.[1] Hunt's much shorter study has still found interesting new things to say, by focusing more on the way the revolution was experienced by its individual participants than on the way it was organized and led.

He looks at assassinations and executions, for example, not just as incidents of political struggle, but as wrenching emotional events for people in the communities where they occurred. He makes it clear that there was broad support for the revolution in villages in My Tho, but he says this did not translate into broad enthusiasm for the deaths of landlords and officials. "When blood was shed, people fainted or fled from the scene." The few who "liked to kill," and carried out large numbers of assassinations for the revolution, inspired "fear and revulsion" on the part of their neighbors (p. 55).

He considers at some length the extent of urban influence in rural society. This influence was greater than some authors have suggested. Substantial numbers of peasants had had significant experience of urban life. They had gone to towns or cities for employment in a remarkable variety of occupations, for education, or to escape the wars going on in the countryside. Those who had not actually lived in towns might have gone to markets there. People living in the towns also visited the villages, for various reasons. The Viet Minh in the late 1940s had to a considerable extent isolated the villages it

ruled from enemy-controlled towns. The National Liberation Front in the 1960s was much less able to do this, though it sometimes still tried.

There was tension in the villages between traditional cultural patterns, the modern patterns emanating from the towns, and a different set of modern patterns promoted by the revolutionary movement. The impact of modern culture on gender norms was especially complex. The revolution offered a wider sphere to women than had been possible in traditional society, but stopped well short of giving them real equality.

Hunt traces the revolution in My Tho/Dinh Tuong by stages, from its beginning to about 1968. The periodization is important; the movement was more different in 1962 from what it had been in 1960, and more different in 1966 from what it had been in 1962, than most readers will be aware. First came what Hunt calls the “concerted uprising” (p. 1), occurring in various villages at various dates mostly in 1960, in which a few revolutionaries—so few that only one of them ended up among the Rand interviewees—broke the Saigon government’s control and began the establishment of revolutionary power in large areas of the countryside. Next came the “golden period” (p. 47) of the early 1960s, when the revolutionary organizations, which had become much larger, were able to exercise power openly in the villages. Popular support was strong, willing recruits for military service were plentiful, and the revolution was less dependent on coercion than in earlier and later years.

Escalation of the war from 1965 onward placed both the revolutionaries and their communities under severe strain. Indiscriminate bombing and shelling of the countryside increased dramatically. Many peasants were killed, far more fled, and the revolutionaries’ demands for taxes and service became a heavier burden on those who remained than it had been in the golden period. Hunt’s picture of the impact of the escalation, illustrated with numerous quotes from numerous individuals, is among the best parts of his book. Peasants who did not flee to the government-controlled zones often found it necessary to move out of their traditional hamlets, because an isolated hut was less likely to become a target than a group of homes all in one place. Revolutionary cadres had to cut short the process by which policy directives had been studied and discussed before being implemented, because meeting in groups was dangerous. The revolutionaries did not respond to their tribulations with stoic heroism, serene in the confidence that the revolution would tri-

umph. Many despaired, unable to see a path to victory. There was a revival of hope for the victory of the revolution in 1968, at the time of the Tet Offensive. Hunt does not discuss the post-Tet period at length.

The weakest part of the book is its argument that the initial stage of the uprising in My Tho was primarily a local initiative, in which revolutionaries in the province went far beyond what Communist leaders at higher levels wanted. Hunt’s evidence for local initiatives is good, but his evidence that top Communist leaders were opposed to these initiatives is weak. He does not cite any source for his statement that the Communist leadership in Hanoi, when authorizing in January and May 1959 some use of force, “stipulated that violence should be in self-defense only” (p. 30). His statement that in 1959-60 the Communist leaders “did not want a revolution in the South” (p. 56) seems very strange. He quotes from Gabriel Kolko’s 1985 study the statements that top leaders, in an effort to restrain violence, directed that “only the provincial-level Party could authorize executions,” but in practice, “at least two-thirds and possibly four-fifths of the executions were never sanctioned, as local village organizations meted out their own justice” (p. 56). Kolko provided no sources for these statements.[2] In the absence of any citation of primary sources, the reviewer is left to suspect that Hunt and Kolko are showing the residual influence of some of the early scholarship on the war, published in the 1960s, which significantly exaggerated the policy differences between Hanoi and the southern revolutionaries.

Hunt clearly is more sympathetic to the revolutionary movement than to the Saigon government, but this sympathy does not seriously bias his analysis.

One cannot attain an overall understanding of the Vietnam War without looking at the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. Anyone seriously interested in this topic needs to read either Hunt or Elliott, and should consider reading both. Elliott proves his arguments more solidly, doing a better job of fitting the Rand interviews into the context of evidence from other sources. But Hunt proves most of his arguments adequately. And Hunt is much more readable; even the 2007 “concise edition” of Elliott’s *The Vietnamese War* is about twice the length of *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution*.

David Hunt has made a significant contribution to the literature. *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution* can be recommended to the specialist, the undergraduate and graduate student, and the educated general reader. Serious libraries, even amid today’s budgetary problems, should

try to acquire it.

Notes

[1]. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975*, 2 vols. (Ar-

monk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

[2.] Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 129. Hunt's citation was of the same page in a 1994 reprint of Kolko's book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Edwin Moise. Review of Hunt, David, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War, 1959-1968*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24338>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.