Introduction

Points of Departure – The Global and Local Origins of the Vietnam War

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When, how, and why did the Vietnam War begin? Although the end of the war is always dated with great precision to the capture of Saigon on April 30, 1975, there is no agreement about the day or even the year it began. In the late 1990s, the US Defense Department retroactively designated November 1, 1955, as the official start of the "Vietnam Conflict." American officials chose this date because it marked the formal reorganization of the US military advisory mission to South Vietnam. But in 2012, US President Barack Obama overturned this chronology. He proclaimed that the Vietnam War had in fact begun on January 12, 1962, on the occasion of the first US combat mission in South Vietnam.

An obvious objection to these US official periodizations of the war is that they take no account of the Vietnamese or the many other non-American actors involved in the conflict. But even when the scope of inquiry is widened to include other combatants and participants in the war, no clear consensus about a start date emerges. Scholars have variously argued that the Vietnam War began in 1960, 1959, 1956, 1954, 1950, or even 1945.

The disagreements over the war's start date hint at deeper disputes about its origins and causes. In Vietnam today, the war is officially known as "the anti-American Resistance War to Save the Nation," or *Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước*. (Contrary to what many American writers have claimed, the Vietnam War is almost never referred to as "the American War" in Vietnam.) Communist Party historians depict the conflict as a Vietnamese war of national liberation, fought against US imperialism – a representation echoed by many of the authors affiliated with the so-called "orthodox" school of Vietnam War historiography. From this perspective, the war was caused by the United States and by US leaders' stubborn refusal to acknowledge Vietnam's right to self-determination.

The orthodox interpretation is vigorously disputed by the members of the "revisionist" school, who argue that the war was in fact triggered by the communist leaders of North Vietnam, via their subversion and invasion of

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anticommunist South Vietnam. But even as the revisionists try to shift moral responsibility for the war away from the United States, they keep their focus squarely on debating the wisdom of US decisions in Vietnam. Although the revisionists blame "communist aggression" for causing the war in the first place, they are less interested in explaining Hanoi's aggressive designs than in arguing about why Washington failed to thwart them.

The historians whose work appears in this volume are neither orthodox nor revisionist in their thinking about the origins of the Vietnam War. Instead of framing the war within a debate over US foreign policy choices, these scholars situate the war and its origins within longer chronologies and wider interpretive perspectives. More specifically, the essays in this volume tap into the rich variety of new scholarship on modern Vietnam and the Indochina wars that has flourished since the 1990s. The organization of this volume into three parts serves to highlight some of the defining themes of this recent scholarship. Although the Vietnam War was manifestly a postcolonial struggle, the essays in the first part, "Empires, Nations, and Revolutions" suggest how the conflicts that wracked Indochina during the 1950s and 1960s were rooted in the politics and institutional legacies of the colonial era. Similarly, the essays in the second part, "The French Indochina War," incorporate recent efforts to reinterpret the bloody and savage war of decolonization that erupted in Indochina in 1945 and lasted for nearly a decade. In the third part, "The Two Vietnams," the essays reconsider Indochina's path from peace back to war during the decade after the Geneva Conference of 1954. Although many Americans appear in these pages, they comprise only a fraction of a much larger cast of characters. The Vietnam War was an enormously complex conflict, and any comprehensive reckoning of its origins must include the role of the United States. But an "American War" it was not – especially during its earliest stages.

Empires, Nations, and Revolutions

As the Vietnam War raged during the 1960s and 1970s, observers frequently remarked on the central importance of *nationalism* in the conflict. For many critics of US policy in Vietnam, nationalism was the key to understanding not only the origins of the conflict but also the US military's evident inability to crush the Vietnamese communist movement. According to these critics, Vietnamese national identity was defined by a centuries-old tradition of resistance to foreign invaders. Moreover, the communists and Hồ Chí Minh were assumed to be the inheritors of this putatively ancient tradition – which meant that the US intervention was doomed to fail, despite the United States' superior

firepower and resources. This argument was formulated most influentially in Frances FitzGerald's 1972 book *Fire in the Lake*, which won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, and which strongly shaped Anglophone scholarship about the war and Vietnamese nationalism during the 1970s and 1980s.[1]

Since the 1990s, this representation of Vietnamese nationalism has been criticized by Vietnamese studies scholars on several points. First, there is no convincing evidence that the "ancient" tradition of Vietnamese nationalism existed before the nineteenth century. Prior to the founding of the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1802, no king or state had ever ruled the entire territory of today's Vietnam. Indeed, the term "Vietnam" was only coined for the first time in 1804 – and then almost as an afterthought, in the course of a diplomatic exchange between the Nguyễn and Qing royal courts. The term quickly fell into disuse, and only became invested with nationalist significance during the 1920s, when it was resurrected by anticolonial activists.

