



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Saigon in the Sixties

Gawthorpe, A.J.

Citation

Gawthorpe, A. J. (2021). Saigon in the Sixties. *Diplomatic History*, 45(5), 1031-1034. doi:10.1093/dh/dhab064

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3238795>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Korean war brides immigrated in higher numbers than adoptees yet received less coverage and attention. Woo's monograph reflects this disproportion, with only one of six substantive chapters discussing how they were represented. Although Woo covers similar terrain to Naoko Shibusawa's *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), Korea and Koreans registered differently in U.S. consciousness. During the 1950s, Japanese Americans were the largest ethnic Asian population in the United States and the most successful, despite the mass incarceration of World War II. Shibusawa described their rapid transformation from a despised alien invasion, characterized as degraded male labor competition, into more pliant female and juvenile subjects in the form of more absorbable geishas, war brides, and adorable children. Unlike Japanese war brides who were associated with the successful U.S. occupation and the remaking of Japan's economy, constitution, and society, Korean war brides evoked the unfinished civil war and prostitution. No less than two Hollywood movies promoted Japanese war bride romances, while Korean war brides were depicted in none. Although there were many non-vice related means by which American men and Korean women met, the greater inequality stigmatizing these relations was unsuitable material for narratives celebrating the United States' benevolent patriarchy in Asia.

Despite its emphasis on recovering the lives and experiences of Korean women and children, *Framed by War* is chiefly concerned with discourse analysis rather than social history. Woo's evaluation of biases, ellipses, and disparities in media coverage of Korean women and children during the Cold War is persuasive but does not additionally provide narratives that flesh out their perspectives. Perhaps the next great Korean American novel will help to redress this lack.

doi: 10.1093/dh/dhbo62

Advance Access publication on August 5, 2021

ANDREW J. GAWTHORPE

Saigon in the Sixties

Heather Marie Stur. *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 280 pp. \$29.99 (paperback).

The most exciting section of Vietnam War historiography right now is undoubtedly that which is expanding our understanding of South Vietnam and its people. If the Vietnam War era is a tapestry, then we have been missing, still, some of the most important threads. One of the most conspicuous has been an

understanding of the experiences of the Vietnamese who lived in South Vietnam's urban centers, and particularly Saigon. Existing in a context which has been declared (not entirely unfairly) ephemeral and artificial, their experiences have been treated the same way. This is unfortunate. Not only were the city-dwellers of South Vietnam important stakeholders in the struggle for the future of South Vietnam, but a study of their experiences also teaches us much about South Vietnam as a polity.

Into the breach steps Heather Marie Stur, whose latest book focuses on the cacophonous urban society of Saigon, placing it in two contexts. The first is the war which was raging around it—and, in myriad ways, penetrating the city itself. The second is the international context, both in the international propaganda campaigns waged by both sides, and the “global sixties” of activism and political solidarity. This latter innovation is particularly important, because it situates South Vietnam not just as an inspiration for activism elsewhere during the global sixties, but as a key site of activism itself (22).

Drawing on a range of sources—including some in Vietnamese—Stur explores different facets of Saigon's urban politics in the 1960s and early 1970s. Some chapters are organized by actor (students, anti-government Catholics) and others by period (Saigon after Tet, Saigon in the seventies). Each gives us a slice of the social history of Saigon during this time, with a focus on political action and solidarity. We read mercifully little about Saigon as a playground for U.S. GIs, and generous amounts instead about Saigon as a scene of struggle among Vietnamese political actors.

One of the most illuminating chapters is the book's seventh, which examines Catholic political opposition to the regime of Nguyen Van Thieu in the late 1960s and early '70s. This chapter is very successful both at deepening our understanding of Saigon politics, and at illuminating how these politics were embedded in transnational networks of exchange. In standard narratives of the war, Catholics are notable for having fled North Vietnam in large numbers to settle in the South after the Geneva Accords of 1954, and henceforth becoming staunch supporters of the government. Stur, however, returns from the archive with a different story, one about how Catholic South Vietnamese challenged their government's political repression, particularly the mistreatment and torture of political prisoners. Stur demonstrates how this political praxis was informed by the liberation theology of the 1960s, which was giving Catholics all over the world a renewed emphasis on the plight of the poor and the oppressed.

