

ARTS & SOCIETY

BOOKS

Filling the vacuum

The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War by Stein Tonneson. *International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, and Sage Publications, London. £45 (US\$83.50).*

The Americans who planned the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 probably gave little thought to how the abrupt end of World War II would effect the countries Japan had ruled. Vietnam was one of those countries, and Tokyo's sudden collapse had momentous consequences. The Japanese there, demoralised by the sudden defeat, did nothing when the ailing Vietnamese government they had set up six months before collapsed, leaving an almost complete absence of authority. Occupation troops — from Britain and Chiang Kai-shek's China — were weeks away. One man was ready, though: Ho Chi Minh. Eleven days after Japan's 14 August surrender, his Viet Minh had the whole country in their hands; on 2 September Ho declared the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

He lasted a month in the south and a year in the north before being forced back to the jungle by the returning French colonists. Yet the ruling, inter-lude provided a firm base of legitimacy for Ho's Communist Party, the sponsor and leader of the Viet Minh front. Is it possible that if the August Revolution had not succeeded, the communists might not have been able to hold out against the French and Americans and finally regain the whole country in 1975?

Historian Stein Tonneson does not address the question directly, but his answer would probably be yes. In this book he studies the events and decisions that led up to the Viet Minh revolution. His research, which delves into reams of original documents, produces a trail of "ifs": if such an event had or had not happened, the path might not have led to revolution.

The biggest if, perhaps, concerns the Japanese-sponsored government of Tran Trong Kim, which collapsed for internal reasons the week of the atomic bombings. If it had held on, there certainly would have been no power vacuum for Ho to fill. Then again, if Ho had not led the Viet Minh so ably, the guerilla network might

not have been primed for the opportunity. One nice example of Ho's Comintern witness noted in this book is how he made the Viet Minh newspaper look like a local edition, as if it were part of something much bigger. He numbered the first issue 101 to make it seem as if it had been around a long time.

But Tonneson takes the trail much further and wider than home events. Using military and government despatches, he pries open the conflicting plans for Indochina drawn up by the Allies and Japan — and the farce of misunderstandings and misinterpretations as everyone tried to outmanoeuvre everyone else. The US State Department was riven on Indochina policy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was working almost alone, and Winston Churchill ignored the promptings of the Foreign Office. The French, snubbed by the US, blundered about with little idea of what was going on. No one even bothered to tell Gen. de Gaulle when the colony he so valued was split between the British and Chinese commands at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.

The causal chain is very complex, but if any one person has particular responsibility for bringing Vietnam to revolution, in Tonneson's view it is Roosevelt. The author puts forward evidence that Roosevelt's hatred of the French and his commitment to putting Indochina under an international trusteeship went much further than previously documented. Tonneson argues that the president had a secret plan to land American troops in Vietnam as part of the offensive against Japan — a plan officially dropped in September 1944.

The author even speculates that Roosevelt may have kept this plan alive in early 1945 specifically to frighten Tokyo into overturning the French Indochina administration its officials had lived with for so long. Indeed, the Japanese ousted the French in March only because they thought the Americans were coming. Tonneson suggests that Roosevelt may have wanted to have the Japanese in charge so that France would have had no authority to object to a trusteeship. But the effect of the coup was to allow the Viet Minh to expand dramatically because it got rid of the French oppressors. Furthermore, the president's late-1944

ban on US cooperation with the French, which lived on after he died in April 1945, may have encouraged American intelligence to deal with Ho Chi Minh instead. The US connection gave the Viet Minh a distinct boost because the Vietnamese public had long looked to the anti-colonial Americans as their saviours. Indeed, US advisers followed Vo Nguyen Giap's army to Hanoi after the revolution. Tonneson's book reminds us that, despite the long hostility between Washington and Hanoi, the US was instrumental in bringing Ho's people to power.

— Judith Clarke

We, the army

Genesis of Power: General Sudirman and the Indonesian Military in Politics, 1945-49 by Salim Said. *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. US\$22.*

Salim Said's analysis of the Indonesian army's origins and early political role is not only a worthy contribution to this field of study, but also timely. For at the present juncture of Indonesia's political development — with a possible change of leadership on the horizon — it helps to explain why the military's political role is not simply going to evaporate when President Suharto departs the stage.

In this respect, the most important section of this comprehensive survey of the Indonesian army's early development, is the epilogue. Here, the author explains why events which occurred almost half a century ago continue to shape the army's perception of its role in society. As Salim notes: "To justify the dominant position of the military in Indonesian politics since October 1965, officers started to refer to their experiences with civilian politicians during, as well as after the revolution."

The Indonesian military's role in politics is, as Salim points out, difficult to define with the aid of conventional — mostly Western — theories about military intervention in politics. The Western liberal tradition assumes that military intervention in politics is illegitimate because armies are essentially apolitical institutions.

The value of Salim's narrative is its stress on the army's perception of itself as a legitimate political actor from the start. The Indonesian army, he states, "was a self-created army." The fact that civilian politicians were reluctant to form a regular army in the face of the returning Dutch colonial forces after the defeat of Japan is a point seldom made strongly enough.

Events in 1945-49 saw the entrenchment of misunderstanding and mistrust between the military and civilian establishments. The early bickering over the army's structure and organisation, its relations with

