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Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*.

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Indochina emerged from the Second World War in a state of flux. After their earlier expulsion by invading Japanese, the French resumed control, while three great powers—the United States, the USSR, and communist China—vied for influence in the area. Vietnam, a narrow coastal region of mountains, jungle, swamps, and fertile farmland, over a thousand miles north to south, became a cockpit within which these issues were violently resolved. In *Hanoi's War*, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen¹ (Univ. of Kentucky) describes—from the Vietnamese viewpoint—almost four decades of bitter conflict which saw, first, the French driven out of Indochina; second, American forces driven out of South Vietnam; and, finally, a unified, independent, communist Vietnam capable of repelling Chinese incursion into its northern province.

Nguyen reminds us how two names became familiar to the world: President Ho Chi Minh, the titular father of Vietnam, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor at Dien Bien Phu, where French forces suffered their final humiliating defeat. They in turn lost power as two more powerful personalities assumed control of events: Le Duan, a highly placed official within the Communist party (26), and Le Duc Tho, his right hand man (24). Well situated within the communists' customary committee system, the two *Les* pulled the strings of war strategy, conflict, and peace negotiations as the overthrow of French imperialism evolved into communist reunification of Vietnam against powerful American opposition.

In order to fortify Hanoi's control over the chaotic region, the Viet Minh leadership sent Le Duc Tho south in 1948. As a professional revolutionary who had begun to streamline operations in the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam], Tho would do the same in the Mekong Delta. When Tho met Le Duan for the first time in 1948, he realized he had met someone he could not push around. Le Duc Tho thus became Le Duan's loyal deputy as vice secretary, and together the two men set out in the late 1940s to neutralize their communist and non-communist opponents while waging war against the returning French forces. Their endeavors in these heady days of the war for decolonization forged a partnership that would come to dominate the communist leadership for the next half century. (24)

The 1954 Geneva Accords had granted independence to the North, but the promised all-Vietnam elections, in 1956, were thwarted by communism-fearing America. Subsequently, ideological rifts divided North Vietnam's leadership: some saw conquering the South as the main priority, others wanted to develop the North economically, and disillusioned intellectuals felt betrayed by their communist leaders (36). Land reform, cooperatives and collectivization, too, were proving unpopular: "Political scientist Benedict Kerkvliet describes villagers' use of 'weapons of the weak' to hide their resistance by 'shirking work' and 'snitching grain' during this period" (40). Broader strategic struggles overlaid this internal dissent: Moscow championed peaceful reunification through socialist development of the North; Beijing favored violent reunification through liberation of the South (41). However, in 1959, the Party adopted Le Duan's Resolution 15, which called for "the overthrow of the Diem [South Vietnamese] government through not only political agitation but also military means" (45). Despite this, the Moscow-Beijing rivalry influenced events in Vietnam right up until reunification in 1975.

To add a human dimension to her account, Nguyen explains how the geography of Vietnam affected Le Duan personally as he sought to direct events, on the spot, in the South, while his family was based in the

1. Her specializations include the United States in the world, the Cold War, Southeast Asia, and gender theory. She held the Henry Chauncey Jr '57 Postdoctoral Fellowship in Grand Strategy, International Security Studies, at Yale University in 2009-10.

militarily isolated North. To improve his situation, Le Duan acquired a second, very capable wife in the South; but she, too, suffered separation as Le Duan's career progressed.

While Le Duan constructed his formidable empire in the early days of the new decade, Nga, his second wife and "true love," could not join in on the celebrations surrounding her husband's promotion at the Third Party Congress. Instead, she was in another key Asian capital in the Cold War. Along with her three children—she had given birth shortly after she arrived in China—Nga pursued her studies in Beijing, where she was far from the judgmental eyes of Hanoi society. Her routine was rigorous. She awoke in the early morning hours, fed and dressed her elder children, roused the baby awake, and sent them off before going to the university. When she returned home in the early evening, she cooked dinner, bathed her children, and made sure they were snug in bed at a decent hour. She then studied Chinese until her eyelids grew heavy. (56)

Exhaustion soon curtailed such devotion. The children were sent to Hanoi, as Nga pined for her home in the Mekong Delta, but she was eventually reunited with Le Duan in Beijing, where she met Chairman Mao (57).

The political and military objectives of Resolution 15 led inevitably to spasmodic progress as each, in turn, took precedence over the other: battlefield failures favored the politicians, political failures the generals. As the long war progressed, the United States, too, matched its response—either military force or political negotiation—to each new development. November 1963, a critical month, opened with the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother; three weeks later, President John Kennedy was shot in Dallas. By then, America's role had evolved from "an advisory one to a 'limited partnership'" (59), but in August 1964, in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident,² President Lyndon Johnson escalated the conflict with retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam. "In the aftermath of the 1964 elections and into the beginning of 1965, the American president, a tough Texan with a grand domestic vision, increasingly committed himself to a foreign war, despite public apathy and allied resistance, since he saw his nation's—and his own—credibility on the line in South East Asia" (74).

All this took place as Moscow and Beijing competed for influence. Each was aiding North Vietnam, while decrying the other's participation. Each was suffering problems in its own backyard: Soviet satellite states were demanding democracy and the Cultural Revolution was rocking China. "In addition to criticizing the Chinese, the Soviets also utilized their growing influence to urge the North Vietnamese toward a negotiated settlement. The response from the Chinese was unequivocal. Mao and the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] tried to foil the Soviet 'peace talk plot' at every turn and tried to enlist fraternal parties to denounce Soviet machinations" (81).

