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Vietnam's American War: A History

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The American War Museum, which used to be called the American War Crimes Museum, is located in Ho Chi Minh City, which used to be known as Saigon. I could speculate, but I don't know why they changed the name of the museum. The reason to change the city's name is more obvious. The museum is in a four-story building surrounded by a tall thick wall that encloses a large yard filled with equipment left behind when the American forces departed Vietnam. There was a helicopter, spotter plane, armored vehicles, rockets, a jeep, and other things I cannot now recall. There was a guillotine in one corner, a gift of the French, and a remarkable map showing where the many guillotines were used throughout the South to dispatch its enemies as recently as the early 1960's. I'm not a spiritual guy, but bad juju haunted that spot of the museum yard.

While sitting on a bench under a tree in the museum yard, surrounded by school children who were running around, yelling at each other and playing like all school children do, I noticed a large black cylindrical object. It must have been 6-8 feet or more in diameter, 10-12 feet tall, and jet black. I had to get up and go see what the sign on this thing said. It said this was a bomb the Americans used in the war. Gigantic, it would have produced a very large swath of destruction. My immediate reaction was to say out loud – to no one in particular – why did they have to use this thing?

Much has been written about the whys and wherefores of the American actions in Vietnam, and a recent Ken Burns and Lynn Novick public television series re-hashed some of the story from a specific American perspective. But with very few reports from those on the side that won the war, the series was incomplete.

Pierre Asselin's timely new work, *Vietnam's American War: A History,* begins to fill the void about the whys and wherefores of the actions of the North Vietnamese victors who took Saigon in April 1975. A Canadian who speaks and reads Viet and now works as Professor of History at San Diego State University, Asselin tells the stories of the nationalists who worked for Vietnam's independence, some of whom worked for independence since the closing days of World War I. Gaining access to archives in Hanoi, records in several other repositories, and interviews with those who were there, Asselin's work sheds new light on the arguments and decisions, as well as the fears and motives of the Communist leaders of what used to be called North Vietnam.

While scholars steeped in the literature may find other revelations, two themes recurred in my read of Asselin's book: the depth and influence of the Northern Communists' adherence to the Marx and Lenin ideology, and the extent of the sacrifices made by the families of the North's warriors.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, the Europeans, who had staked out colonial occupations of large parts of the African and Asian continents, asserted their legal claims to the land and people, including Indochina. While the process of throwing off colonial yokes in the rest of the world accelerated following WWII and became most earnest in the 1960's in the New International Economic Order and its premise of sovereignty over natural resources, none of this history was new to Vietnam, whose nationalists have resisted invasions and occupations for over 2,000 years.

Vietnam's oldest dispute is with its northern neighbor, China, and they have fought over territory since time began. With the discovery of oil and gas in Vietnam's offshore waters, that dispute is destined to continue.

The French are part of the history, too. French Jesuit missionaries worked in the country since the early seventeenth century. In response to a request made in 1787, the French King supplied limited arms used to overthrow the Tay Son Dynasty by 1802. Later, Vietnam's Emperor, Gia Long, invited additional French aide that Asselin says "sowed the seeds of his own nation's demise." The French completed their conquest in 1887 and, according to Asselin, "exploitation, suffering, and misery characterized the French rule in Vietnam." The French took and exported rubber to Michelin's new tire factories in France, Tonkin coal to China and Japan, and laborers to its colonies in Polynesia, New Hebrides, New Caledonia and Reunion Island.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, France enlisted some 90,000 Vietnamese as combatants and support personnel, all hoping for French citizenship and other benefits. After the war, Ho Chi Minh, who became the most well known of the Vietnamese Communists, attended the 1919 Peace Conference at Versailles, when the Western powers sought to make some sense of what just happened at the conclusion of the First World War. Ho and his compatriots petitioned for Vietnamese independence, citing President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and the U.S. Declaration of Independence. He was not successful largely, I believe, because the Western Powers, including France, were not ready to acknowledge their colonies' desires for independence. Plus, Ho was, after all, a little yellow man asking favors of the white colonizers. Nevertheless, Ho staked out a claim for the independence of his people from colonial occupation. And he never gave up.

Ho saw in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and his study of Communism a narrative that connected the dots of what he had seen and experienced. The colonies provided capital with the necessary resources of raw materials and cheap labor to keep the machine going. If the slave can throw off the master, the people can then live in peace and harmony, or so the theory went. Ho and his compatriots became zealous adherents of Marx's theory and Lenin's application of the theory.

It's not news to read that Ho Chi Minh was a die-hard Communist. What I learned was he was a peace maker, too. Asselin draws a picture of an advocate who wished America's example of revolution and pursuit of liberty might ring a bell somewhere and garner some support. If only.

