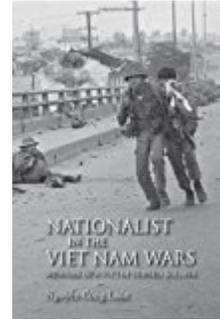


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Công Luận Nguyễn. *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. xv + 598 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35687-1.



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“Patriotism at the highest degree gives to some an almost unimaginable will to survive, but it also encourages people of the same forefathers to kill their compatriots more eagerly and savagely” (p. 66). These words cited from Nguyễn Công Luận’s work quintessentially reflect on the history of Vietnam in the twentieth century and on the book he wrote about it. His work provides us with a unique voice from the South Vietnamese side of the conflict in Vietnam. But it does much more than this. The author skillfully entwines memories of his and his family’s life with the broader picture of the events taking place in his country. As his book is unique, so has been his life.

Nguyễn was born in 1937 in the provincial town of Vĩnh Yên, thirty miles north of Hanoi. His father was an active member of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Quốc dân đảng) and Nguyễn absorbed his influence from a very early age. His father was imprisoned by the Communists and died in prison, and Nguyễn moved to the South, where he became an officer in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), in which he served in several capacities, including head of the Reception Directorate of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam, RVN) Chiêu Hội Ministry and chief of the strategic study and research division of the General Political Warfare department. He achieved the rank of major. Several times he was sent

to the United States for training, the last of which occurred just prior to the fall of Saigon in 1975. He nevertheless chose to go back to Vietnam. There he was put into the reeducation camps for almost seven years, released in 1982, and was eventually allowed to relocate to the United States. Prior to the publication of his memoirs, he contributed to the *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*.

His work on the *Encyclopedia* and his research into the recent history of Vietnam appear to have enormously enriched his narrative. Along with the story of his life, he provides a succinct but flavorful introduction to Vietnam, its culture, and its politics as seen through his eyes. There are many points that draw attention in this almost six-hundred-page book, but within the constraints of this review I will focus on three topics that I believe present fresh perspectives on the conflict that occupied so much of his life: relations between the Nationalist and the Communist parties, the Chiêu Hội program, and the role of Americans.

Nguyễn traces the roots of the conflict between the Vietnamese Nationalists and Communists to a time long before the division of the country by the Geneva Accords in 1954. Both came into existence in the second half of the 1920s and were relatively well organized with clearly

defined doctrines. The two found themselves in a rivalry that eventually tore the nation apart. Based on his father and his father's comrades' testimonies, Nguyễn refutes the Communist claim that the Vietnamese Nationalists were mere underlings of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and its leader Chiang Kai-shek. The rivalry started from the beginning. He cites several examples of Communists' betrayal of non-Communist Nationalist activities, especially in China. However, Nguyễn observes that, unaware of many of these betrayals, the non-Communist Nationalist in Vietnam often considered Communists as friends, rather than foes, who also dreamed and fought for the independence of Vietnam from French colonial occupation. The difference was that the Nationalists did not think beyond gaining independence for their country, unlike, according to him, the Communists, whose eventual goal encompassed not only independence but also the revolutionary class struggle. The rivalry became apparent and aggravated after the August Revolution of 1945 when the Vietnamese Communists took power and started to enforce brutal policies, first squeezing and eventually eliminating their rivals. Nguyễn depicts his own transformation from someone who had friendly feelings toward Communists in general and special respect for Hồ Chí Minh as a leader in particular to a person who turned against the Communists by 1950, observing and enduring Communist policies in the areas under their control and losing his father, who perished in a Communist prison. His father's imprisonment and death reveals a little-known fact that even during the war against the French the Communists already had an established penitentiary system. In 1954, at the age of seventeen, when the country was partitioned in two, Nguyễn and his surviving family moved to the South and pursued an idea of patriotism that was very different than the one he witnessed among the Communists in the North.

Nguyễn's depiction of his life in the South gives us a vivid portrait of a society that despite many faults and flaws tried to establish a non-Communist version of Vietnamese modernity. The author's analysis of the mistakes (and successes) of the Saigon government is nuanced and deserves close attention from students and scholars of Vietnam. But the part that specifically stood out for me was his work as the director of the Reception Directorate in the RVN Chiêu Hội Ministry. Very little has been written about this program, which dealt with propaganda aimed at the Communist soldiers encouraging them to defect to the Saigon side and with their accommodation and integration into South Vietnamese society. To hear

about this from the person who was in charge of the program is particularly valuable. According to Nguyễn, 160,000 former Communist soldiers joined the South Vietnamese forces, which was equal to more than ten divisions, which also saved at least 5,000 lives if the ratio of ARVN losses to Communist losses was 1:3 (p. 348). His work in the directorate was a unique and rewarding experience for Nguyễn, himself being a refugee from the Communists in the North and now welcoming and helping those who found themselves, willingly or not, on the side of his enemy. In his eyes, the Chiêu Hội program and his role in it was a way to reconcile not with the foes's ideology but with his fellow countrymen, many of whom also espoused patriotism, even if different from his own. The appreciation of other human beings—allies or enemies—permeates Nguyễn's entire work.

Nguyễn's portrayal of Americans is unusual. He, like his father, and like Communists for that matter, hated the French for their occupation of his country. His attitude toward Americans seems to be different. He, like so many others from both the American and the Vietnamese sides, suggests deficiencies, often very significant, in the American policies or lack thereof in Vietnam, especially comparing them with the more consistent policies of the Soviet Union and China vis-à-vis their Hanoi ally. Among other examples, he makes a compelling case about drawbacks in propaganda activities. But what he finds even more troubling, again as is often the case in the book, concerns the human aspect of American-South Vietnamese interactions. He says: "I've always believed that if only one-fourth of the half million GIs serving in the Việt Nam War each year had been treated kindly by our Vietnamese, we would have won many objectives of the war." The source for this lack of kindness he sees in some high-ranking Americans "who did not favor the friendship with Vietnamese closer than what they thought necessary" (p. 360). As a result, "in the war, relationships between American fighters and Vietnamese people were minimal" (p. 358).

To conclude, this is a personal account encompassing many facets of Vietnamese life in the twentieth century. And its strengths are many. There are only a couple of criticisms that I could raise here. As with any memoirs written after a significant time in the aftermath of an event a question arises: how much is a work a memoir and how much is it a result of the knowledge acquired later, that is, is it really how an author remembers the events or is it how the author's memory has been transformed through time? While reading this brilliant work, I encountered an incredible number of names, numbers,

and multitude of details, some of which I surmise could hardly have been known to the author at certain stages of his life. Thus, it struck me that this work is not strictly a memoir but also a result of painstaking research, perhaps in the author's capacity as one of the editors of the *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, which gave a measure of detail to the experiences of the author during his amazing life.

There are some points that for a modern American reader might jump out as "politically incorrect." For example, while relating his unforgettable love with a beautiful girl in 1957, Nguyễn informs us that "like most pretty

girls, she paid little attention to patriotism and politics" (p. 175). While some might be taken aback by such statements, in my opinion, this is one of the things that gives the work a sense of a memoir, immediacy, and authenticity, tearing it away from purely academic research.

This book is of incredible value for anyone interested in Vietnam—its history, politics, and culture—and in the American involvement with Vietnam. It is also a meditation of a Vietnamese patriot on the substance of patriotism during a time of civil war in a context of international alliances. Amid the terrors and harsh imperatives of war, the author's is a rare voice of human decency.

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