Vietnam's American War

The Vietnam War was more than the sum of its battles. The ground war in South Vietnam and the air war in the North were certainly important in shaping its course, but they alone fail to explain why Hanoi bested Washington in the end. After all, communist forces lost most battles and suffered disproportionately higher casualties than the United States and its allies throughout the conflict. To make sense of the Vietnam War, we must look beyond the war itself. Above all, we must understand the formative experiences and worldview of the men who devised communist strategies and tactics during the conflict, and the rationale for – as well as impact of – those strategies and tactics. And that is the story this book relates: how the Vietnamese David defeated the American Goliath.

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Vietnam’s American War

A History

PIERRE ASSELIN
San Diego State University
For those teachers who have taught and inspired me the most, and to whom I owe all of my professional successes and much of my personal happiness:

the exigent Tom Tynan,
the admirable Huynh Kim Khanh,
the exemplary Yves Frenette,
the indefatigable Tim Naftali,
the fatherly Steve O’Harrow,
and the incomparable Idus Newby.
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Acknowledgements

I first became interested in the Vietnam War after watching *Rambo: First Blood Part II* on television. I was a high school student in Quebec City, Canada, at the time. Growing up in a highly homogenous white, French-Canadian, Catholic environment, I had no idea who or what the Vietnamese were, or even that the United States had lost a war in their country a little over a decade earlier. Watching the movie, only parts of which I understood because it was in its original English version, I thought Sylvester Stallone’s character was going after mean Chinese soldiers detaining Americans for no other reason than that they were Chinese, and mean. (I had only ever personally interacted with one Asian person at the time, a nice kid in my high school whom I assumed was Chinese on account those were the only Asians I knew of [turns out he was, by way of Madagascar, no less!]) My ignorance became apparent the next day when I asked my History teacher about the movie and he pointed out that it was actually set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, and the United States had never gone to war against China, as far as he knew. I ended up writing a paper for his class naively entitled “The Vietnam War” relating the various types of booby-traps used by Vietnamese communist forces against US troops, and based on a single book with lots of pictures in it. Rambo and that paper were all it took to pique my curiosity in the conflict and set me on the path to becoming a history professor specializing in the Vietnam War.

This book represents a culmination of my efforts to make sense of the people who were mean to Rambo and his buddies, of the “other side” in the Vietnam War. It is a summation of what I have come to understand about the leaders of that side and how they won that war. It is
also a labor of love, a testament to my deep respect and appreciation for a country, a people, and a history that have fascinated me since I began studying them.

Several individuals and organizations contributed in various ways to this project. Lewis Bateman of Cambridge University Press expressed interest in it before its first page was written. Had it not been for Lew, this book may never have been produced. My gratitude extends to Debbie Gershenowitz, who assumed charge of the project following Lew’s retirement, Kristina Deusch, her assistant, Josh Penney, my content manager, and John Bowdler, my copyeditor. It was a privilege to work with such a diligent and competent editorial team.

My comrades in Vietnam War and Cold War studies have made learning about those topics fulfilling to the extreme. Pierre Journoud, Pierre as our peer group has labeled him on account of his superior looks (and intellect too, I am sure), has done more for me professionally than I could ever repay him. “Mon Journoud” has organized several of my visits to France and provided invaluable feedback on my writings. I will never regret choosing Vietnam as my field of expertise if only because it allowed us to become friends. I can say the same about Lien-Hang Nguyen, whose scholarship and generosity sharing source material have been of tremendous benefit. Larry Berman has never turned me down when I needed his assistance, and meaningfully impacted my professional development. Antoine Coppolani has been most supportive and a joy to be around, along with “La Dominique.” Ed Miller is an ebullient colleague and collaborator. Fred Logevall and Chris Goscha remain exemplars: Fred on account of his assiduousness and prolificacy, Chris for his meticulousness and unparalleled knowledge of modern Vietnamese history. I also appreciate the support and friendship of David Anderson, Jessica Chapman, Sean Fear, Marc Gilbert, Pierre Grosser, Martin Grossheim, Ang Cheng Guan, George Herring, Jim Hershberg, Alec Holcombe, Liam Kelley, Ben Kerkvliet, Mark Lawrence, Lorenz Lüthi, Shawn McHale, Mark Moyar, Jason Picard, John Prados, Andrew Preston, Balazs Szalontai, Hue-Tam Tai, Carl Thayer, Nu-Anh Tran, Tuong Vu, Alex Vuving, Qiang Zhai, and Peter Zinoman. Bob Brigham, William Duiker, David Elliott, Sophie Quinn-Judge, Bill Turley, and Odd Arne Westad and continue to inspire me. Marilyn Young always made time for me; I miss her terribly.