Communism gained traction in Vietnam in the 1930's, leading to resistance to French control, and a brutal French response. A thousand or more were killed and scores were detained in concentration camps, none of which endeared the French to the Vietnamese.
Turmoil existed throughout the 1930's world. Stalin's Soviet Union was stirring, Franco invaded Spain to rescue the Spanish Monarchy and Catholic Church from Marxists, and Hitler rose to power. When WWII broke out, France conscripted more than 1.5 million mostly Vietnamese to fight Nazi Germany. But after Germany overran France, the Vichy government and Axis Power Japan agreed the Imperial Japanese Army could station troops in, and use Vietnam as a base of operations. Unfortunately, Asselin doesn't tell us what became of the draftees France conscripted to fight the Germans.

After studying in Moscow, Ho spent time with the Chinese Communists, whose story of revolution rang familiar, and he returned to Vietnam in 1941 after a 30-year absence. He formed the Vietminh, an indigenous united front against the French and Japanese. President Roosevelt briefly considered the Vietminh to be a U.S. ally in the war with Japan. A team from the American Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency, parachuted into Vietminh's main base to train its fighters and provide medical care to Ho, who was fighting dysentery and malaria. When WWII ended, Ho and the Vietminh, accompanied by an OSS team, took control of Hanoi without opposition. But the possibilities of a different course of events evaporated when the need to placate Charles De Gaulle in order to bolster resistance to the Russians in Europe led America to give France a free hand in its colony.

Fighting above its weight, France played both sides, America and Russia, against the middle hoping to keep its toe-hold in Vietnam. They demeaned Ho, asserting he was a Russian stooge when in fact Stalin, no friend of Ho, was more concerned about French favor.
Vietnam's French war from 1945 to 1954 ended in catastrophe when the Vietminh under General Giap defeated the French forces at Dien Bien Phu. Coincidentally, the Geneva Conference opened the next day. The Western powers who called the shots at Geneva viewed the partitions in Germany and Korea as a successful model for dealing with Communists, and pressed for partition in Vietnam, suggesting it would only be temporary until national reunification elections could be held. Ho, the peaceful one, agreed and was blamed for giving away too much, or not demanding enough, in Geneva in 1954. By then, he and his followers had been fighting French and Japanese occupiers for over twenty years.

Asselin refers several times to the French wish for a commonwealth. In several places in the world the French occupied lands and people from whom much was taken in return for not much more than a foreign language. It is difficult to find the depth of institutions, rule of law, or preference for democracy in the former French colonies

necessary to sustain a commonwealth that we find in the English speaking world where Britain relinquished its colonies.

When the French finally gave up on the notion of an imaginary commonwealth and quit its colony in Vietnam, the Americans stepped in. American military aide in the fight against the Communists began in 1950, increased clandestinely after 1954, and was dramatically increased in 1965 when it appeared the Communists had the upper hand in the South.
Following partition, Ho favored abiding by the terms set in Geneva and he directed Northern efforts to advance economic recovery, development, and education. His moderate approach came under increasing criticism. Meanwhile in the South, its Catholic leader, Diem, was consolidating his hold, and it became increasing clear he had no intention of submitting to a reunification vote. In late 1956 the North's Central Committee authorized limited military action in the South, including kidnapping, assassination, and bombing of institutions and establishments associated with Diem or the American presence. Diem responded by killing, capturing or otherwise neutralizing thousands of the Southern revolutionaries and their sympathizers.

Asselin credits this next part of the story to Le Duan, one of Ho's compatriots and a hard liner. The Vietnamese Communists saw themselves, and were seen by the world wide Communist movement, as a vanguard of the advance of communism. Le Duan believed national liberation was but one step to the liberation of all the oppressed masses and the demise of imperialism and global capitalism. They had allies in the Non-Aligned Movement and among the revolutionary forces in Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Indonesia, Cuba, and Latin America. Vietnamese military instructors were sent to Egypt to train Algerians fighting for independence from France. At the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966, Che Guevara, an architect of the Cuban revolution, exhorted an audience representing more than eighty governments, "how close and bright would the future appear if two, three, many Vietnams flowered on the face of the globe….with their repeated blows against imperialism, forcing it to disperse its forces under the lash of the growing hatred of the peoples of the world!"
"Absolutely revolted by Ho's decision to accept the Geneva formula," Le Duan objected vociferously to Ho's resistance to all out war. Asselin observes how unusual it was for a communist regime to tolerate argument. By contrast, in Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China, and Kim Il-sung's North Korea, dissidents more often were executed. Ho's willingness to rule by consensus was more in keeping with Lenin's approach of "diversity in discussion, unity in action."

Le Duan succeeded in moving Ho out of control in 1963, which was, coincidentally, when the South's military assassinated Diem. Ho didn't see the war's end; he died in 1969 at the age of 79.

Russian and Chinese support for Communist Vietnam's fight waxed and waned, as did the Northern leaders' efforts to please the two countries while pursuing their own goal. As the leaders of world wide Communism, they helped Ho and his cause only when their interests permitted. But it occurs to me that Russian Communism by the 1950's was advanced really as far as it was destined to go, and the contest for Europe and competition with America distracted its policy makers. When Nikita Khrushchev took over the Soviet Union and denounced Stalin and advocated peaceful coexistence in 1956, Ho and his comrades endorsed the new line.