Second and more substantively, Fitzgerald and other nationalist historians invariably depict Vietnamese identity in both monolithic and essentialist terms. In these accounts, Vietnamese nationalism functions as "a political *deus ex machina*" – the ghost in the engine of Vietnamese politics that allegedly overrode all other forms of identity.[2] Such a formula discounts the vibrantly pluralistic qualities of Vietnamese history. As Christopher Goscha observes, "there has never been one Vietnam but several remarkably varied ones."[3] In challenging the Fitzgeraldian view, Vietnamese studies scholars do not at all deny the salience of nationalism in Vietnamese history. Instead, they argue for a more contingent approach, one that historicizes nationalist ideologies as varied and dynamic, rather than the product of a unitary and unchanging tradition.

A similar emphasis on contingency and pluralism is also evident in recent scholarship on the meaning of *revolution* in Vietnam. Vietnamese revolutionary activism since the 1930s has not been the exclusive province of the Communist Party. Across Southeast Asia, communism coexisted with republicanism, Islam, Christianity, and other ideologies and traditions that promised to transform and liberate Southeast Asian societies.[4] Within Vietnam, the

1 Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, 1972).
2 Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge, 2021), 5.
3 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016), 3.
4 John Sidel, *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, 2021); Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican: The Political Vision of Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Berkeley, 2014).

diverse ranks of the country's revolutionaries included monarchists, republicans, anarchists, and fascists, as well as communists. Although Hồ Chí Minh and his comrades sought to turn "revolution" (*cách mạng*) into a synonym for communism (*cộng sản*), the meaning of the term remained more contested and more pliable than the party's supporters liked to admit.[5]

The emergence of alternative approaches to nationalism and revolution in Vietnamese history is intertwined with another recent trend: a new historiography of *empire* in modern Vietnam. In recent decades, a host of studies have reconfigured our understanding of both the ideological and practical dimensions of colonialism in French Indochina. Although this new scholarship is too large and diverse to explore in detail here, two strands within it can be highlighted as particularly relevant to thinking about the origins of the Vietnam War.

One strand involves the study of the French colonial state. In some respects, the colonial state appeared very strong. Its leaders often spoke of France's "civilizing mission" in Indochina and of their modernizing ambitions for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. These ambitions were reflected in an array of state-backed infrastructure projects to construct railroads, dig canals, turn Mekong Delta marshes into farmland, and transform the built environments of Indochinese cities. The power of the colonial state was also evident in its overtly racist policies and in its coercive and abusive treatment of its colonial subjects. Through institutions such as prisons, exploitative labor regimes, and a highly extractive tax system, millions of Vietnamese endured bodily harm and structural violence at the hands of the state and its representatives.

For all its evident strength, however, the power of the colonial state was never so total nor so far-reaching as its representatives claimed. From the beginning of the conquest, France found it impossible to recruit enough Europeans to staff the Indochinese colonial bureaucracy. As a result, the state turned to mandarins and other local elites to fill mid- and low-level posts. French officials also complained that the tax system, for all its extractive qualities, did not prevent chronic budget shortfalls. The state undertook to consolidate its rule via the establishment of official monopolies, but the alcohol monopoly alone consumed nearly a third of its revenues.[6] And colonial prisons were perpetually overcrowded, underfunded, and mostly unable to

5 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); George Dutton, "革命, Cách Mạng, Révolution: The Early History of 'Revolution' in Việt Nam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46 (1) (2015), 4–31.

