



Olga Dror. *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965-1975.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 338 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-68856-7.

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Many books have been penned about the multifaceted history of the Vietnam War. Few, however, are dedicated solely to studying the identities and experiences of Vietnamese youths who grew up during the embattled years. Olga Dror's *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities, 1965-1975* is the most recent attempt to fill this historiographical gap. In this ambitious comparative study, Dror peruses the different ways in which the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) influenced and molded their respective youths through education, social organizations, and publications. Using archival materials, existing secondary literature, and oral interviews, Dror argues that the DRV was ultimately successful in indoctrinating, unifying, and mobilizing North Vietnamese youth for war. This ability to "harness youth to the nation's agenda" and create harmony among a new generation of "loyal fighters for the cause" was crucial to the North's goal of constructing "a communist state that would eventually encompass the South" (pp. 14, 7). By contrast, the RVN's republicanism and diversity discouraged its leadership from imposing "the war agenda on its young ones." The result was a "fractured and stratified" society that left South Vietnamese children and young adults unaware of, uninterested in, or in outright opposi-

tion to their country's ongoing fight against Communism (p. 7).

The first venue through which the DRV and the RVN influenced youth was education. According to Dror, the DRV's educational system was heavily politicized to accommodate the central goal of raising revolutionary fighters. In addition to Marxist-Leninist theories, students were also taught "the importance of class analysis, of love for Ho Chi Minh and for the [Communist] Party, and of hatred for those who opposed their goals" (p. 25). Accompanying this anti-capitalist curriculum was a series of patriotic emulation movements that compelled youth to both adopt an anti-American, anti-imperialist worldview and directly contribute to national production and the war effort. Beginning in 1965, northern schools further became militarized under the "oppose Americans, save the country" campaign (p. 29). Both teachers and students were expected to support the war in various ways, such as providing first aid and maintaining underground shelters. Significantly, the DRV also established its own socialist educational systems in the People's Republic of China and the RVN. Dror argues that while suffering from challenges and myriad shortcomings, these efforts demonstrated the DRV's commitment to creating "an educational mini-empire" as part of

its “exhausting war to bring the RVN under its sway” (p. 71).

Second, the DRV indoctrinated its youth through a hierarchical system of social organizations, modeled after Soviet youth groups and designed to shepherd children onto a designated path toward Communism. Depending on their age, youth could participate in the Children of August Organization, the Pioneers Organization, or different subgroups of the Youth League. As with classroom activities, organizational activities also involved emulations and competitions to engage in agricultural and war production. The special organization of the Youth Shock Brigades further took part in roadbuilding, transportation of ammunitions, and even physical combat. According to Dror, through participation in these organizations, children and adolescents became increasingly unified under a centralized pro-war agenda and by “the relationship of love and devotion” they allegedly shared with Uncle Ho Chi Minh (p. 106).

Finally, the author argues that DRV youth literature was heavily influenced by Ivan M. Gronsky’s socialist realism, a Soviet literary genre that sought to foster in its audience “optimism, collectivism, a sense of purpose, and compliance with state policies” (p. 117). Strict control in the form of self-regulation and self-control by publishers was also exercised over all DRV publications (p. 118). As a result, exceedingly few fictional or satirical works were published, while most books strove to cultivate in young people hatred for Americans and an appreciation for labor and the proletarian cause. Similarly, DRV textbooks featured revolutionary writings, myths denoting a common Vietnamese ethnic origin, and critical realism “describing hardships of working people” (p. 171). The ultimate goal, contends Dror, was to “militarize and mobilize” North Vietnamese youth to fight the American imperialists and build “a socialist state on the unified territories of the DRV and the RVN” (p. 166).

In this context, the RVN emerges through Dror’s lens as nothing short of the antithesis of the DRV. In contrast to the latter’s work-study approach, the former’s education emphasized examinations and “bookish learning to the exclusion of other activities” (p. 57). Dror argues that while DRV schools strove to politicize their students, RVN leaders chose to promote an apolitical education to create a “shield of normalcy” for their young ones. For instance, while detailing the various “deficiencies of Marxist theory,” RVN textbooks neither mentioned “the atrocities” committed by the Communists nor adequately taught students “the necessity to defeat” them (p. 71).