China's Communists won control when Chiang Kai-shek fled the mainland to Taiwan in October 1949. Later, when Nixon went to Beijing and made nice with the Chinese in 1972, Le Duan privately said, "the current Chinese leaders are not revolutionaries but traitors to the interests of the revolutionary forces of the world." That enmity never dissipated.

After an incident in the Tonkin Gulf, the U.S. Congress authorized military force, and in March 1965, the United States began bombing the North and U.S. Marines came ashore in the South. Known in America as the Vietnam War; Asselin properly locates the event in his title, *Vietnam's American War*. During this war, the Vietnamese fought for another ten years, including two years after the American forces withdrew in 1973. In America, we complain about a war in Afghanistan that has now stretched on for sixteen years, while our home land was untouched after the 9-11 attack, and none beyond our warriors and their families have suffered any direct consequence.

The magnitude of the impact of thirty years of war on the people and place of Vietnam cannot be overstated. For ten years, at least, the country was on a total war footing. Women replaced men on farms and in factories. Artists, musicians and actors entertained the troops. The stories of the Trung sisters and Lady Trieu, folk heroines who had led rebellions against the Chinese 2,000 years before, were mobilized to inspire women to contribute.
A Northern man drafted to fight didn't simply serve a tour of duty; he stayed for the duration, and was not discharged until the war was over. Asselin reports that very few deserted. The seriously wounded were not sent home, instead, they were moved to camps in Laos. The government's need to control information didn't allow families to communicate with the sons, brothers, and husbands who went to fight; most were heard from or reported dead only after the war ended. There was no mail service between North and South and, of course, cell phones didn't exist then.

The tonnage of bombs dropped, like the one at the American War Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, was off the scale. In the twelve days of Christmas in 1972 alone, over 1,900 sorties by B-52 bombers and smaller aircraft dropped over 20,000 tons of bombs on Hanoi and Haiphong harbor. Fifteen B-52's and several other U.S. aircraft were shot down in those twelve days by an estimated 900 Soviet made surface-to-air missiles. Casualties were relatively low in that bombing campaign because most of the civilians had been evacuated to the countryside.

Asselin reports the total deaths of the Vietnamese, including civilians, are conservatively estimated at 1.3 million; more than 300,000 of the dead were never recovered. Vietnam, especially the North after the 1954 partition and a mass migration of Catholics south, is a mostly Buddhist country where burial rites are central to the culture, and taking care of the dead and ancestor worship are important duties. Closure involves more than simply knowing when the man died. Without a proper burial it is believed the soul wanders aimlessly in perpetuity.

Saigon fell in April 1975, and the two halves of the country formally merged in July 1976, but national reconciliation and unity was harder to come by. While the feared mass executions did not occur, upwards of 1 million Southerners were confined in more than eighty re-education camps, and a million or more fled, most by rickety fishing boats. And as if the past was prologue, war erupted twice again.

Vietnam aligned itself by treaty with the Soviets and, perhaps in retaliation, China assisted the regime in Cambodia where Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge embarked on a genocidal rampage, killing Vietnamese and others, and attacking Vietnamese villages. They claimed the Vietnamese were greedy imperialists who had stolen the Mekong River Delta two centuries earlier. Tired of that nonsense, on December 25, 1978 Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion and drove Pol Pot from power.

In 1979, China's leader, Deng Xiaoping, visited President Carter and told him the Vietnamese had been "naughty children" and would have to be "spanked". 200,000 Chinese troops invaded across Vietnam's norther border with Carter's implicit sanction, according to Asselin. Discipline imposed, the Chinese withdrew after less than four weeks. Ten years later in 1989, Vietnam forces withdrew from what was renamed Kampuchea, after losing another 55,000 troops.

Asselin closes out his book wondering how history might have differed if the Americans and Vietnamese had more accurately gauged each other's commitment to achieving their goals. While the American actions were fought over in Congress, college campuses and on the streets, Le Duan's resourcefulness and organizational skills were not broadcast on the nightly news and not well understood. But all history is contingent, and it seems to me America's leaders were trapped by a fear of communism, and remained unaware that its contradictions made it unsustainable until 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. All the while, the Vietnamese wanted to be their own masters.

And yet, global capital reigns still. A client of mine who does business in Vietnam invited me to accompany him once, and he warned me that when I returned to the states I would wonder which one of us is the Communist country. What struck me even more was the apparent absence of any ill will toward Americans.

The American War was only one in a long story of defending their land and people; my conclusion is they take a very long view of history. Pierre Asselin's well written, deeply researched, and sometimes dry history of Vietnam's American War is a valuable contribution to the literature and a must read for those who seek to know what the other side thought they needed to do to win.