6 Gerard Sasges, *Imperial Intoxication: Alcohol and the Making of Colonial Indochina* (Honolulu, 2017).

impose the "modern" discipline described in official rhetoric, despite the brutal violence meted out to inmates.[7]

A second relevant strand of the new scholarship on empire has to do with the study of colonial politics. In nationalist historiographies, the political history of French Indochina is narrated as a straightforward struggle between the heroes who resisted the colonial state and the craven collaborators who served it. But more recent scholarship shows that the relationship between resistance and collaboration was less of a binary division than a continuum. Many individuals – both elites and ordinary people – moved back and forth along this continuum over time, depending on their goals and the circumstances in which they found themselves. Even Hồ Chí Minh, destined to become the country's supreme anticolonial hero, began his political career as a collaborator. Although Communist Party propagandists still deny it, Hồ did not adopt a stance of outright opposition to the colonial state until the early 1920s, when he was already more than thirty years old.[8]

All these interpretive trends have important implications for thinking about the origins of the Vietnam War. Instead of casting the war as the culmination of an age-old tradition of Vietnamese resistance and revolution, scholars now emphasize the diversity of nationalist, revolutionary, and other agendas that emerged in Vietnam during the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, the politics of the colonial era were not simply a struggle between those who challenged the French colonial state and those who defended it. The violent and oppressive qualities of colonial rule spilled over into Vietnam's postcolonial era, but those legacies served mainly to exacerbate the country's political divisions and to generate bitter clashes over sovereignty. By 1945, Indochina was poised on the threshold of a new era of warfare in which internal political rivalries and the interventions of foreign powers would soon collide, with devastating effects.

The French Indochina War

Although the practice of referring to the Vietnam War as "the Second Indochina War" may sound awkward to some readers, the term usefully reminds us that the Vietnam War was merely one in a series of conflicts in Indochina that stretched over decades. The name also implies that any serious attempt to examine the origins of the Vietnam War must reckon

7 Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940* (Berkeley, 2001).

8 Sophie Quinn Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years* (London, 2003), chapter 1.

with its antecedent, the (First) Indochina War of 1945–54. As several of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, a wealth of recent scholarship has substantially revised our thinking about this large and extraordinarily complex conflict. Moreover, much of this recent work has incorporated the alternative approaches to nationalism, revolution, and empire referenced above.

On its face, the war that erupted in Indochina in 1945 was a war of national liberation, fought to free Vietnam from French colonial dominion. The conflict was triggered by two momentous events that year: (1) the decision of French leaders to reimpose their rule in Indochina, after the wartime overthrow of the colonial regime by imperial Japan; and (2) Hồ Chí Minh's proclamation of an independent Vietnamese state, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). Over the next nine years, the conflict between French and DRVN forces became the twentieth century's largest and bloodiest war of decolonization. For the DRVN and its partisans, the central importance of national liberation was underlined by their side's spectacular victory in the battle of Điên Biện Phủ in the spring of 1954, and by the subsequent withdrawal of French forces from Indochina.

But the French Indochina War was not *just* a war of national liberation. It was also a savage civil war that fractured Indochina along political, ethnic, and sectarian lines. Although the large majority of Vietnamese hailed Hồ's call for independence in 1945, many were skeptical about the Communist Party's role in the leadership of the DRVN state. In the Mekong Delta, the outbreak of fighting between DRVN and French forces in 1945 coincided with clashes between DRVN units and militia groups affiliated with the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious movements, leading eventually to the unraveling of the DRVN's alliance with both groups. Meanwhile, several delta districts were wracked by vicious communal violence between Khmers (ethnic Cambodians) and Vietnamese.[9] In Tonkin, Hồ Chí Minh and other Communist Party leaders maneuvered against members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDĐ) and the Vietnam Revolutionary League, two anticommunist groups with ties to Nationalist China. After Guomindang troops withdrew from Vietnam in the spring of 1946, DRVN forces led by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP)'s Võ Nguyên Giáp attacked both rival parties, killing many of their members and driving others back into exile in China.[10] One DRVN soldier lamented that he had "shot dead three fellow brothers" during a clash with a

9 McHale, *The First Vietnam War*, chapters 4 and 5.

10 François Guillemot, "Autopsy of a Massacre: On a Political Purge in the Early Days of the Indochina War (Nam Bo 1947)," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9 (2) (2010), 225–65.

nationalist group. "Vietnamese must stop killing Vietnamese over politics," he declared sorrowfully.[11]