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A good part of the information and insights I present in the pages that follow derives from time spent in Vietnam mining archives and “talking story” with colleagues and students there. Professors Hoang Anh Tuan, Pham Quang Minh, Nguyen Van Kim, Vu Duong Ninh, and Le Mau Han share an unmatched passion for their country’s history and have taught me much. Professor Tuan has also been instrumental in helping me secure access to Vietnamese document repositories. My frequent interactions with graduate students in the History Department at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi have proven equally edifying, as have my exchanges with journalists Bao Trung and Chi Trung. Special thanks to Professor Phan Huy Le for sponsoring my first visits to Vietnam and remaining a good friend through the years. My utmost gratitude extends to the people at National Archives Center 3 in Hanoi, which remarkable collection I have been mining for more than two decades. I am especially appreciative of the assistance rendered by Chu Dinh, Em Thanh, Em Ly, and, more recently, Director Tran Viet Hoa, Deputy Director Nguyen Minh Son, and staff members Em Nhung and Anh Tien. All have been incredibly accommodating and indulgent with me. And I am truly sorry for making their lives so miserable at times!

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I owe my career and achievements as an academic to those who taught me. John Keyes and Tom Tynan formed me in my younger years at St. Lawrence College. Yves Frenette at Glendon College made me want to become a History professor. The late Huynh Kim Khanh at Glendon, Ron Pruessen and Hy Van Luong at the University of Toronto, and Gary Hess as well as Tim Naftali during their passage at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa opened my eyes to important realities of Vietnamese and Cold War history. Stephen O'Harrow of the University of Hawai'i has nurtured my passion for Vietnam since 1988. Last but not least, Idus Newby, formerly of the University of Hawai'i, meticulously combed over my book and article manuscripts. He was generous with his time and trenchant with his words. He was a scholar's scholar, a man of infinite wisdom and intellect. He passed away shortly before this book went to press. Even though old age precluded him from going over this manuscript, it owes its best aspects to his mentorship, to the judiciousness he imparted to me.

My mother and sister in Quebec City remain an exceptional support system despite the distance that separates us. Our phone conversations and the time we spend together when I visit provide much relief from the stresses of life. I do owe my mother an apology: I should call more often, just not as frequently as I do when the Habs are in the playoffs and I need to vent after each period of play. Pierre-Marie, thanks for still keeping an eye on me.

Grace, my scintillating wife, is still the best thing that has happened to me. I hate growing old as much as she does, but I love getting old with her. She is the reason I have enjoyed, and I mean really enjoyed, the last twenty-plus years of my life. I thank her for putting up with my inadequacies, and for all the love she has given me during our time together. This book, like the others, owes much to her forbearance. As for you, Ursula, you may have come from the streets of Honolulu, are missing a pretty noticeable part of one ear, are wheezy all the time, have disproportionately long toes, and look weird for all your uniqueness, you are still my favorite companion. Thanks for constantly reminding me to take life in stride, for making it impossible for me to be stressed when I am around you, and for making me feel like I can be an indispensable source of support, literally, to another living being. You were far from my first choice that day at the Humane Society but, luckily for us, I have a
wife who has much better judgment than I do, especially when it comes to adopting cats.

