



**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. 444 S. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3551-7.

LIEN-HANG T. NGUYEN



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The history of the Vietnam War has been written mainly from American points of view. These historical accounts may be divided simply and crudely into two groups. The first group consists of books written by various people in the political and military ranks who participated in conducting the war. The second group includes research based, to a decisive extent, on American documents. There is no doubt about the refreshing originality of most of the studies that are based on a careful analysis of the documents, but we are still receiving them from an American point of view. This perspective is used in examining, among other things, the reasons for U.S. involvement in another war in East Asia as well as the factors that influenced the strategy during the first years of the war. Furthermore, scholars use it to analyze the process that led to the termination of the war. Although in recent years we can find studies that also deal with “the other side of the hill” (for example, Ang Cheng Guan’s *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists’ Perspective* [2002]), they have less

weight in comparison with the publications about the American experience in the war. These studies from the “the other side” are mainly based not on archival sources but on official documents published in Vietnam and documents translated into English, such as those that fell into the hands of American intelligence during the war.

The book by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen is therefore an impressive breakthrough. Her research, which is grounded in documents from the Vietnamese archives, examines the policy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the system of decision making by the heads of the state in face of the renewal of warfare in order to bring about the complete unity of Vietnam under the rule of Hanoi. These Vietnamese documents were disclosed for the first time and laid before Nguyen. Through her careful work, she took the fullest advantage of this opportunity.

The book is divided into four parts that examine the second war in Vietnam chronologically. The first part is an introduction to the war. It

traces the processes that had already begun to occur during the French stage of the war, and the discussions that were held in the North before the renewal of the struggle in the South, i.e., in the second half of the 1950s. The second and third parts analyze the policy of the North during the war with an emphasis on the decision-making system that led the Communists to embark on the Tet offensive (January 1968). Even though from a military viewpoint the forces of the North and the Vietcong were soundly defeated, they achieved an important psychological victory. Most of the studies on the Vietnam War determine beyond all doubt that the Tet offensive was a turning point in the war. The last section deals with the long and exhausting process of negotiations to end the war, together with further discussions on warfare, strategies that should be adopted, and the influence of battlefield achievements on political talks.

As said above, the important innovation of this book is in its examination of the war and the decision-making process of North Vietnam. Analysis of this kind is lacking in the research literature on the Vietnam War, and in fact it may be claimed that for many wars in which Communist states took part it is difficult to form a complete picture and thus to compare the processes of decision making and policy shaping. However, the question that must be asked is whether, as a result of access to Vietnamese archival material, Nguyen provides new insights into research on the Vietnam War. An analogy can be made with research on the causes for the outbreak of the Korean War. On this issue there are two historiographical approaches. The first perspective is that the Soviet Union and China urged Kim Il Sung to invade the South. This means that the war began as a Communist aggression on a pro-Western state and that therefore it was from its very beginning part of the Cold War. The second approach, which developed during the 1980s, is that the war did indeed begin with aggression by the North, but the reason was Kim Il Sung's desire to unify Korea, and therefore the war should be regarded as a civil

war. It was only through American involvement a few days after the outbreak of the war that the confrontation in Korea became part of the Cold War. Either way, until the end of the 1980s, most studies by scholars of both schools of thought were based on Western archival documents, mainly from American archives. Other sources are the memoirs of various personalities in the Soviet Union and China. One of the exceptions to these publications is the comprehensive work, *The Origins of the Korean War* (published in two parts, *Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* [1989] and *The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* [1991]), of Bruce Cumings, whose knowledge of the Korean language allowed him to base his research on Korean sources. Cumings's conclusions tend toward the second school of thought; according to his claims, it was Koreans who invaded Korea.[1]

The general lack of access to Soviet, Korean, and Chinese archives should not cause surprise that the story of the Korean War as we know it in the English language is mainly the American version of the story. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev's memoir (*Khrushchev Remembers*, translated by S. Talbot [1971]) was the main source for understanding the interrelations between Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung. But did the collapse of the Soviet Union and the limited possibility to access Soviet archives lead to any essential change in research on the causes for the Korean War? From a reading of the research written on the basis of Soviet archival material it appears that each of the schools of thought found reinforced support for the theses they had presented before the opening of the archives.[2] The study of non-Western documents did not lead to the end of the debate but to the further entrenchment of the old theses through new evidence. However, the importance of research written on the basis of non-Western material is that this research can illuminate addi-

tional aspects and also examine the decision-making system of the opposing side.

This is what gives importance to Nguyen's research. It is well known that discussions were held in the North Vietnamese politburo and that power struggles occurred between various personalities, especially after the death of Ho Chi Minh (1969). Yet the nature of these discussions and struggles was not sufficiently known and certainly no description was made of the decision-making system based on careful analysis of archival material. In other words, the framework was known to the researchers of the Vietnam War but obscurity prevailed whenever an attempt was made to determine what occurred north of the 17th parallel at various stages of the war. Of course, one cannot fully endorse the archival material; the documents were written by those who had their own agenda, which did not necessarily reflect objective realities but their own subjective worldview.

Nevertheless, we have here a breakthrough of unique importance for a fuller understanding of the history of the Vietnam War. Through verification and analysis of Vietnamese archival documents combined with prolific literature written about the Vietnam War, Nguyen manages to explain the various mechanisms that underlay the North Vietnamese system of decision making. Moreover, the use of these documents illuminates the different positions and arguments that were conducted in Hanoi during the course of the war and thus it destroys the paradigm that the Communist regime was of a monolithic uniformity. There is no doubt that the aim of the war was clear, i.e., to remove the American presence and unify Vietnam, but there was a variety of opinions regarding the ways and means to be adopted to achieve this aim.

Future research about the Vietnam War, especially by those who will examine the decision-making system during the critical junctures of the war, will have to refer to this work. Although, in

her research, Nguyen also incorporates the American side, she emphasizes the North Vietnamese system. This research therefore constitutes an important point of departure for comparative studies between the system of decision making in the United States and the one that was conducted in North Vietnam, as well as studies that will examine the reactions and counter-reactions of the two states during various stages of the war. There is no doubt that researching the war from the Vietnamese side is difficult, if only because of language barriers. But the effort will be greatly rewarded.

#### Notes

[1]. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, vol. 2, *The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 619.

[2]. For a survey of Soviet archives, see Jonathan Haslam, "Russian Archival Revelations and Our Understanding of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 2 (1997): 217-228.

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