The civil war dimensions of the conflict were also reflected in the creation of the State of Vietnam (SVN). Known unofficially as the "Bảo Đại solution" (after the former Vietnamese emperor who led it), the SVN was one of three "Associated States" set up by colonial officials for the purpose of keeping Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos within the French Union. Communist propagandists and many historians have long dismissed the SVN and its Vietnamese backers as French puppets and "lackeys." But the reality was more complicated. The SVN was constituted via an improvised process in which the colonial state transferred authority to Bảo Đại's government in piecemeal fashion. The new state thus operated in a context in which sovereignty was both layered and fragmented.[12] For French leaders, sharing sovereignty with the SVN was a sensible strategy, because it enabled them to channel civil warfare in ways that served their interests. As early as 1947, one senior colonial official recommended "transposing the quarrel we have with the Việt Minh party onto a strictly Vietnamese playing field." The French should "take part as little as possible in the campaigns and reprisals [against DRVN supporters], which should be left to the native adversaries."[13]

If the First Indochina War was a civil war, it was also indisputably part of the Global Cold War – or, more precisely, it became part of it. The victory of Mao Zedong's communist forces in China's civil war in 1949 transformed the strategic context of the conflict in Indochina. Although the connections between the Vietnamese and Chinese communist movements dated back to the 1920s, it was only after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that Mao could begin sending weapons, supplies, and military advisors across the border to Hồ's DRVN forces in the mountains of Tonkin. In late January 1950, the PRC and the Soviet Union became the first foreign governments to formally recognize the DRVN state. A few days later, the United States replied by recognizing the SVN and assembling its first package of military and economic assistance for French Union forces and the Associated States. Over the next four years, the flows of aid and advice from Washington, Moscow, and

11 "Letter from a National Guardsman to the Youth and People of the Country," *Sao Trắng* newspaper, June 2, 1946, quoted in Brett M. Reilly, "The Origins of the Vietnamese Civil War and the State of Vietnam," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018), 176.

12 Brett M. Reilly, "The Sovereign States of Vietnam, 1945–1955," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 (3–4) (2016), 103–39.

13 Léon Pignon, quoted in Christopher Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu: A History of the First War for Vietnam* (Princeton, 2022), 209.

Beijing would enable both French and DRVN commanders to build massive and modern armies – the armies that would eventually clash at Điện Biên Phủ.

Thinking about the national liberation, civil war, and Cold War dimensions of the First Indochina War illuminates another important feature of the conflict: the striking variations in the way the war was fought in different regions. As the chapters in this collection demonstrate, Indochina was not a single theater of war during 1945–54. Cochinchina, where the war began in 1945, happened to be the region of Vietnam in which the ICP was weakest, due to the lingering effects of a failed uprising the party had launched there in 1940. As a result, French forces quickly regained control of Saigon and most cities in the Mekong Delta during 1945–6. In addition, by deftly exploiting the tensions between the DRVN and its local allies, French officials convinced the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Bình Xuyên militia commanders to align themselves with the colonial state. As a result, DRVN power in the southern delta for much of the war was mostly confined to "liberated zones" established in thinly populated areas such as the U Minh Forest and the Plain of Reeds. Down to the end of the war, DRVN military forces in Cochinchina never operated in units larger than battalions. By the early 1950s, French and SVN leaders believed they had defeated the communist movement in the Mekong Delta – a claim that would be echoed twenty years later by American and South Vietnamese commanders during the later stages of the Vietnam War.

The situation was very different in the central region of Annam. Although the French controlled a few port cities and the surrounding coastal strips, the DRVN held and administered large swaths of this region for the duration of the war. Designated as Zone IV (northern Annam) and Zone V (southern Annam) on DRVN maps, these areas served as a crucial source of manpower and food for resistance forces. Meanwhile, a different conflict was unfolding to the west, in the provinces of the Central Highlands. To undermine DRVN efforts to win the allegiance of Highlander minority groups, French officials established the Pays Montagnard du Sud Indochinois (literally "Highlander Country of Southern Indochina"). Even though the French were forced to roll back some elements of this separatist scheme following the creation of the SVN in 1949, the move underlined the strategic importance of the Highlands and the competition for the support of the indigenous people who lived there.

