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Pierre Asselin. *Vietnam's American War: A History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, xxxv + 283 pp. Maps, illustrations, annotated bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-107-51050-0 (paper, \$22.89).

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REVIEW BY ANDREW GAWTHORPE, UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN

According to Pierre Asselin's faculty web page at San Diego State University, his fascination with the Vietnam War began the same way it did for many of us – cinematically. In Asselin's case, it was a viewing of the movie *Rambo: First Blood Part II* which whetted his appetite. In the decades since this unlikely beginning, Asselin has produced a prodigious body of scholarship on the war from the North Vietnamese perspective.¹⁰ The section of the historiography that Asselin has contributed to has seen a number of notable publications in recent years, particularly those by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and Tuong Vu.¹¹ But until now it has lacked a single-volume history which covers the entire period of the war and is not only useful for scholars, but also accessible to the general reader. *Vietnam's American War* fills this gap admirably.

Asselin's focus in this work is on how the major decision-makers in North Vietnam made strategic decisions and managed their war effort in such a way that they ultimately "defeated the American goliath" (1). In justifying his focus, Asselin argues that North Vietnamese decision-making has been systematically understudied in the literature on the Vietnam War. It is as if, he argues, historians had studied World War II "without delving into – indeed, making any serious effort to relate – the goals, strategies and motivations of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany" (7).

While there have been honorable exceptions – particularly the works of Tuong Vu and Lien-Hang Nguyen cited above – it is certainly true that much of the literature on the Vietnam War has been so American-centric that it has tended to explain the war's outcome in terms of American deficiencies rather than North Vietnamese successes. This choice of focus calls to mind the remark of Confederate General George Pickett, who when asked why his side lost the American Civil War responded that "I always thought the North had something to do with it."¹² As Pickett was suggesting, placing the 'other side' at the center of analysis forces us to take their experience seriously, and only in doing so can we get closer to an understanding of what took place. Such an understanding makes it much more difficult to argue, as many still try to, that the Vietnam War might have been won by the United States if only the Congress had kept its nerve or some particular counterinsurgency 'genius' had been allowed to dictate American strategy.¹³ Such arguments are dangerous because they have so frequently been weaponized to argue for the possibility of success in more recent wars. On the other hand, Asselin's project implicitly argues against seeing America's enemies as blank slates or abstractions who could be defeated with the right combination of political will and military technocracy. Instead they must be taken seriously.

With his purpose established, Asselin proceeds to his narrative. As he notes, while his narrative is not exhaustive, it does have a comprehensive scope (8). This is true in two important respects.

The first is that *Vietnam's American War* devotes attention to the whole range of issues and policies with which the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) had to wrestle as they pursued their war. Alongside strategic decision-making, Asselin discusses cognate topics such as the domestic politics of North Vietnam, its war economy, its international

¹⁰ Especially Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954 – 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹¹ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹² See Marc Gilbert, *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

¹³ Max Boot, *The Road not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018).

relations, and the experiences of its soldiers and civilians. This provides us with a more detailed understanding of the North Vietnamese experience of the war than any previous single volume.

Asselin's discussion of the North Vietnamese home front is a particularly valuable part of his book. Books on the Vietnam War which neglect this topic can too easily give the impression that the inhabitants of the DRV were near-automatons, fanatically devoted to their country's reunification whatever the personal cost. This 'yellow horde' narrative clouds our appreciation of the immense personal sacrifices demanded of North Vietnamese communities in service of the war effort, and the problems this created for the DRV regime. As Asselin argues: "If we never speak of popular opposition to the war in North Vietnam as we do in the United States, it is not because it was non-existent, or that Hanoi's cause was more righteous than Washington's; is it because the DRVN's propaganda and security apparatus preempted it" (129–30). Asselin tells us that propaganda by the DRV authorities consistently downplayed the fact that the war was mainly fought against other Vietnamese rather than against the Americans. The deaths of many Northern soldiers were not reported to their families until the war was over, and those wounded in battle were not allowed to return home for fear of the impact they might have on civilian morale. Asselin's coverage of these topics helps to make his account well-rounded and humane.

The second sense in which Asselin's narrative is comprehensive is the extent to which it is embedded in both the pre- and post-history of the war. Many older general histories of the war are so focused on the American perspective that they promptly shift their focus back to the United States in 1975, examining the legacies of the war for America. Asselin instead considers how the legacies of the war influenced the DRV's attempt to assimilate South Vietnam after 1975. While this material is not new to scholars who have studied post-war Vietnam, it is instructive for the general reader to consider the ways in which the political and economic legacies of the war made Vietnam difficult to govern in the late 1970s and 1980s. Asselin does not shrink from describing the "veritable death camps" (235) into which many southerners were herded after the war, nor the lingering animosities between Northerners and Southerners. He describes how war heroes were given prominent positions in state-owned enterprises, contributing to mismanagement which by the mid-1980s made rationing necessary, something that had rarely happened even during the war.

Asselin's judgements on the motivations and competency of the DRV's leadership are well-balanced. He labels the ideology of the Vietnamese Communist leadership "patriotic internationalism," stressing that their ideology was an amalgam of communist and nationalist elements (111). The DRV, he says, was a "quintessential Stalinist police state, a totalitarian political entity" (110). Asselin stresses that it was the very deliberate actions of those who held the levers of power in this state – particularly Lê Duẩn – that ultimately brought victory over the Americans. In doing so, he is in a sense restoring the agency of North Vietnamese actors, which narratives based on the historical inevitability of their victory – or the decisive power of impersonal forces such as nationalism – tend to subtly deny. In such a highly-centralized political system, the agency of those at the top mattered a great deal. Asselin argues that Lê Duẩn and other Communist leaders showed "grit, resourcefulness, and remarkable organizational skills," but that they also made "tragic miscalculations" for which the Vietnamese people paid dearly (250–1). To admit this is not to detract from the miscalculations and crimes perpetrated by the United States during the war. It is instead to reach a more complete understanding of the whole.

This focus on North Vietnamese agency is slightly in tension with Asselin's judgement that the American war in Vietnam merely "delayed the inevitable" (250). Such a statement can seem to open the door again to determinism, but if one reads carefully this is not the case. What made the DRV's victory inevitable was the single-mindedness and ruthlessness of Lê Duẩn and his colleagues in Hanoi, not impersonal historical forces. As Asselin writes: "As long as Lê Duẩn remained at the helm, Hanoi was never going to give up its goal of reunifying the country under the authority of the Communist Party" (250). Asselin is equally clear-eyed on the question of whether the war could have been ended earlier through negotiations. It could have, he argues, but only through the "capitulation" of the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies (134).

As a single-volume history of the Vietnam War from the North Vietnamese perspective, this book will be hard to beat. Given its intended audience and scope, it would be churlish to complain about what was left out, and instead it is to be hoped that this volume whets the appetite of a new generation of Vietnam War scholars – perhaps even more so than a viewing of *Rambo*. Such scholars could carry out their own research into some of the topics about which this book leaves the

reader wanting to know more, such as everyday life, popular culture and quotidian resistance in North Vietnam, and how they were all intertwined with the war.

Teachers should consider assigning this book to their students alongside one of the many general histories of the war which focus on the American perspective. This is an opportunity not just to juxtapose the experiences of two sides to the same war, but also to consider broader questions about legitimacy, democracy, and ideology in the global Cold War.

Asselin has written a fine book, and we will be returning to it for years to come.