

 **Article REVIEW**

**Pierre Asselin.** “Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954-1955.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.2 (Spring 2007): 95-126. doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.2.95. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1162/jcws.2007.9.2.95> .

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**P**ierre Asselin’s “Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam” offers a valuable reassessment of Hanoi’s revolutionary policies immediately after the July 1954 Geneva Agreement on Vietnam. For sources Asselin relies primarily upon *Van Kien Dang—Toan Tap* (Party Documents—Complete Works), a series put out in installments from 1998 to the present by the Vietnamese government publishing house.<sup>1</sup> He acknowledges the incomplete and selective nature of this collection, but correctly concludes that “the volumes shed much new light on VWP policies, internal debates and disagreements, and motivations for specific policies” (95).

Based on these new sources, Asselin argues that Hanoi accepted the provisions of the Geneva Agreement not because of pressure from Beijing and Moscow, as historians often claim, but because Vietnamese Workers’ Party (VWP) leaders were “confident that implementation would bring peaceful reunification and promote the cause of socialism in Vietnam” (96). He notes that this position inspired a rift between the VWP and southern revolutionaries, who resented the subordination of southern liberation to socialist development in the North, and objected to the Geneva Agreement on the grounds that it obviated the fruits of their prior struggle. Asselin claims that southern cadres “suspected that the French, the Americans, and the anti-revolutionary forces that controlled the South Vietnamese government would never abide by its terms or permit a peaceful triumph of the revolution” (96). But the VWP disregarded southerners’ concerns in the immediate aftermath of the ceasefire, instead insisting that Party sympathizers on both sides of the seventeenth parallel should refrain from any action that might contravene the principles of the Geneva Accords or legitimize non-compliance on the part of the Saigon government. According to Asselin, “The failure of this policy, which was soon apparent in Hanoi, had major repercussions, prompting a change of leadership in the North and causing VWP leaders to lose faith in diplomacy as a means of advancing the revolution, and induced them to rely predominantly on military operations to achieve revolutionary success” (96-97).

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<sup>1</sup> For an earlier introduction to this documentary collection, see Pierre Asselin, “New Evidence from Vietnam,” *Passport: The Newsletter for the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* (December 2004).

Asselin lists four reasons for Hanoi's decision to discontinue the military struggle after 1954. First, he claims, the military was "exhausted by the war with France and needed to regroup for a possible U.S. intervention in China" (106). Second, a period of peace would give the DRV a much-needed chance to consolidate itself politically and economically. Third, VWP leaders believed that Hanoi's adherence to the Geneva Agreements "would encourage the other side to do likewise, paving the way for peaceful reunification and fulfillment of revolutionary objectives" (108). And fourth, "North Vietnamese leaders believed that peace under the Geneva Agreements would be more promising than war as a vehicle for encouraging national reconciliation after reunification" (108). Throughout his article Asselin provides documentation for these well reasoned points, albeit with sources selectively released by the Vietnamese government. However, at times he goes beyond what his evidence will support in arguing that VWP leaders *believed* in 1954 that they could achieve the peaceful reunification of Vietnam by adhering to the Geneva Agreement. It might be more accurate to state that Hanoi *hoped* for such an outcome, and actively avoided violating the agreement in order to create the best possible conditions for its eventual implementation. It seems that the VWP always recognized the possibility that Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States might subvert the Geneva mandated reunification elections and provoke the DRV to resume violent struggle.

This minor criticism aside, Asselin argues quite convincingly that, in contrast to northern leaders, southern revolutionaries expected all along that peaceful means to reunification and reconciliation would fail. His discussion of the rift that Hanoi's post-Geneva policy generated between northern and southern revolutionaries contributes significantly to our understanding of the stained relationship that later developed between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the National Liberation Front (NLF). It also sheds light on the shift in VWP leadership that took place as Le Duan replaced Truong Chinh as First Secretary of the Party in 1957. Thereafter, Hanoi advanced a much more hard-line policy that moved rapidly in the direction of supporting violent struggle in the South. Asselin claims that this was largely a result of VWP disillusionment with diplomacy and negotiations resulting from the failure of peaceful DRV policies carried out in 1954-1955. But Asselin's own evidence suggests that it was the ascendance of Le Duan and his southern associates, rather than a more generalized disillusionment within the Party, that accounted for Hanoi's future militancy and distaste for negotiations.

On the issue of the DRV's long-term diplomacy towards South Vietnam and the United States, Asselin may also consider paying greater attention to the roles of its communist allies, particularly China and the Soviet Union. While it is certainly valuable to detail the internal workings of the DRV as Asselin has done, this value would only be enhanced by situating VWP policy decisions within their broader diplomatic context. Asselin notes that "satisfying the interests of the USSR was not ultimately a priority for the VWP," but research by Qiang Zhai, Ilya Gaiduk, Lien-Hang Nguyen and others suggests that this situation remained fluid over time, and that the leadership in Hanoi never achieved

unanimity on matters of diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Although the cold war was not the only factor that influenced North Vietnam's strategy, neither was it irrelevant.

Asselin's piece serves as a reminder of how much we still have to learn about the various Vietnamese players in the Vietnam Wars. He has added useful nuance to a story that is all too often rendered in black and white. In the future he may consider bringing a bit more skepticism to sources released by the Vietnamese government, which has been known to exert strong control over historiographical production.<sup>3</sup> Overall, though, "Choosing Peace" is a welcome contribution to the field of diplomatic history and should become standard reading for students of the Vietnam Wars.

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<sup>2</sup> See Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003); Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).