Although the warfare in Cochinchina and Annam was fierce and bloody, the conflict in those regions would ultimately be overshadowed by the enormous scale of the combat that unfolded in the northern region of Tonkin. The Vietnamese communist movement had traditionally drawn most of its leaders and many of its most ardent supporters from Tonkin and northern Annam. But

Tonkin was also the primary bastion of French power in Indochina, with Hanoi serving as the capital of the Indochinese Federation. From the outset, therefore, leaders on both sides knew that the war would be won and lost in the north. After 1950, moreover, the incoming flows of US, Chinese, and Soviet military aid were channeled disproportionately to that region. As a result, the war in Tonkin became a slowly escalating stalemate, with neither side able to gain a clear strategic advantage, despite a series of large set-piece battles.

As Christopher Goscha has shown, the DRVN eventually succeeded in linking its "islands" of territory to create a contiguous arc that wrapped around the Red River Delta and stretched far down into Annam. This territorial consolidation, combined with the DRVN's successful mobilization of local populations and its daring use of Chinese- and Soviet-supplied weapons, became the foundation for the spectacular capture of the French garrison at Điên Biện Phủ in 1954. But even that battle might have turned out differently, if French commanders had not insisted on going ahead with an ill-timed separate operation in central Vietnam.[14]

The stalemated nature of the war profoundly shaped the international peace talks that took place at Geneva immediately after the DRVN victory at Điện Biên Phủ. It is true that French leaders were under heavy political pressure to make peace at Geneva, due to rising public disenchantment with the war in the metropole. It is also evident that PRC and Soviet officials wanted a peace deal, and that they counseled the DRVN to accept a compromise settlement. But DRVN leaders had their own reasons to make peace in 1954. These included war-weariness among their soldiers and supporters, as well as a plausible fear that the United States might intervene directly in the conflict, should the peace talks fail. These concerns led Hồ and his comrades to accept an agreement that divided Vietnam into northern and southern regroupment zones. Although the DRVN had to withdraw from its liberated areas in the Mekong Delta and lower Annam, it took exclusive control of all of Vietnam above the 17th parallel, including Hanoi and the other French-controlled parts of the Red River Delta. DRVN leaders also secured promises of internationally sanctioned reunification elections in 1956 – elections that they fully expected to win.

In light of the compromise nature of the peace agreement at Geneva, is it correct to describe the outcome of the French Indochina War as a victory for Hồ Chí Minh and the DRVN? If the war is viewed as a national liberation struggle in which the DRVN was the champion of Vietnamese self-determination, the outcome of the war was indisputably a tremendous

14 Goscha, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*, chapter 12.

triumph for the party and the state that it controlled. After all, the Geneva Accords paved the way for the achievement of the DRVN's primary aim since its founding in 1945: the formal end of France's empire in Indochina.

Yet the nature and extent of the DRVN's victory becomes more ambiguous when the war is viewed as either a Cold War conflict or a civil war. At Geneva, the main antagonists in the Global Cold War agreed to a truce in Indochina, not a comprehensive peace settlement. Although the Geneva Accords gestured toward the possibility of such a settlement, the details were left to the rival Vietnamese parties to work out. This arrangement ensured that the SVN, now headed by the staunch anticommunist Ngô Đình Diệm, would play an important role in shaping the country's postcolonial fate – even though Diệm had denounced the deal brokered at Geneva.

Diệm's 1955 refusal even to discuss the possibility of reunification elections with the DRVN showed that the critical question of national sovereignty in Vietnam remained unresolved. His move also demonstrated that the SVN – soon to be reborn as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) – had enhanced its status as a credible rival to the DRVN. This status was affirmed on post–Geneva maps of Vietnam, which depicted Diệm's South Vietnam and Hồ's North Vietnam as ruling nearly equal-sized territories and populations. Diệm and the SVN must therefore also be counted among the victors of the First Indochina War. Both Vietnamese states had made gains at Geneva, but neither believed that they had been given their due. Such a situation was far from a promising basis on which a lasting peace might be built.

