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**Le Duan's War**

“Old Ho,” President Lyndon Johnson said to his aide Bill Moyers in April 1965, “can’t turn that down.”[1] Johnson was describing his offer to the purported leader of North Vietnam, or Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), Ho Chi Minh, to fund a massive development project in the Mekong delta modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority. There were two problems with Johnson’s supposition. First, Johnson discounted the nationalist fervor that the leaders in North Vietnam possessed in their fight to reunite their country under communist rule. Johnson was horse-trading not with a reluctant US senator but with an entirely different breed of political actors, ones who would not accept a bribe, least of all from the imperialist, capitalist enemy. Second, “Old Ho” was no longer in power in the DRV, having been replaced several years earlier by Le Duan.


Written in a lively, engaging prose—including the conversational use of exclamation points and rhetorical questions—*Vietnam's American War* is divided into six chronological chapters, exclusive of an introduction and epilogue. Each chapter is helpfully broken down into digestible parts by the use of subheadings. The book contains useful maps, a dramatis personae, and a glossary of terms. The fact that Asselin is able to synthesize this level of information in 283 pages is a testament to the depth of his knowledge and his abilities as a writer.

The book is designed for, and will be a welcome addition to, many a college class on the Vietnam War. Read in conjunction with the American perspective on the conflict will help complete what is often missed when introducing the topic. Though Asselin provides an annotated bibliography, citations are scant, and the chapter endnotes are limited to secondary sources. Asselin should not be criticized for taking this approach—he informs the reader early on to reference his
other books for primary source citations—but scholars may be frustrated not to see the source material when Asselin describes the thoughts and feelings of the leaders, or when he refutes the statements of “many historians” (p. 207).

Though the book is ostensibly about the American War in Vietnam (1965-73), Asselin takes a holistic approach to the topic by providing a survey of Vietnamese history and an analysis of the French War in Indochina. The thrust of the book is on the political judgments and diplomatic maneuverings of the North Vietnamese leadership, and Asselin expertly contextualizes the decision-making process by manifesting the relevance of international relations, the domestic economy, and the internal politics of the DRV. Asselin provides valuable insight that the DRV leadership did not operate in a vacuum.

Asselin identifies the ideology of the DRV as “patriotic internationalism,” a fusion of Stalinist communism and fervent nationalism (p. 111). But the DRV was far from unified. Appropriating American nomenclature, Asselin posits that the DRV was split between the “doves,” moderates led by Ho, who were focused on stabilizing the North and more apt to side with the entreaties of Soviet détente, and the “hawks” led by Le Duan, who were focused on revolution and defiant of their communist patrons but, when strategic, more aligned with their militant Chinese brethren. Through the mid-1960s, North Vietnam was caught in a “metaphorical love triangle” between the communist powers and proved to be an exemplar of how a client or proxy state can leverage and control its more powerful patron (in this case, patrons) (p. 140).

Asselin ably describes the rift between the Le Duan faction—whose members considered Ho “soft” for his capitulation in the execution of the 1954 Geneva Accords that partitioned the country—and the Ho sect but leaves a distinct impression of his high regard of Ho. Asselin posits that Ho was not cajoled by the Soviet Union and China into accepting the split of his country but did so because he feared American intervention.[2] With peace in place, Asselin posits that Ho strictly adhered to the accords but then contradicts this supposition by describing the immediate violation of the terms of the agreement by the remaining presence of over fifteen thousand communist troops in the South. Asselin grandiloquently explains that this was due to the parochial nature of the Vietnamese people and their ties to their ancestral land but then refutes this point by the fact that nearly one million northerners abandoned their homes and fled south to avoid living under communist rule (pp. 80-82).