On the ground, Le Duan was forcefully pursuing a General Offensive and General Uprising policy aimed at inflaming the South into rebellion and simultaneously defeating its army. Several major political and military initiatives produced very heavy casualties but only rare successes, most notably the 1968 Tet offensive. "The coordinated military attacks on all of the major cities and towns of South Vietnam during the first wave of the offensive failed to deliver a definitive military victory over ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] forces or to incite a general political uprising of the masses. Instead, they brought about a public shift in U.S. war policy that resulted in the initiation of peace negotiations" (149).

"Le Duc Tho met Henry Kissinger for the first time on a cold winter's day in a working class suburb of Paris" (153). Having already dealt with other American negotiators, including W. Averell Harriman and Henry Cabot Lodge, Tho quickly recognized Kissinger's unique ability, but persevered with his own approach to negotiation. Impervious to his opponent's skill in argument, he believed success depended on a single factor: his own patience (153). Decades later, at a Washington conference, "Kissinger, who outlived Tho, walked up to the Vietnamese dignitaries from Hanoi and said, 'It's Le Duc Tho's fault that I look this old. He aged me quite a bit during our negotiations'" (154).

The peace talks extended into the Nixon administration. By then, the conflict had spilled into neighboring Laos and Cambodia.

2. On 2 August 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin, believing the destroyer was participating in a South Vietnamese raid on the North.

Nixon delivered a televised address on 30 April [1970] explaining how the joint U.S.-ARVN “incursion” saved American lives and facilitated negotiation. Few were persuaded, and the invasion revitalized the anti-war movement. Throughout May, anti-war protests erupted in cities and on college campuses. At Kent State University in Ohio, four students were shot dead and nine were wounded when the National Guard opened fire on demonstrators after four days of intense confrontation that had begun as a peaceful protest against the Cambodian invasion.... [Elsewhere] Anti-Vietnamese sentiment continued to rise in Phnom Penh, and in early May the mood turned ugly. [Cambodian general] Lon Nol’s army and police units in Takeo and elsewhere rounded up and shot thousands of Vietnamese civilians, including women and children. (174–75).

In 1971, exposure to the world of the My Lai massacre³ added to American discomfort. However, “Rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union had strengthened Nixon’s resolve in Vietnam” (208). Zhou Enlai presented the Chinese view directly to Nixon in Beijing: “Only the Indochinese [have] the right to speak, to negotiate with you. But as the Indochinese area is a concern to us we should have the right to raise our voice on that matter. What’s more we have the obligation to give the Indochinese peoples assistance and support” (241).

By 1972, in Le Duan’s opinion, “Vietnamization had strengthened the South Vietnamese armed forces, but they were still not as effective as American troops. The major losses of the ‘reactionary armies’ in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos threw the ‘puppet government’ into political turmoil. Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization, and more generally ‘Indochinization’ had failed” (243). This reinforced the earlier conclusion of DRV leaders that Nixon’s troop withdrawals had given communist forces a clear superiority on the battlefield. “On 30 March 1972, tens of thousands of PAVN [People’s Army of Vietnam] troops, armed with Soviet and Chinese tanks and weaponry, crossed the DMZ towards Quan Tri province. The Spring-Summer Offensive targeted Tri-Thien military region in northern South Vietnam, the eastern Mekong Delta, and the Tay Nguyen area in the Central Highlands” (244). After stunning PAVN victories within the first month and a half, US bombing led to what Hanoi termed “a period of equilibrium” (245). Le Duan and Le Duc Tho saw victory within their grasp and South Vietnam ripe for insurrection. Nixon threatened Hanoi via its allies and authorized a bombing campaign and naval strikes around the city (247). Moscow blamed Beijing for encouraging the PAVN offensive. Amid the conflict and recriminations, peace negotiations continued erratically, as South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu pursued his strategy of extorting as much aid from Nixon as possible before Kissinger sold him out (221).

Le Duan, in the meantime, had redefined his own policy: “we must concentrate our efforts on doing whatever it takes to resolve our first objective, which is ‘to fight to force the Americans to withdraw.’ The achievement of our first objective will create the conditions necessary for us to subsequently attain our second objective, ‘to fight to make the puppets collapse’” (260). As Nguyen explains, the North’s “total victory” military objective had effectively been deferred until general military pressure, along with external forces, compelled an American withdrawal from South Vietnam. At the same time, less stringent terms were sought at the peace talks in Paris, crucially, the North’s call for “an administration of national concord” rather than “a government” immediately after peace had been agreed. Kissinger later described that moment “as the most thrilling in all his years of public service” (277). The peace agreement was signed in January 1973. Two years later, on 30 April 1975, PAVN troops entered Saigon.

Hanoi’s War is a well written, meticulously researched book⁴ that will appeal to both military and general readers. Without dwelling on the harsh realities of war, it reveals how a proud, determined, developing nation regained its independence after many decades of foreign occupation. That spirit lingers today in a country that, like Churchill, adopted the Agincourt archers’ two-finger symbol⁵ to promote a cause (29).

3. On 16 March 1968, American soldiers abused, mutilated, or killed several hundred Vietnamese civilians. Three years later, 2nd Lt. William Calley, alone, was found guilty of killing twenty-two men, women, and children.

4. It includes comprehensive endnotes (313–90) and bibliography (391–415), and an index (417–44).

5. English archers defiantly displayed their intact “pull fingers.” The Vietnamese adopted the gesture in 1954 to symbolize reunification (29): see my 2011 photograph of an elderly Vietnamese woman’s patriotic salute – www.miwsr.com/rd/1309.htm.