The Two Vietnams

For Indochina, the decade after the Geneva Conference was a period of tense and tenuous peace that eventually gave way to renewed war. Between 1954 and 1959, the competition between North and South Vietnam was waged mainly in the arena of nation-building, as each state sought to demonstrate that its chosen model of development would outperform its rival's. For a time, it appeared that the partition of Vietnam might harden into an armed standoff not unlike those that emerged in Germany and Korea during the 1950s. But by the end of the decade, Indochina was sliding back into violent conflict. Although open warfare emerged first in Laos following the breakdown of a power-sharing agreement there, the most fateful steps would be the ones taken in South Vietnam.

A man of fervent faith, Ngô Đình Diệm believed that the nation-building contest with Hồ's DRVN was one that he could win. His tenure in power

began on a high note, with his unexpected triumph over a coalition of noncommunist militia groups in the battle of Saigon in April 1955. He then launched an elaborate program of state-building. In addition to ousting the former emperor Bảo Đại and proclaiming the establishment of the RVN (with himself as its founding president), Diệm organized elections for a National Assembly and engineered the drafting of a new constitution. In the countryside, the RVN state expropriated some of the largest landowners in South Vietnam and implemented a "land development program" to settle poor farmers on previously uncultivated land. But the benefits of these initiatives were limited by rushed implementation and corruption, and by Diệm's desire to keep the actual redistribution of land to a minimum.

The RVN president also sought to consolidate his personal authority via new security laws and an array of police and intelligence agencies. These forces were deployed in the Denounce Communists Campaign, which aimed both to mobilize the population and to eliminate the thousands of stay-behind communist operatives who had remained in South Vietnam after Geneva. Although many of Diệm's security measures generated resentment and fear among ordinary South Vietnamese, he insisted that they enhanced the authority of the RVN state at the expense of the DRVN. In the short term, at least, he was right. As the Communist Party's own historians now acknowledge, by the late 1950s Diệm's crackdown had effectively destroyed the party's operational capabilities in some parts of South Vietnam.

In North Vietnam, DRVN leaders were equally zealous in their nation-building endeavors and their efforts to eliminate internal opposition. The state's showcase initiative was its land reform program, which had been launched on a limited basis in 1953 and was implemented widely above the 17th parallel after Geneva. This program sought to do much more than simply redistribute land. It was a Maoist mass mobilization campaign that aimed to enlist ordinary North Vietnamese farmers in the Communist Party's efforts to shatter the power of local rural elites. As a result, the program deliberately targeted "class enemies" for persecution, public humiliation, imprisonment, or execution. The victims included some "patriotic landlords" who had previously supported the revolution. Among the first to die was businesswoman Nguyễn Thị Nam, who had once sheltered Hồ Chí Minh from the French, and whose sons served as officers in the DRVN armed forces.[15]

15 Alex-Thai D. Vo, "Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10 (1) (2015), 1–62.

The harsh nature of Hanoi's land reform campaign eventually provoked a backlash. In 1956, Hồ Chí Minh and other DRVN leaders publicly apologized for "errors" in the implementation of the program. But the party's implicit admission that its legitimacy had been tarnished did not mean that it was changing course on nation-building. Following a "rectification of errors" campaign, the state moved to the next phase of rural mass mobilization: the creation of party-managed collective farms. By 1961, the large majority of North Vietnamese lived and worked on these farms. Although collectivization never delivered the economic gains that party leaders predicted, it placed both the population and the means of production under the direct control of the DRVN state and the Communist Party – an achievement that would greatly facilitate Hanoi's subsequent efforts to shift North Vietnamese society onto a war footing.

Before 1960, the nation-building competition between the two Vietnams was only indirectly shaped by Saigon's and Hanoi's foreign allies. US President Eisenhower nearly withdrew support from Diệm during the internal turmoil of 1954–5 but changed his mind after Diệm's victory in the battle of Saigon. During the late 1950s, South Vietnam received more US military and economic aid than all but a handful of other states. Yet this aid mostly failed to translate into actual American influence over RVN policies. US diplomats and experts complained that Diệm was more interested in Washington's material resources than in their advice.

In comparison, the DRVN state was more willing to follow the socialist development prescriptions proffered by Chinese and Soviet experts. But with Beijing and Moscow both committed to a policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West, neither seemed interested in positioning North Vietnam for an eventual takeover of the South. In 1957, Hanoi was dismayed when Soviet officials briefly floated a deal to admit both Vietnams to the United Nations – an arrangement that might well have transformed the 17th parallel into a de facto permanent boundary, had it been implemented.

