General Introduction

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While the study of any war provokes debate among its scholars, few wars have inspired the level of disagreement that the conflict in Vietnam has generated over the past half century.[1] Indeed, while the history of the fighting that took place in Vietnam has been the subject of voluminous and deeply informed studies, consensus continues to elude the field. When did the fighting begin, why and how did it escalate, and in what manner did the violence end and the legacies emerge? These are some of the fundamental questions that have consumed scholars of the war whose works spin off yet more questions than they offer any definitive answers. Despite its being a rather "young" field, there is already a robust historiography, replete with dueling interpretations and outsized stakes. An "argument without end," to borrow one title from an influential volume, there appears no let-up in this academic fighting fifty years on.[2]

Even what the war is called remains contentious. Most commonly referred to as the "Vietnam War" in the United States and its Vietnamese translation *Cuộc chiến tranh Việt Nam* in South Vietnam at the time, it is officially the "Anti-American Resistance War for National Salvation" in communist studies produced in Vietnam today.[3] Perhaps the "Second Indochina War" is the most politically innocuous name, despite its colonial baggage, and this also manages to convey the war's geographical scope and temporal spacing. Beyond the name of the war, the accompanying references to

1 As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second in memory." This cannot be more apt. Beyond the disagreements on the particulars as they pertain to the history of the war in Vietnam, the conflict itself profoundly shaped the trajectories of academic disciplines as well as historical fields and historiographies.

2 Robert McNamara et al., *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York, 1999).

3 It is also referred to as the "American War," though that is not a direct translation of the official Vietnamese title (*Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước*).

the nation-states involved and their armies also present a politically charged lexicon.[4] What one calls the war and the belligerents involved have mattered greatly to scholars, many of whom agonize over the use of one term over another for fear of being misinterpreted or accused of harboring political agendas.

Periodization also presents challenges. When did the Vietnam War begin, on what terms did it conclude, and why? Vietnamese parties had been locked in fierce battle in the twilight of French and Japanese imperial control over Indochina and the waning days of World War II. Some would argue these Vietnamese mid-century struggles were deeply imbricated with the growing Vietnamese civil war of the Global Cold War era. At the same time, others would argue that the Vietnam War began only in 1954, when the United States took over from France as patron of a newly independent, anticommunist state below the 17th parallel. In what some refer to as the interwar years in the latter half of the 1950s when a fragile peace descended over two competing Vietnams engaged in nation- and state-building, hostilities grew. It is instead, then, probably more helpful to think of Vietnamese history from the close of the imperial era to the winter of the Global Cold War as existing in a gray zone, in which the distinctions between war and peace were blurred so much as to become indistinct. How this period in modern Vietnamese history aligned with the concerted shift in US policy toward Asia is key. The founding of the People's Republic of China and the outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula prompted the United States to adopt a militarized response to contain communist expansion. This intersection between the East–West ideological struggle, the global process of decolonization, and the burgeoning Sino-Soviet split may hold the key to unlocking the origins and roots of the Vietnam War.

Likewise, the multiple endings of the Vietnam War frame the histories of the war's end and its enduring legacies. Did the war for all intents and purposes conclude in 1972 with the Shanghai Communiqué and the Moscow Summit, signaling the end of Vietnam's grip over international relations? Or did the 1973 Paris Agreement to End the War and Restore the Peace in Vietnam constitute the actual concluding chapter of the war as US troops exited the region? If this marked the finale of the United States' Vietnam War, how do we reconcile this ending with the fall of or transfer of power

4 For example, scholars debate whether to refer to South Vietnam as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) or the Government of Vietnam (GVN) as well as the etymology and politics of using "Việt Cộng" to refer to the People's Liberation Armed Forces of Southern Vietnam (PLAF).

in Phnom Penh, Saigon, and Vientiane in 1975? Finally, can we fathom the notion of a perpetual war for Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians in the twentieth century when we discern the roots of the Cambodian genocide and Third Indochina War in the ashes of the Second Indochina War or when we contextualize the ongoing tensions within refugee and overseas communities today? Periodization has long presented scholars with thorny issues that speak to root causes, turning points, and real and imagined ends.