My father passed away a couple of years ago. If academics are allowed to have fans, he was my most devoted and loyal one. I realize now that one of the reasons I enjoyed publishing to the extent that I did was because it made him so damn happy to see his son’s name in print. Pride is just not strong enough a word to convey what he exuded whenever I achieved an important milestone. There has been this deep void in my heart since he passed. I cry as I write these words because they remind me of just how much I enjoyed having him around. Life is not as beautiful without him in it. He was a good, honorable man who made me want to be as decent, respectable, and just. I am still working on that.

All contributions aside, I alone accept responsibility for any shortcomings in this work.
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Annam: French colonial administrative region consisting of the central third of Vietnam. Known to the Vietnamese as Trung Bo or Trung Ky.

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Formerly the VNA. Armed forces of the RVN, or South Vietnam.

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Bac Bo/Ky: Tonkin.

Binh van: Communist clandestine “proselytizing” among enemy armed forces.


Cao Dai: Eclectic Vietnamese religion founded in 1926 in Tay Ninh Province. Largely limited to that region, the Cao Dai proved fiercely independent and staunchly anti-communist during the Indochina and Vietnam Wars.

CCP: Chinese Communist Party.

CEFE: Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient, or French Far East Expeditionary Corps. Term used in reference to the French army combatting the Vietminh in the Indochina War and consisting of troops from France, the French Foreign Legion, and various French colonial holdings.

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency (US).


Cochinchina: French colonial administrative region consisting of the southern third of Vietnam. Known to the Vietnamese as Nam Bo or Nam Ky.
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Comintern: Abbreviated from Communist International (1919–43). Outfit created by Moscow to export communism globally.


COSVN: Central Office (Directorate) for Southern Vietnam. Organ in charge of coordinating communist activity in the southern third of Vietnam (Cochinchina), 1951–4 (including all of Cambodia) and 1961–75. “Upgraded” incarnation of the Nam Bo Executive Committee.

CPI: Communist Party of Indochina (1929–30). Predecessor to the ICP.

CPSU: Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

CPV: Communist Party of Vietnam. The SRVN’s current ruling party known as the VWP during the Vietnam War.

Dai Nam: Name of Vietnam, 1839–45.

Dai Viet: Name of Vietnam for much of the period 1009–1804.

Dan cong: “Patriotic workers.” Individuals recruited or conscripted by communist authorities during the Indochina War to move supplies to the front. Known derogatorily as “coolies” in the West.


DRVN: Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh on 2 September 1945. Its government fled to the mountains of Pac Bo during the Indochina War. Controlled by the VWP and based in Hanoi from October 1954, it claimed sole jurisdiction over all of Vietnam. It formally merged with the South in 1976 and became the SRVN under the CPV.

EDC: European Defense Community.

FLN: Front de libération nationale (Algérie), or Algerian National Liberation Front. Popular national resistance front not unlike the Vietminh created in 1954 to pursue the cause of independence by armed, political, and diplomatic struggle in Algeria.

FPJMC: Four-Party Joint Military Commission. Organ created by the 1973 Paris agreement with representation by the United States, the DRVN, the RVN, and the NLF/PRG to determine the specifics of troop withdrawals and ensure joint action in implementing other core provisions of the agreement.

French Union: Commonwealth of nominally independent states under partial control of France, 1946–58.
Giao Chi: See Jiaozhi.

GMD: *Guomindang*, or Chinese Nationalist Party. Political party founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1911, eventually under Chiang Kai-shek and the archival of the CCP.

GPD: General Political Department. Organ in charge of ideological conformity within the PAVN.

GTD: General Technical Department. Outfit coordinating the collection, repair, and distribution of weapons for Vietnamese communist forces. It also inventoried, refurbished, and distributed military hardware captured from the ARVN for use by PAVN and LAF troops.

Hoa Hao: Pseudo-Buddhist Vietnamese religion founded in 1939 and practiced mostly in the Mekong River Delta’s An Giang Province. The movement was stalwartly anti-communist during the Vietnam War in part because the Vietminh assassinated its founder and leader, Huynh Phu So.