If superpower agendas were not the primary drivers of the rivalry between the two Vietnams, what caused Indochina to slide back across the threshold from peace to war? In hindsight, two changes stand out as particularly consequential. First, starting in 1959, the RVN government sought to tighten its authority in rural areas. With great fanfare, Diệm launched the construction of agrovilles, a government-designed network of large settlements in the Mekong Delta. Under this modernist scheme, residents were assigned to live on small residential plots located in a town-like grid; they were also supposed to receive access to amenities such as clean water and electricity. In practice, however, the program functioned as a population regroupment-and-control

scheme in which residents had to be forced to build and live in the new settlements. The general resentment generated by the agrovilles was exacerbated by a new RVN security law known as the 10/59 decree. That measure established traveling military tribunals with the power to investigate, imprison, and even summarily execute anyone accused of subversion.

The second key change that led eventually to war was a shake-up in the senior ranks of the Communist Party. As part of the reckoning with the "errors" of the land reform program, VWP General Secretary Trường Chinh, the party's leading ideologue since the 1940s, was demoted. Among the new members of the Politburo was Lê Duẩn, the party's top leader in the south since the late 1940s. During 1954–7, while living and operating clandestinely in South Vietnam, Lê Duẩn witnessed the devastating effects of Diệm's crackdown. Following his recall to Hanoi, he began quietly lobbying for the party to adopt more aggressive forms of resistance. With the support of figures such as Lê Đức Thọ, the head of the VWP's powerful Party Organization Commission, Lê Duẩn argued successfully for a 1959 resolution that authorized cadres in South Vietnam to initiate small-scale rural insurrections. Although the Politburo explicitly cast the measure as an incremental step rather than a return to outright rebellion, Party activists in the South embraced it as validation of their view that the time to resume armed struggle had arrived.

In hindsight, these 1959 policy shifts had far-reaching consequences. The immediate result was a communist-led insurgency that tore through many rural districts of South Vietnam during 1960. In December of that year, Hanoi announced the formation of the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF), an ostensibly noncommunist organization dedicated to Diệm's overthrow.

The rise of the insurgency, in turn, touched off an escalatory cycle involving both Vietnamese states and their most powerful foreign allies. During 1961–2, in a bid to defuse a looming confrontation in northern Indochina, US President John Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev entered negotiations to neutralize Laos. But choosing compromise in Laos made Kennedy even more determined to hold the line in South Vietnam. In late 1961, in response to Diệm's evident inability to check the NLF, Washington and Saigon announced that they had upgraded their ties to a "limited partnership." The new agreement included deliveries of US weapons systems such as helicopters and armored vehicles that greatly enhanced the fighting capabilities of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Kennedy and Diệm also agreed to expand the number of US military advisors in Vietnam, which grew from several hundred in 1961 to more than 16,000 two years later. Washington also

expanded American aid for RVN nation-building programs, including Diệm's new flagship counterinsurgency initiative, the Strategic Hamlet Program.

During 1962, with NLF forces suddenly back on their heels, DRVN leaders made their own escalatory moves. First, Hanoi expanded its efforts to infiltrate men and war material into South Vietnam. Although the number of fighters coming down the overland Hồ Chí Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia remained modest, deliveries of supplies and weapons to NLF forces soared following the opening of a seaborne smuggling route across the South China Sea. Second, DRVN leaders sought support from their oldest and closest allies: the rulers of Communist China. Following the public emergence of the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, Beijing had become openly disdainful of Moscow's policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West. For Mao and his comrades, support for Hanoi's escalation in South Vietnam made sense – especially in light of the expanding US military role there. PRC officials agreed to large deliveries of small arms, including the heavier-caliber guns that NLF forces had previously lacked. The allies also reached a conditional agreement on direct Chinese military intervention in Indochina: If the United States attacked North Vietnam, Beijing was prepared to send its own forces to bolster DRVN defenses.