The *Cambridge History of the Vietnam War* (*CHVW*) seeks neither to reconcile these past arguments, enflame ongoing disputes, or trigger new debates over periodization. Instead, our starting point is that nothing presented in the following pages attempts to present any semblance of consensus in the field. Rather, we celebrate the diversity and difference on full display over these three volumes as they attest to the indisputable importance of this seminal conflict in global history. For a war that never rose to the level of a world war and remained more or less within the borders of most of mainland Southeast Asia, the impact of the conflict on the course of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, American, and world history cannot be overstated. Indeed, it was the United States' longest war of the twentieth century, with more tonnage of bombs dropped over Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia than anywhere else in the entire history of modern warfare.[5] This made these small countries of Southeast Asia the most dangerous place to reside for much of the Cold War.[6]

What can be called the first generation of scholarship, including "first-cut" studies that benefited from the unorthodox release of official US documentation known collectively as the "Pentagon Papers" in 1971, was highly critical of US policy toward Vietnam and the origins of American military intervention.[7] Casting the war as an immoral and unnecessary conflict, these award-winning books reveal in real time the tragedy that results when American hubris, exemplified by wrong-headed US presidents, comes up

5 See George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th edn. (New York, 2001).
6 See Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *Cold War's Killing Fields* (New York, 2018).
7 These "first-cut" studies tended to be written by journalists who covered the war. See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972) and Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, 1973) as the two best-known examples. Regarding the Pentagon Papers publications, see Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield (eds.), *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York, 1971); Mike Gravel (ed.), *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam*, 4 vols. (Boston, 1971); Leslie H. Gelb et al. (eds.), *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945–1967*, 12 vols. (Washington, DC, 1971). See also Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York, 1972).

against the forces of Vietnamese nationalism, particularly under communist leadership. The end of the war in 1975 and erasure of Saigon from the proverbial map served to affirm their arguments, prompting more journalists, public intellectuals, and ultimately academic historians to join the fray.[8] In short, Washington's ignominy and Hanoi's victory underscored the inevitability of Vietnamese history over the bankruptcy of American exceptionalism.

If the first generation, including early studies published as the war raged, put forward an orthodoxy that was highly critical of American military intervention, the second generation began to appear by the 1980s as the United States suffered from what some politicians and pundits called the "Vietnam syndrome." While the orthodoxy continued to gain traction in the same decade, the new national mood also resulted in studies putting forward revisionist interpretations that were less critical or defended US foreign policy toward Vietnam and American military strategy deployed during the war.[9]

While they agreed on little, orthodox and revisionist scholars did share one characteristic in common: their singular focus on the United States at war. The evolution of post–1945 US foreign policy toward Vietnam, military strategy and soldiers' experiences, the effect of the war on domestic politics, culture, and society, as well as the meaning and legacies of the conflict in the United States after 1975, dominate the Anglophone scholarship on the Vietnam War. According to one historian's recent estimate that tens of thousands of books have been published on the conflict, it is certain that the overwhelming majority of these studies focus on the American perspective.[10] Much of that has to do with the vast historical documentation on the US side of the conflict, including what can be found in government archives, presidential libraries, oral history projects, and rich cultural repositories. In other words, the Americentrism of Vietnam War scholarship is rooted in the archival and preservation practices of the losing side.

While the Vietnam War was a seminal event in US history and historiography, the same cannot be said for the war in modern Vietnamese history and historiography. That Vietnam is not a war, but a country with its own history,

8 See Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York, 1989); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York, 1994); Herring, *America's Longest War*, 1st ed. published in 1979 as examples, respectively.

9 See Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC, 1979) and Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA, 1982).

10 See Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York, 2013).

politics, society, and culture worthy of study, is indisputable. But it was precisely the impulse to distinguish the country from the war that led most area studies scholars to avoid research on the 1945–75 period of Vietnamese history, leaving the study of the war era to their Americanist colleagues.[11] At the same time, Vietnamese-language publications from Vietnam as well as from within the global diaspora tended toward propaganda and hagiography for the victors on one side and to finger-pointing and lamentations for the defeated on the other. Without engagement by area studies scholars or historians of the US war effort in Vietnam, the Vietnamese-language scholarship from either side comprised sealed-off historiographical worlds of their own.[12]