ICCS: International Commission of Control and Supervision. Reconstituted ICSC created by the 1973 Paris agreement consisting originally of members from Poland, Hungary, Indonesia, and Canada. Its mandate included monitoring implementation, documenting violations, and adjudicating disputes between signatories of the agreement.

ICP: Indochinese Communist Party. Previous incarnation of the VWP founded in October 1930.


Indochina: Geographical area consisting of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Indochinese Federation: See Indochinese Union.

Indochinese Union: French colonial territory formally established in 1887 consisting of the Vietnamese regions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, plus Cambodia and, after 1899, Laos. Renamed the Indochinese Federation in 1941 and abolished in 1954.

Interzone IV: Vietnamese communist administrative region consisting of northern Central Vietnam, including a portion below the 17th parallel.

Interzone V: Vietnamese communist administrative region consisting of southern Central Vietnam, including the Central Highlands.

Jiaozhi: Chinese province incorporating the Vietnamese heartland during the millennium of Chinese rule, 111 BCE–938 CE.
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Kampuchea: Name used in reference to Cambodia during the 1980s.

Khmer Rouge: Radical communist faction led by Pol Pot and responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of people after it assumed power in Cambodia in April 1975.


Lao Dong Party: See VWP.

Lien Viet: Communist-led popular front established in 1946. The official name of the Vietminh after 1951.


MIA: Missing-in-action.

Nam Bo/Ky: Cochinchina.

Nam Bo Executive Committee: Organ coordinating communist activity in the southern third of Vietnam (former Cochinchina), 1954–61. “Downgraded” incarnation of COSVN.


NLF: National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam. Broad-based Southern Vietnamese umbrella organization created in 1960 and controlled by Hanoi to oppose the RVN. Also known as the Viet Cong.

OSS: Office of Strategic Services (1942–7). Precursor to the CIA.

PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam. Armed forces of the DRVN controlled by the VWP during the Vietnam War, and of the SRVN under the CPV since 1976.

PCF: Parti communiste français, or French Communist Party.

PLA: People’s Liberation Army. Armed forces of the PRC under CCP control.

POW: Prisoner-of-war.


PRG: Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Southern Vietnam. Coalition of mostly NLF and PRP members formed in 1969 and operating under VWP guidance. Became the Provisional
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Government of Southern Vietnam after 30 April 1975. Merged with the DRVN in 1976 to form the SRVN.

PRP: People’s Revolutionary Party, formerly the Party Committee of Southern Vietnam. Ostensibly independent Southern Vietnamese communist party established in 1962, in actuality part of the VWP.

RVN: Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Formerly the SOVN. Proclaimed in October 1955 by President Ngo Dinh Diem from its capital at Saigon. Claimed sole jurisdiction over all of Vietnam.

SDS: Students for a Democratic Society. American antiwar group.

SOE: State-owned enterprise.


Tirailleur: Colonial/indigenous infantryman in the service of France.

Tonkin: French colonial administrative region consisting of the northern third of Vietnam. Known to the Vietnamese as Bac Bo or Bac Ky.

TPJMC: Two-Party Joint Military Commission. Organ created by the 1973 Paris agreement with representation by the RVN and the NLF/PRG to delineate the areas controlled by the military forces of each party in the South after the ceasefire and ensure the implementation of other core provisions of the agreement.

TPP: Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Trung Bo/Ky: Annam.

UN: United Nations.

VCP: Vietnamese Communist Party. Coalition of Vietnamese communist organizations formed in February 1930. Rebranded the ICP later that same year.

VFF: Vietnam Fatherland Front (1955–present). Mass organization promoting national unity, loyalty to the Party and state, and resistance to foreign aggression and internal subversion in the DRVN during the Vietnam War. Merged with the southern-based Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces of Vietnam in 1977, kept the same name, and now promotes national solidarity in the SRVN.
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Viet Cong/VC: Term used in reference to Southern communists and their sympathizers, including, after 1960, members of the NLF and LAF, by their enemies. Abbreviated form of either Viet nam Cong san (Vietnamese Communist) or Viet minh Cong san (Vietminh Communist).

