

 **Article REVIEW**

Christopher E. Goscha. “Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945–1950).” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-1-2 (February 2006): 59-103.

Liên-Hang T. Nguyen. “The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-1.2 (February 2006): 4-58.

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The inaugural issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (JVS) appeared in August 2006, published by the University of California Press. This review examines two of the articles from the first installment: Christopher E. Goscha’s “Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945-1950)” and Liên-Hang T. Nguyen’s “The War Politburo: North Vietnam’s Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive”.

Christopher Goscha (Université du Québec à Montréal) examines the period between the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV) in 1945 to its formal recognition by the Soviets and Chinese in January 1950, the cause for which he attributes to Chinese influence. Reaffirming previous scholars’ conclusions, Goscha states that communist and anti-communist forces alike questioned whether Ho advocated nationalism or internationalist communism in this period. While he views this issue as a result of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) dissolution in 1945, this controversy had been in existence since the 1930s, as William Duiker and others have explained. Ho’s independent decision to dissolve the ICP, however, did exacerbate dramatically the suspicions of Stalin and others. Goscha accounts for the ICP dissolution as a result of both internal political pressures from other factions like the Dong Minh Hoi (DMH) and Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), plus as an external effort by DRV leaders to reassure the occupying forces of the Chinese Nationalists.¹ But, as the author uses Russian, French, and Vietnamese sources to demonstrate, this action also had serious consequences. Internally it created confusion among ICP members and externally it led to doubts about the intentions of the DRV, especially among the French and Soviets.

Goscha states that, “Faced with full-scale war with the French and unable to gain concrete support from the Americans, the party needed to reactivate its communist diplomacy and re-establish its contacts with the communist world” (66). Yet, as he goes on to reveal, Vietnamese efforts to restore ties with the international communist community after World War II achieved little. For example, the DRV tried to establish contact with the Soviets through foreign offices in Thailand and France, but with unimpressive results. The author reassesses the role of official representatives such as Pham Ngoc Thach in 1947, whose active efforts to contact the Soviets ultimately failed.

Such was the case with most Vietnamese diplomats sent to open direct channels of communication with the Soviet Union.

Goscha then emphasizes the unofficial diplomacy of Le Hy and Tran Ngoc Danh, both long-time internationalists whose “initiative” in seeking Soviet contact and support resulted from the ICP dissolution and dwindling faith in the true aims of DRV power holders. The author describes their acts as confirmation of the “desperate state of Vietnamese diplomacy.” Further, “The unofficial diplomatic efforts of Tran Ngoc Danh and Le Hy also allow one to better understand why Ho Chi Minh would encounter a reluctant Stalin in January 1950” (75). However, it is difficult to determine from the evidence provided how much credibility the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) or French Communist Party (FCP) gave these “loose cannons.” For that matter, whether their overtures had any impact whatsoever on diplomatic relations remains ambiguous. Also, the work of scholars such as Balazs Szalontai brings into question the idea that Soviet worries concerning the ICP dissolution simply disappeared in 1950.

U.S. overtures to the DRV complicated the Vietnamese position even more. Emphasizing the Titoist context along with Stalin’s issues with Asian leaders universally, Goscha demonstrates that the increasing U.S. interest in Vietnam damaged Vietnamese legitimacy even further vis-à-vis the internationalist communist community. At the same time, the DRV strove to keep their public pronouncements about the U.S. as neutral as possible, at least until confirmation of Soviet support. Collectively, the author argues, fears of Titoism, DRV ambiguity toward the U.S., and the unofficial overtures of those like Le and Tran, all but ended the possibility of DRV legitimacy within the communist world.

With help from the leading figures of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Stalin ultimately agreed to diplomatic recognition of the DRV. Although available evidence is still limited, it appears that Vietnamese military assistance to the CCP along the southern border confirmed their internationalist convictions to the Chinese and the personal support of Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Mao Zedong furthered the DRV cause with Stalin. Official recognition came in January 1950, along with an alteration in the DRV position regarding the U.S.. Praise for Stalin prevailed in speeches and publications, as did a clear, internationalist position. Ho modified his previously careful rhetoric, calling the U.S. an imperialist nation in his interviews. While such intimations had been made previously in venues such as *Su That*, the DRV leaders now overtly dedicated Vietnamese communists to the internationalist cause. This, in turn, guaranteed future support from the Soviets and Chinese during the American intervention, although the degree and amount would vary.

The subsequent schism between the Soviets and Chinese as well as Vietnam Worker’s Party (VWP) rivalries form the core of Liên-Hang Nguyen’s (University of Kentucky) article on the background to the Têt Offensive. In *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (2002), Marc Jason Gilbert and Robert Brigham sought to shift the focus of scholarship on the Têt Offensive away from the U.S. to the Vietnamese, both North and South. Nguyen finds that the most compelling questions concern the DRV and the decisions

leading to the “General Offensive-General Uprising.” She argues that “Ideological divisions and personal rivalries within the VWP that intersected with the larger debates taking place in the communist world” and thus a careful balancing act between “foreign allies and domestic adversaries” shaped DRV efforts leading to the decision to implement a military solution in the South (5).