By a quarter of a century after the war's end, winds of change were blowing through Vietnam Studies as they did for the historical discipline within the United States and Global Cold War scholarship. Starting around 2000, historians of modern Vietnam began new explorations of the war and thus inaugurated a third generation of scholarship on the conflict. In the decade following the 1986 launch of the Đổi mới (Renovation) policy in Vietnam, scholars with expertise in Vietnamese and other languages took greater advantage of archival openings, the easing of travel restrictions, and the transnational upsurge of historical interest on Vietnamese perspectives on the war. Just like their US historiographical counterparts, Vietnam Studies specialists have moved from a focus on political, military, and diplomatic affairs toward explorations of the war at the ground level and the conflict's impact on Vietnamese culture, art, and postwar society. At the same time as this "Vietnamization of Vietnam War studies," the end of the Cold War and the opening of archives in former communist countries coincided with the international and transnational turn in the discipline.[13] Studies of the Vietnam War at the regional and global levels explored bilateral relations between the belligerent states and their respective allies, the roles that third-party nations played in war-making and in the peace process, and the impact of the Vietnam War on revolutionary struggles

11 There were exceptions to this rule. They included historians who had served in the foreign service and the military or were embedded with the military during the war, and subsequently wrote histories and studies focused on the Vietnamese experiences of war and revolution in the period 1945–75. See the works of William Duiker, Douglas Pike, and Gerald C. Hickey, for example.

12 The two main publishing houses in Vietnam for official war scholarship include Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia (National Political Publishing House), formerly Sự thật (Truth), for political history and Nhà xuất bản Quân đội nhân dân (People's Army Publishing House) for military history. The overseas presses are located where there are large Vietnamese communities.

13 For the Vietnamization of Vietnam War Studies, see Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4 (3) (2009), 1–16.

elsewhere in the Third World as well as on social protest movements around the globe.

The three volumes of the *CHVW*, which bring together seventy-five leading experts on the war from around the world, cover the long history of the Vietnam War from its origins in the late colonial era to its present day legacies. As leading historians who employ a range of diverse methodologies and approaches, the contributors as a whole explore the war from multiple perspectives and on different scales. From decision-making in the corridors of power, to everyday life at war on the battlefronts and homefronts, to the global cultural legacies of the war on a global level, the *CHVW* presents the most exhaustive and authoritative treatment of the conflict.

Volume I addresses the origins of the Vietnam War by locating the roots of the conflict starting in the late colonial era and ending with the pivotal events of 1963. The civil conflicts that wracked Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos before the US intervention and escalation of the 1960s emerged during an earlier era when Indochina was under French and later Japanese rule. Hot on the heels of World War II, the conflict known variously as the "Indochina War" or the "First Indochina War" culminated in the end of French colonial rule but failed to resolve key questions about postcolonial sovereignty. Although the Geneva Accords of 1954 ushered in a fragile peace, the contributors analyze how feuding Vietnams, divided at the 17th parallel, had parallel state- and nation-building agendas set in an increasingly divisive geopolitical climate as the Cold War arrived in full force in Southeast Asia.

If the United States appears as just one of several important players in Volume I, its role is markedly different in Volume II, which covers the Americanization of the Vietnamese War during 1963–8. Although this volume focuses on a relatively short time frame, the chapters are ambitious in their exploration of wide-ranging spheres or zones of war, including the battlefronts and military operations, homefronts and societies in conflict, and the international dimensions of the Vietnam War that shook the foundations of the global order to its core in the 1960s. Together, these chapters give a sense of the all-encompassing and engrossing nature of the Vietnam War at every level on which it was fought.

The local, regional, and global impacts of the Vietnam War resonate strongly in Volume III, which tracks the long road to the end of the Vietnam War and continues all the way to its enduring legacies. The official expansion of the air and ground wars to Cambodia and Laos set against the backdrop of an increasingly complex international stage, with Sino–American rapprochement and US–Soviet détente, comprises the tortured (multiple) endings of

the conflict. It is no surprise, then, that the prolongation of the peace process set against the definitive transfer of power to communist hands in Indochina did not bode well for the postwar era, in which peace once again eluded the region. While the proximate cause of the Third Indochina War lies in the ending of the Vietnam War, the latter's manifold legacies live on to the present day. Whether in societies torn asunder, land that contains the environmental and ecological residue of the fighting, or individual memories and public consciousness, it is clear the Vietnam War lives on.

Over the course of preparing these three volumes, we have lost some of the original contributors but their scholarship lives on to shape the field; and we have seen younger scholars progress through their early careers to produce seminal first books and landmark articles. This project is dedicated to the memory of the former and the potential of the latter. That we may not agree on every aspect of the Vietnam War is clear, but its history nevertheless unites us as scholars to chronicle the full weight of the past in order to move forward.

Introduction

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

EDWARD MILLER

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

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).