Vietminh: Contraction of Viet nam Doc lap Dong minh Hoi, or Vietnam Independence League. United front organized in 1941 by Ho Chi Minh and the ICP to fight the Japanese/French occupation of Indochina. Served as the main nationalist/patriotic front in the war against the French between 1946 and 1951, when it was officially dissolved and became part of the Lien Viet front. Blanket term used in reference to those who fought against the French during the Indochina War (1946–54).

VNA: Vietnamese National Army. Armed forces of the SOVN. Previous incarnation of the ARVN.

VNQDD: Viet nam Quoc dan Dang, or Vietnamese Nationalist Party. Pro-independence and moderately socialist revolutionary party founded in 1927 and modeled after the Chinese GMD.


VWP: Vietnamese Workers’ Party, also known as Lao Dong Party. Replaced the ICP in 1951 and controlled the DRVN government after 1954. Became the CPV in 1976.

WTO: World Trade Organization.
Cast of Main Characters


Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975): Chinese Nationalist (Guomindang) and anti-communist leader. Fought the armies of Mao Zedong during the Chinese Civil War (1946–9). He and his regime fled to Taiwan in 1949 where they reconstituted the pro-American Republic of China.


Duong Van Minh (1916–2001): South Vietnamese General who briefly served as President twice, in 1963 immediately following Ngo Dinh Diem’s assassination and in April 1975 shortly after Nguyen Van Thieu’s flight from the country. He was in office when Saigon fell to communist forces.


Khrushchev, Nikita (1894–1971): Leader of the Soviet Union shortly after Stalin’s death until his ouster in October 1964. He was a proponent of East-West “peaceful coexistence” and opposed escalation of hostilities in Vietnam.

Kissinger, Henry (b. 1923): National Security Adviser to President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State under President Gerald Ford.
Kissinger represented the United States in the secret Paris talks to end the war in Vietnam.

**Le Duan** (1907–86): Hardline Vietnamese revolutionary originally from Central Vietnam largely responsible for Ho Chi Minh’s political marginalization after 1964. He was paramount leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam) during the American War, and the primary communist decision-maker throughout that period. He oversaw Vietnam’s reunification and rechristening as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) in 1976. He ruled until his death in 1986.

**Le Duc Tho** (1911–90): Le Duan’s “war buddy” from their days fighting the French in Southern Vietnam, and also his most trusted colleague in the Party. As head of the Party’s powerful Organization Committee, Tho facilitated the promotion of hardliners and the marginalization of dovish moderates in the 1960s. He was instrumental in allowing Le Duan to centralize power into his own hands and dictate the course of the war in the South. Tho was also Henry Kissinger’s counterpart in the secret Paris talks.


**Nguyen Ai Quoc**: Alias of Ho Chi Minh.

**Nguyen Chi Thanh** (1914–67): Five-Star General of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Hardliner loyal to Le Duan in charge of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam (COSVN) until his death under mysterious circumstances in 1967. Possibly, Thanh was murdered by allies of Vo Nguyen Giap, his arch-nemesis in the PAVN.

**Nguyen Huu Tho** (1910–96): Chairman of the Central Committee of the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF, or Viet Cong) and President of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Southern Vietnam (PRG).

**Nguyen Thi Binh** (b. 1927): NLF Central Committee member and PRG Foreign Minister who represented the PRG in the semi-public Paris peace talks, 1969–73.

Nguyen Van Thieu (1923–2001): Leader of South Vietnam between 1965 and 1975, as Head of State (1965–7) and then President (1967–75). Abdicated and fled the country just days before the fall of Saigon to communist armies.

Pham Hung (1912–88): Close hardline ally and confidant of Le Duan, whom he served with in the South during the Indochina War. Pham Hung was DRVN Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of the Party Reunification Committee during the American War. He replaced Nguyen Chi Thanh as head of COSVN in 1967 until the final victory of communist armies in 1975.