The reemergence of Indochina as a Cold War hotspot served as the backdrop for a series of dramatic events in South Vietnam during 1963. In January, ARVN forces suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of a badly outnumbered NLF unit in the battle of Ấp Bắc in the Mekong Delta. During the daylong clash, the insurgents used their new Chinese weapons to great effect against the ARVN's US-supplied helicopters and armored vehicles. Around the same time, new tensions emerged in relations between Washington and Saigon. Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu, despite the debacle at Ấp Bắc, had become firmly convinced that they were winning the war against the NLF, and now raised the possibility of a drawdown of US military advisors. Pentagon analysts were also optimistic about the course of the war but worried about the implications of a premature disengagement – a concern shared by Kennedy.

In mid-1963, US worries about Diệm were greatly exacerbated by the eruption of a new political crisis in South Vietnam: an anti-regime protest movement led by Buddhist monks, who accused Diệm (who was Catholic) of religious discrimination. When an American journalist photographed the self-immolation of a bonze on a Saigon street in June, the crisis became headline news across the globe. Kennedy's doubts about Diệm were confirmed in mid-August, when the RVN president defied US warnings and used force to crush the protests. Urged on by Henry Cabot Lodge, the newly appointed US ambassador to South Vietnam, the administration shifted to a policy of

qualified support for regime change in Saigon. After two months of rumors and false starts, a group of ARVN generals seized power in a coup launched on November 1, 1963. Diệm and his brother Nhu surrendered the next morning, only to be murdered by the soldiers sent to detain them.

In contrast to the South Vietnamese crisis and Diệm's overthrow, which was widely covered in the international media, the final steps toward war in 1963 were taken mostly in secret. During November and December 1963, senior VWP leaders gathered in Hanoi for a plenary session of the party's Central Committee. After much debate, the participants endorsed a public communiqué that denounced "revisionism" in the international communist movement – a thinly veiled critique of Moscow and its advocacy of "peaceful coexistence." But the committee's most consequential action was the approval of a secret resolution, one crafted and backed by General Secretary Lê Duẩn. This measure (later dubbed "Resolution 9" by historians) outlined plans for a rapid expansion of Hanoi's war effort in the South, including stepped-up infiltration of DRVN troops. The goals of this escalation included the "annihilation" of the ARVN and the destruction of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The authors of Resolution 9 hoped and expected that these goals could be achieved relatively quickly, perhaps in as little as two years.

Lê Duẩn and his comrades were, in the apt words of one historian, "going for broke" – gambling that they could defeat the floundering RVN state before Washington could shore it up with US combat forces.[16] Nearly a decade after opting for peaceful compromise at Geneva, DRVN leaders now concluded that war was the only realistic means to settle the sovereignty dispute between the two Vietnams in their favor. They also believed that Diệm's downfall had opened a window of opportunity. This would prove a fateful miscalculation. Less than eighteen months after the plenum concluded in Hanoi, US warplanes were bombing North Vietnam on a daily basis and US ground combat units were pouring into South Vietnam. Instead of paving the way for an early end to the Vietnam War, the events of 1963 merely marked the end of the beginning of the conflict.

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As the evidence presented in this volume demonstrates, the Vietnam War did not begin as an "American war." Neither is it sufficient to explain the conflict as the straightforward result of "communist aggression." Although

16 David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975*, concise ed. (Armonk, NY, 2003), chapter 10.

the United States, the DRVN, and Hanoi's international communist allies were implicated in the escalatory slide that dragged Indochina into war during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the roots of the conflict were older and deeper. The rivalry between the DRVN and RVN states (as well as the separate-but-related conflicts in Laos and Cambodia) emerged directly out of the First Indochina War. The DRVN–RVN clash was also conditioned by the failure of the Geneva Conference to come to grips with the critical question of national sovereignty in postcolonial Vietnam. At the same time, politics and policies in both Vietnams after 1954 were profoundly shaped by the institutional and ideological legacies of the colonial era, and by the many different nationalist, revolutionary, sectarian, and communal identities that flourished in Indochina. It is evident that the Vietnam War was a postcolonial war of national liberation; it was also clearly an episode of major importance in the Global Cold War. Yet it is equally true that the Vietnam War was a civil war, and that civil warfare was a defining feature of the conflict from the outset. Understanding the *Vietnamese* and *Indochinese* origins of the Vietnam War is therefore a critical first step if we are to reckon with the history of this bloody, violent, costly, and staggeringly complex war.

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