South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem is portrayed in a particularly harsh light for making a “mockery” of the accords, an agreement to which he neither agreed nor signed, while Ho is portrayed as continuing to abide by the accords, while sanctioning a “very limited” program of assassinations of Saigon officials and terrorist bombings of government institutions (p. 88). Ho was “bewildered” when the southern revolutionaries engaged in widespread guerilla activities after he authorized Resolution 15, a resolution that explicitly authorized such actions (p. 98). The assassination of Diem by his own troops in late 1963 coincided with the bloodless coup of Ho by Le Duan. The heretofore limited war by the DRV would become a full-blown armed struggle.

For every American soldier who died in Vietnam, over twenty soldiers of the DRV’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) or southern Viet Cong revolutionary died. The DRV attempted three major campaigns in the South—the 1964 Offensive, the Tet Offensive (1968), and the Easter Offensive (1972)—and all failed, the latter two spectacularly. In this context, how was the North ultimately able to unify their country? Incredibly, the DRV won the public relations war. In the age depicted in Matthew Weiner’s TV series Mad Men (2007-15) and age of Vance Packard’s Hidden Persuaders (1957), America lost the war of public perception.
and imagination to a country that ostensibly lacked even a modicum of sophistication, transforming what was a fratricidal civil war into a war against malevolent American imperialism.

After the failure of the Easter Offensive, secret peace discussions between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho of the DRV appeared to bring a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the fall of 1972. However, the DRV failed to enter into an agreement, parsing language related to the demilitarized zone, leading an enraged President Richard Nixon to bomb the DRV. A chastened Le Duan soon executed the treaty, ending the American war in early 1973. When the Americans abandoned the effort, a final push by the DRV in the spring of 1975 allowed for the reunification of the country. This reunification meant the end of South Vietnam, or as it was known, the Republic of Vietnam. Though the book is ostensibly about the entirety of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese perspective is not included.

Asselin laments that not enough attention has been given by scholars to the study of North Vietnam. Though there has been important work done, there is a basis for the criticism.[3] But there is also an overt reason. Vietnam remains a closed society. Western scholars cannot rely on its Vietnamese counterparts for insight because of strict government controls. Even Asselin’s yeoman work in this arena is subject to close scrutiny since he is not allowed unfettered access to Vietnamese archives.

In his coda—in a passage that will cause some consternation among historians—Asselin posits that America’s entry into the Vietnam conflict only “delayed the inevitable” (p. 250). Asselin carefully explains that his conclusion is not deterministic but contends that because of Le Duan’s ferocity and tenacity, the goal of reunification would never be abandoned, no matter the cost.[4] But history is littered with fanatical, driven despots who failed. Asselin’s argument is more persuasive when he examines how the DRV used a three-prong approach—military, political, diplomatic—and linked their struggle to the international arena..

Asselin begins and ends his tome by unfortunately analogizing the conflict with the fable of David versus Goliath. David had nothing but faith and a simple weapon; the DRV had the economic and military backing of two superpowers and a ruthless and mendacious leadership that continuously sacrificed its own people. In the wake of reunification, one million former South Vietnamese would be subjected to concentration camps. Another one million would flee, the most well-known being the “boat people,” so desperate that they risked death rather than continuing to live under communist rule (between two hundred thousand and four hundred thousand died at sea). In contemporary Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and his top general, Vo Nguyen Giap, are celebrated, even revered, while Le Duan, the man most responsible for uniting the country, is scarcely remembered.

Thanks to Asselin’s noteworthy efforts, the historiography of the Vietnam War is richer and avenues for future work have been opened. Agency has been restored to leadership of the communist cause in the singular presence of Le Duan. Though it remains remarkable that Johnson and the American government were unaware of his leadership of the DRV, perhaps they can be forgiven. Even Le Duan’s people want to forget him.

Notes


[2]. The reasoning is more nuanced. The DRV looked to the Chinese, with Soviet complicity, for guidance in accepting the partition. Though all parties wanted to avoid and isolate the United States, China played a major role in tacitly pressuring the DRV. Mari Olsen, Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64: Changing Alliances (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43-44; and Fredrik Logevall, Embers of War: The Fall of an


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