The diversity of southern society further fostered a wide range of youth organizations associated with different religious, social, and political movements. Many were not controlled by the government, and some even experienced “friction” in their relationships with the regime. According to Dror, this youth-government friction resulted partly from youth participation in anti-government protests and partly from the fact that southern youth “wanted everything their way and were extremely impatient with official regulations” (p. 99). Improvement thus came only with the destructive 1968 Tết Offensive, which inspired the previously apolitical Boy Scouts to begin keeping “an eye on communist underground activities,” while over two hundred thousand students were organized into paramilitary organizations, such as the People’s Self-Defense Forces (p. 105). Despite these nominal changes, Dror argues that the lack of a hierarchical system of youth organizations allowed young people in the South relative freedom to either join their nation’s anti-Communist struggle or “ignore the war as much as possible” (p. 107).

Finally, if DRV publications followed Soviet ideology and helped to serve the party’s agenda, RVN youth literature was influenced by Western existentialism and various political and religious agendas. On the one hand, South Vietnam’s liter-

ary scene had become “saturated” with foreign entertainment novels by 1970. On the other hand, many southern writers continued to publish works that emphasized “Vietnamness” and promoted a Vietnamese identity among their young audience. According to Dror, while the absence of a totalitarian government and a “centralized state economy” necessarily posed commercial challenges to southern private publishers, it also allowed for “incredible intellectual freedom” in the South compared to the North (p. 157). Even members of the “patently anti-government, latently pro-communist” Third Force were able to reach youth through such magazines as Tran Kim Bang’s *Hon Tre*, Nguyen Vy’s *Thang Bom*, and Father Chan Tin’s *Tuoi Hoa*. The author argues that while these publishers were explicit in transmitting their antiwar messages to younger generations, other anti-Communist writers “did not want to raise children with hatred” (p. 155).

Since “neither the government nor individuals promoted militarization” through literature and education, contends Dror, South Vietnamese adults were able to provide youth with “a sense of normalcy by avoiding the topic of war” (p. 166). In the end, however, that the RVN “had no policy to teach youth to hate enemies and to be eager to display battlefield prowess” constituted “a liability in terms of RVN viability.” Dror insists that this “non-politicization of youth” left many young people “in confusion about the war, its causes, their place in society, and their feelings about the war” (p. 275). By refusing to impose ideological uniformity, the RVN ultimately failed to mobilize its youth to the nation’s defense against the ongoing Communist invasion both by the North and from within.

Dror’s *Making Two Vietnams* is commendable for exploring the heretofore unnoticed topic of youth identities during the Vietnam War. Dror’s comparative study benefits from her extensive archival research and incorporation of both English and Vietnamese sources. Oral interviews with

some Vietnamese writers and former publishers further add insights to the author’s reconstruction of the political and cultural forces that shaped young people’s ideology in the two Vietnams. Particularly interesting is Dror’s examination of wartime publications by youth in the two states. In fact, it is primarily in these discussions that the author gives youth some semblance of historical agency. The rest of *Making Two Vietnams* is more interested in what adults’ construction of youth identities in North and South Vietnam revealed about the different natures of the two societies. In other words, Dror’s work is a cultural history in methodology but a political history in goal.

Indeed, this book is the latest contributor to the Vietnam-centric revisionist interpretation of the war. *Making Two Vietnams* identifies the American Vietnam War as an ideological civil war, in which the defensive and benevolent South Vietnam fought helplessly to “stave off an invasion” from the oppressive and aggressive North Vietnam (p. 220). The National Liberation Front (NLF), a Communist-led nationalist coalition in South Vietnam, for instance, is described as an organization established by the DRV to unite Communists and Communist sympathizers. This narrow and oversimplified interpretation of the conflict not only relies on unproven assumptions about the homogeneity of Vietnamese Communism and the political legitimacy and moral superiority of the RVN government but also undercuts Dror’s reconstruction of wartime youth identities in important ways.