Pham Van Dong (1906–2000): Affable and widely-respected Prime Minister and, until 1961, Foreign Minister of the DRVN.

Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940): Radical Vietnamese patriot who called for the violent overthrow of French colonial rule and the creation of a republican system in Vietnam.


Tran Quoc Hoan (1916–86): Minister of Public Security, the dreaded organ tasked with maintaining public order and silencing dissent in the DRVN and then the SRVN, 1952–81.

Truong Chinh (1907–88): Leading Vietnamese communist theoretician. Served as Party Secretary from 1941 until his demotion owing to a botched land reform campaign in 1956. Rehabilitated in 1963, he became a faithful supporter of Le Duan’s hawkish regime.


Vo Nguyen Giap (1911–2013): First Five-Star General in the PAVN. Longtime friend and ally of Ho Chi Minh famous for leading Vietminh armies during the Indochina War and directing the Dien Bien Phu campaign of 1954. A moderate-at-heart like Ho, he was sidelined by Le Duan in 1964 along with Ho.

US Presidential Administrations, 1945–1975

Harry Truman: 1945–53
Dwight Eisenhower: 1953–61
John F. Kennedy: 1961–3
Lyndon Johnson: 1963–9
Richard Nixon: 1969–74
Gerald Ford: 1974–7
Timeline

111 BCE–938 CE: Subjugation of Vietnamese by China.
939–1009: First Vietnamese Civil War.
1225–1400: Tran Dynasty.
1407–28: China occupies Dai Viet.
1428–1788: Le Dynasty.
1613–1788: Second Vietnamese Civil War.
1788–1802: Tay Son Dynasty.
1789: Emperor Quang Trung defeats Chinese invading forces during Tet.
1802–1945: Nguyen Dynasty. Dai Viet becomes Vietnam (1804) and then Dai Nam (1839).
1858: French punitive expedition arrives to end the persecution of Catholic missionaries and converts by Nguyen monarchs. Gradual conquest of Dai Nam (Vietnam) ensues.
1885–96: Can Vuong royalist resistance movement against France.
1887: France completes its conquest of Vietnam, which it partitions into Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. Creation of the Indochinese Union including Cambodia and, after 1899, Laos.
1890: Birth of Ho Chi Minh.
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Timeline

1912: Creation of the Vietnamese Restoration League under Phan Boi Chau.

1914–8: World War I.

1917: Bolshevik Revolution in Russia leads to formation of the Soviet Union as a communist state.


1920: Creation of the French Communist Party.

1925: Ho Chi Minh establishes the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League (*Thành niên*) in Guangzhou, China.

1927: Creation of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD).


1929–35: Great Depression.

1930: CPI merges with two other communist organizations to form the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP, February). VCP is renamed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP, October).

1930–1: Yen Bai mutiny and Nghe-Tinh uprising.

1936–8: Popular Front liberal government in France.

1937: Japan invades China.

1939–45: World War II in Europe.

1940–1: Japanese forces move into Indochina. Collaborationist Vichy regime in France enters into *modus vivendi* with Tokyo allowing continued French colonial control in Vietnam.

1941: Ho Chi Minh returns to Vietnam, assumes leadership of the ICP, and forms the Vietminh as a united front to combat Japanese and French forces in Indochina.

1943: Dissolution of the Comintern.

1944: Creation of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) under Vo Nguyen Giap.


1945–6: Occupation of Northern Vietnam by Chinese Nationalist (GMD) forces and of the South by British troops to disarm and repatriate Japanese soldiers. French troops return to Indochina as colonial control gradually resumes.
1946: Outbreak of the Indochina, or Franco–Vietminh, War (December). The subsequent recruitment of large numbers of Vietnamese to fight for France, the “yellowing” (jaunissement) of the French war effort, marks the onset of Vietnam’s Third Civil War.

1949: Proclamation of the State of Vietnam (SOVN) under Bao Dai (July). Victory of Mao Zedong and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War results in the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, October).

1950: Recognition of the DRVN by the PRC, the Soviet Union, and the rest of the communist bloc. Creation of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina (MAAG). Outbreak of the Korean War (June).