Another excellent chapter is number five, which examines discourse regarding womanhood in wartime Saigon. By examining a magazine whose title translates as *New Woman*, Stur traces the development of a new ideal of womanhood, whose representatives would be “politically engaged, aware of the plights of the less fortunate, and willing to offer assistance via fundraising or other types of advocacy” (156). While not straying far from traditional patriarchal strictures, the Saigon regime also encouraged women to enlist in a

Women's Armed Forces Corps, in which they served in support positions in order to free men up for combat roles. Moves such as this have taken place in many societies during the total wars of the twentieth century, and they have often ushered in changes in gender roles. Stur hints at just such a change in South Vietnam, and further study would be fascinating.

There is a great deal of merit to Stur's approach, which builds social history from the bottom up. Each chapter adds a new layer to our understanding of Saigon society and its urban politics. Each chapter also allows us to look at the South Vietnamese state through fresh eyes, illustrating the different guises in which the state appeared to its citizens—as a harsh repressor, as the pathway to a degree of female empowerment, as the distant object of hopeful supplication. The only group who felt left out of the story were veterans, many of whom felt betrayed and abandoned by the Saigon regime in the late 1960s and '70s, and took to the streets to protest. Because of the centrality of the military to South Vietnamese life, an analysis of the veterans' protest movement would have been welcome.

Another question which would have been interesting to consider is the extent to which various competing Saigon elites thought about the necessities and possibilities of urban-rural political solidarity and joint praxis. Since at least the Russian Slavophiles of the nineteenth century, politically-conscious urban elites in developing countries have struggled with this issue. The actors in Stur's book do not seem to give much thought to the countryside, except to lament the destruction being wreaked on it by the war, and to sometimes push for the Saigon regime to end the war in order to bring peace to it. Did these urban elites celebrate rural folk? Did they denigrate them? Did they see the rural areas as lost to the Communists, or did they have a rural political vision for saving them? These questions are left, tantalizingly, for future researchers.

The book would also have benefited from a clearer conceptualization of democracy, and the exact ways in which we consider South Vietnam to have been democratic. The book at various points describes South Vietnam as a "working democracy," a "nascent democracy," and a "democracy lost" (16, 27, 3). These all seem too strong. The book seems implicitly to lean on a definition of democracy which gives pride of place to the existence of a vibrant civil society. There was certainly a vibrant civil society in Saigon, albeit one that operated within certain restrictions and waves of repression—but is this enough to label South Vietnam "democratic"? South Vietnam seems to be more appropriately viewed as what political scientists call an "anocracy," a regime with a mixture of democratic and authoritarian features, but ultimately falling far below the standards required to be regarded as democratic. This issue is further clouded when the book at times credits South Vietnamese rulers with "struggl[ing] to ... establish new democratic political institutions," or implies that such institutions failed to emerge only because of "political infighting" (31, 27). There is scant evidence that any South Vietnamese ruler ever intended to establish "democratic political institutions," and more is needed to clarify the

precise way in which the word “democratic” is being used in these formulations.

Overall, this book adds significantly to our understanding, and is recommended to anyone with an interest in its topic. Hopefully, it will spark yet more research into urban South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese polity, and the lives lived at the points where the two intersected.

doi: 10.1093/dh/dhabo64

Advance Access publication on August 2, 2021

BENJAMIN A. COATES

Laying Down the Law ... And Picking it Back Up

R.W. Kostal. *Laying Down the Law: The American Legal Revolutions in Occupied Germany and Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 480 pp. \$57.00 (hardcover).

The U.S. occupations of Germany and Japan aimed not merely to subdue but also to rebuild. In *Laying Down the Law*, legal historian R.W. Kostal contends that promoting individual rights and the rule of law formed a central part of that mission—and a “quintessentially *American*” one at that (3). Yet he does not agree with triumphalist proponents of American global hegemony who praise these occupations for establishing the groundwork for a so-called liberal and rule-based world order. Instead Kostal joins the ranks of historians including John Dower, Jennifer M. Miller, and Susan Carruthers who have shown these occupations to be messier, less consensual, and less successful in establishing liberal governance. Kostal contributes a compelling indictment of the Americans charged with reshaping German and Japanese legal systems. Despite their early intentions they proved unable and at times unwilling to build systems that would protect civil liberties. While it hammers another nail in the coffin of the myth of the “Good Occupations,” *Laying Down the Law* shies away from offering broader conclusions about the role of legal expertise and ideology in the application of American power.

Relying on exhaustive research in U.S. archives, Kostal offers a thorough and convincing portrait of the legal departments serving U.S. authorities in Japan and Germany. U.S. officials envisioned the rule of law and civil liberties as essential to building peace and democracy. In Germany this meant rehabilitation: Americans believed that the German legal system had been essentially sound until the Nazis perverted it. “The way forward was to go backward, to