First, while explicit and descriptive of the DRV’s aggression and exploitation of their own children, the author is exceedingly brief and inattentive when discussing American belligerency and its impact on South Vietnamese youth. Nowhere in her narrative does Dror address the ways in which US military destruction and pacification programs inevitably exacerbated southern youths’ experience and shaped their ideology. In reality, both historians and primary documents

have shown that children routinely suffered from incessant bombings, forced relocation, and economic depravity resulting directly from American war policies.[1] That countless children had been turned into orphans, war refugees, and political prisoners by 1968 was instrumental to augmenting youth participation in antiwar activities in the South, whether as part of the NLF or the politically neutral Third Force.[2] Dror's complete omission of the impact of American war conduct on young people is both disappointing and astonishing, especially given the book's supposed coverage of the most ferocious period of the Vietnam War.

Second, Dror understates the United States' intimate role in nation-building and destruction in the South. At the same time, the author overstates and romanticizes the RVN's intentions to prioritize young people's interests and efforts to "separate schools from the war" (p. 71). For instance, despite having cited that the RVN only spent 6 percent of its national budget on education, compared to 60 percent spent on defense, Dror nevertheless insists that "this demonstrates the significance the government allotted to education" (p. 54). Furthermore, Dror praises the system of community education developed under the Hamlet School Program as an "innovation" and attestation to the RVN's dedication to youth (p. 62). As proven by historian Jessica Elkind in *Aid under Fire*, however, this program was in fact a part of the failed American nation-building enterprise in the RVN. Education reforms, along with other US-funded social and economic development programs, constituted "a war strategy" to preserve the increasingly unpopular and highly undemocratic government in Saigon. As Elkind notes, these initiatives were driven by "pragmatic, strategic and political reasons," rather than a genuine concern for the interests of youth in rural areas, as claimed by Dror.[3]

Indeed, while many moral intellectuals and educators undoubtedly desired the best for younger generations, the RVN government itself

was far from amiable to youth. It was in fact during the 1968-73 period, identified by Dror as one of "political stability" and "relative cooperation between youth and the government," that President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered the most violent attacks against youth institutions, including the politically active Saigon University and the privately run Long Thanh War Orphans Village (p. 100). Many students were also imprisoned and tortured under the American-sponsored Accelerated Pacification Program, with a large number of children being held prisoners by the Thieu regime.[4] Given this repressive political context, it was unsurprising that young people were among the most organized and outspoken critics of the government. Yet for Dror, it was rather an abstract sense of "confusion" stemming from excessive freedom, lack of state indoctrination, and aggressive Communist influence that drove southern youth to rebellion.

In this light, Dror only seems successful in illuminating the perspectives of elite and (some) intellectual Vietnamese. The remaining inhabitants of the two countries are largely portrayed as unaware and passive recipients of state tutelage. In the North, only the implementation of an authoritarian system, not unlike that of Nazi Germany, was able to mobilize people for war. Similarly, Dror contends that "political ideas remained abstract for many in the South" due to the absence of "a strong propaganda machine and a rigid societal structure" (p. 8). For Dror, Vietnamese people hardly had any real political or historical agency. Indeed, Dror concludes that the outcome of the war was not even decided by "ideas prevailing among southern or northern youth" but by the "non-Vietnamese patrons of the two Vietnams." The RVN lost because external assistance was "available only to the North during the last two years of the war" (p. 274). In reality, as recent scholarship has shown, the Nixon and Ford administrations continued to supply the Saigon gov-

ernment with financial aid until the very end of the bloody conflict.[5]

In short, *Making Two Vietnams* is a patently anti-Communist, latently pro-American work of revisionist history. While it has undeniable research and archival value, its historical analysis is unfortunately undermined by political biases, cultural essentialism, and colonialist interpretations of people in the Global South as mere instruments of the Soviet Union and the United States in the Cold War struggle for global hegemony.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

[2]. An Thuy Nguyen, "The Vietnam Women's Movement for the Right to Live: A Non-Communist Opposition Movement to the American War in Vietnam," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (2019): 75-102.

[3]. Jessica Elkind, *Aid under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 175.

[4]. Don Luce and Holmes Brown, *Hostages of War: Saigon's Political Prisoners* (Santa Monica, CA: Indochina Mobile Education Project, 1973).

[5]. Nguyen, "Vietnam Women's Movement," 93-96.

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