The DRV of the late 1950s was marked by increasing factionalization, reflecting disagreements within the international communist community between the Soviet solution of peaceful conflict resolution and China’s strategy of revolutionary violence. Thus, Nguyen reinforces the conclusions of other scholars by detailing how the DRV divided into two corresponding camps: those who advocated “peaceful reunification through socialist development of the North” and others who sought “violent reunification through liberation struggle in the South” (8). The rivalry that emerged between these “North-first” versus “South-first” factions intensified following 1960. In September of that year, Le Duan, a leading “South-first” proponent, became General Secretary. The DRV attempted to balance its foreign affairs, especially in light of the deepening Sino-Soviet rift, but by 1963 “Ha noi’s vacillation between political struggle and armed conflict, neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split, and southern war and northern development” ended (15). In late November, despite considerable support for a continued North-first emphasis, the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee passed Resolution 9 in support of a military solution in the South. The resulting purges of pro-Soviet elements from the Party led to a near-witch hunt as long-time leaders were labeled as reactionaries and even overseas students returned to be “re-educated.”

The manufactured Gulf Of Tonkin incident proved to be a significant turning point within the Party. In combination with early war losses and the subsequent lessening of Le Duan’s power, Nguyen argues, the VWP shifted to neutrality again in the Sino-Soviet dispute. More moderate Party members went on their own political offensive and called for a negotiated peace to end the war, expressed especially in the public debate between Nguyen Chi Thanh (a leading South-first proponent) and Vo Nguyen Giap (a staunch North-first supporter). The 1966 U.S. bombing pause allowed the pro-war faction to outmaneuver the pro-negotiations group, although explanation for this must await the release of additional evidence.

During the same period, the Soviets continued to exert pressure on Hanoi to choose a negotiated settlement, while China pressed for a military solution. Nguyen argues persuasively that Le Duan and the pro-South group concluded that a major military action in a U.S. presidential election year would have positive results for their cause, no matter the actual outcome: either the DRV would win the war or at least gain a stronger negotiating position. This line of thinking culminated in the “General Offensive and General Uprising” of Resolution 14, made possible by three waves of anti-Soviet purges within the VWP. Known as the Revisionist Anti-Party Affair (*vu an xet lai-chong Dang*), the rationale for the arrests “rested squarely on the Politburo’s choice of tactics and strategy for the Têt Offensive” (27). Nguyen also argues that the purges “served a useful purpose of sending a clear message to the allies without posing substantial risks to its diplomatic relations,” deterring the Soviets and placating the Chinese (30). Yet, such a

drastic move after substantial Soviet efforts to cultivate Vietnamese friendships may have been viewed as an affront to the Soviets. Once again, more information is needed on the Soviet reaction to these arrests to determine whether or not this move was in fact a big risk rather than a safe course of action, taking into account the increasing importance of the DRV to the Soviets during the mid to late 1960s.

Combined with the death of Nguyen Chi Thanh, the failing health of Ho, and the sidelining of Giap (whose pro-Soviet supporters were targeted during the purges), the author contends that the Revisionist Anti-Party Affair led directly to the decision for the Têt Offensive. Nguyen concludes that, because of the Têt Offensive, therefore, a U.S. administration (that of Lyndon Johnson) fell rather than a Saigon regime. Têt brought on negotiations, and thus the author avers that the DRV moderates won in the end. She goes on to state that “The launching of the Têt Offensive signified the end of a bitter, decade-long debate within the VWP.” What is left unsaid, however, is how these negotiations precipitated a decline in Le Duan’s power, plus a return to pro-Soviet leanings in the post-Têt period. While beyond the scope of the article, casting a wider net should substantiate whether Têt 1968 truly “ended” the Party feuds, especially as Soviet documents tend to indicate the opposite.

Nguyen does well to avoid the trap of claiming this to be simply a proxy war with no Vietnamese agency. Her work demonstrates how the DRV had to balance carefully (and often creatively) its allies’ “much-needed military and economic aid with unwanted, and often conflicting advice” (6). For Nguyen, national security interests are paramount. What is left a bit obscure are the exact internal mechanisms in play, especially the shifting roles and power of the governmental and Party organizations as well as that of prominent figures such as Truong Chinh and Pham Van Dong. For example, Truong Chinh’s supposed path of transformation from a supporter of Ho Chi Minh and land reform in the 1950s to a Le Duan ally in 1963 should be made clearer. Who changed their alliances and why is a compelling question. As this article is part of a larger work, doubtless these issues are clarified in the dissertation.

As with much of the literature on Vietnam and the Cold War, both authors focus substantial attention on “great powers.” Other decolonizing nations and their strategies for independence are missing, as is consideration of their influence, if any, on the Vietnamese context. Archival documents from Vietnam’s Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education suggest that the DRV enthusiastically sought to connect with many other countries in Africa and Europe, especially in the 1950s. Also absent from these two narratives are the array of countries of the growing communist bloc beyond their ability to connect the DRV with the Soviets and Chinese; Stalin and Mao may not be the only influential players worthy of consideration. The Cold War International History Project (CWIP) publications (including those of James Hershberg and Odd Arne Westad) have helped to expand our understanding of this context; both authors make some use of these sources.

What the work of present-day authors such as Goscha and Nguyen contribute is a much-needed examination of internal DRV complications as well as the external milieu of

Soviet and Chinese pressure. Both extend the ways in which scholars approach Vietnam, synthesizing sources from countries such as China, the Soviet Union, France, the U.S., and Vietnam to evaluate the internal and external forces on the DRV. Goscha relies primarily on Russian, Vietnamese, and French sources in addition to the secondary literature to develop his arguments. Nguyen's sources are Vietnamese and American documents, valuably supplemented with secondary works as well as recent archival inquiry and interviews that offer nuance and rich detail. Both articles provide new evidence to substantiate previous scholars' conclusions and also suggest new avenues of inquiry for future researchers.

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ⁱ A copy of this review is available with the Vietnamese diacritics included.