1951: Second Congress of the ICP, renamed the Vietnamese Workers’ Party (VWP).

1953: Death of Stalin (March). End of the Korean War (July).


1956: Policy of “peaceful coexistence” promulgated by Moscow (February). Deadline for holding elections on Vietnamese national reunification mandated by the Geneva accords passes (July). Le Duan calls for a more “forward” communist strategy in the South.

1957: Appointment of Le Duan as VWP Acting Secretary.


1959: Endorsement of Resolution 15 by the VWP Central Committee (January). Opening of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and beginning of insurgent activity in South Vietnam and of the infiltration of men (Southern “regroupees”) and supplies from the North into the South, marking the onset of Vietnam’s Fourth Civil War. Saigon launches the Agroville program of forced relocations of peasants to fortified villages.

1960: Third Congress of the VWP. Le Duan becomes Party Secretary. Creation of the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF, or Viet Cong, December).

1961: Deployment of the first helicopter units plus a large contingent of military advisers from the United States to South Vietnam. Saigon abandons the Agroville program.
Timeline

1964: Le Duan orders the onset of “major combat operations” in South Vietnam. Tonkin Gulf incident and Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (August). Hanoi orders the deployment of the first PAVN combat units to South Vietnam (September).
1964–5: Communist “Winter–Spring Campaign” to win the war before mass deployments of US ground forces to South Vietnam.
1965: Washington initiates sustained bombings of North Vietnam and deploys the first US combat forces to South Vietnam (March). Battle of Ia Drang Valley, the first major encounter between US and PAVN troops (November).
1967: Mysterious death of Nguyen Chi Thanh, a protégé of Le Duan, and onset of the “Anti-Party Affair” in Hanoi.
1970: Invasion of Cambodia by US and South Vietnamese forces, preceded by the overthrow of the neutralist leader Norodom Sihanouk by the “reactionary” Lon Nol (March). Student protesters killed at Kent State University and Jackson State College in the United States.
1971: Invasion of Laos by South Vietnamese forces (February). Kissinger secretly travels to Beijing to discuss the end of the war in Vietnam and related issues (July).
1972: Nixon visits China (February). Spring or Easter Offensive (March). Washington resumes the bombing of North Vietnam in operation Linebacker. Nixon visits Moscow (May). Hanoi calls off the
Timeline

Spring Offensive and shifts to a “strategy of peace” (June). Le Duc Tho presents Henry Kissinger with the first complete draft of a ceasefire agreement (October). Following the breakdown of peace talks, Nixon orders the “Christmas bombing” of Hanoi and Haiphong in operation Linebacker II (December).

1973: Signing of the Paris peace agreement ending the American War in Vietnam (January). Last US troops withdraw (March). Civil war in the South continues. Congress votes to prohibit the resumption of US combat activities in Indochina as Hanoi adopts Resolution 21 calling for renewal of “mass combat operations” in the South (July).

1974: Chinese forces clash with ARVN troops and seize islets claimed by the Vietnamese in the South China Sea (January). Nixon resigns; Gerald Ford succeeds him (August).

1975: Hanoi launches the Ho Chi Minh campaign to take Saigon (March). The Khmer Rouge seize power in Cambodia and Saigon falls to communist armies (April). Laos becomes communist (December).

1976: Vietnam is reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) under the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV).


1979: Vietnam invades Cambodia and overthrows the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot (January). Sino-Vietnamese Border War (February).

1986: Death of Le Duan (July). CPV adopts the policy of Doi moi (renovation) during its Sixth Congress.

1988: Chinese forces assault and occupy another Vietnamese position in the South China Sea (March).

1989: Communism collapses in East Europe.


1995: The SRVN normalizes relations with the United States and joins the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).


2007: The SRVN joins the World Trade Organization (WTO).


2017: US President Donald Trump abandons the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade pact.
MAP 1 Colonial Indochina, 1899–1954
MAP 2 Indochinese Peninsula, 1954–75