

**The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War.** By Stein Tonnesson. Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, and London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991. Pp. xiv, 458. Maps, Illustrations, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

This very interesting book offers a discussion which marginalizes its apparent subject: the Vietnamese revolution of 1945. To do this it first locates the revolution in a 'short sequence of events' (p.5) - one that takes place between the 13 August launch of the Viet Minh's nation-wide insurrection and Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Independence on 2 September 1945. Such a short sequence is necessary, we are persuaded, because a long one, that could conceivably see the Vietnamese revolution extending back to anywhere around 1900 and forward to 1975, is far more likely to have factors intruding into its development. A long sequence is thus far more difficult to explain in terms of factors just prior to it than a short one, and would, in any case, have undermined the book's main purpose which is to produce an international history of the revolution through certain catenas of cause and effect.

By purposely allowing his strong command of Western sources to overshadow his still adequate command of the Vietnamese ones, Stein Tonnesson produces two 'causal chains' in a broken narrative. The 'first' chain links the revolution to factors external to Vietnam - or are they are the external factors that are linked to the revolution? Either way, the chain runs through Roosevelt's plans for an Indochina trusteeship at the end of World War Two, Allied strategic considerations in the Pacific, and the influence of these on the Japanese coup which overthrew the French regime on 9 March 1945. Through the failure of the Tran Trong Kim government, the chain then leads to the ensuing power vacuum which the Viet Minh finally filled.

The 'second' chain tells us how the Viet Minh came to be the ones who filled the power vacuum. It links the revolution to factors internal to Vietnam, and runs through the rise of the Viet Minh League and Liberation Army, the expansion of Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) organisations, and the August general insurrection. However, the work places its 'main emphasis' (p. 409) on the 'first' chain, because it is the one which produces the all important **power vacuum**, permitting the general insurrection and the Viet Minh's rise to power. The chains and chapters carrying them then wind up together in Chapter 11, where a unified narrative now describes the events of 13 August to 2 September. The primary focus of the work, it should therefore be restated, is 'not "the Vietnamese Revolution" per se, but its causes in the development of interstate relations during the final years of World War II' (p.20). We are, for the main part, in the conflict 'between' states (p.423).

So too, therefore, are the French spies, diplomats, soldiers, and politicians who, for anyone who has seen the film 'Casablanca', wait around for us in the broken narrative a little like the extras in Ric's cafe. However, the plots of such people are still wide-ranging. They link Algiers, London, Paris, Calcutta, Kandy, Hanoi, Kunming, and Viet Minh headquarters at Pac Bo. French

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Officers wearing British uniforms establish a DGER post in Calcutta, de Gaulle orders Colonel de Langlade to parachute into Tonkin, hundreds of French 'intelligence-sabotage-guerrilla' (p. 157) are dropped into Laos. Meanwhile, Mounbatten of Southeast Asia Command in India, who is not always informed by his French personnel of their actions in Indochina, gets his wires crossed with Chiang-Kai-Shek and General Wedemeyer in southern China, about who is responsible for what in Indochina and what Allied operations should be launched to defeat the Japanese there.

Allied plans 'collide' (Chapter 4). Ho Chi Minh's diplomacy in southern China musters support for the expanding Viet Minh organisation in Tonkin. And while as all this is going on it is the enigmatic presence of Roosevelt that moves to centre stage.

Did Roosevelt's Francophobia, and his belief that the French in Indochina have 'done nothing to improve the natives' (p.213), imply anything more than a quirky footnote to the history of Allied Pacific planning in 1944 and 1945? Stein Tonnesson thinks it did. In fact, in Chapter 5, when his fascinating discussion of Roosevelt's possible influence on events in Indochina reaches the limits of its Magic and Ultra evidence, it becomes even more magical as it breaks the bounds of historical discourse: an imaginative conversation between Churchill and Roosevelt appears on the pages, along with a long speculative argument that Roosevelt may have used U.S. Intelligence agencies consciously to provoke 'a Franco-Japanese conflict in Indochina, without, however, succeeding' (p.223).

Now the need for this speculation may seem mysterious when the Chapter shows, in any case, how the causes of the Japanese coup, the main event which leads to the power vacuum, lay in Japanese expectations of a US and or Chinese invasion. However, Chapter 5 is entitled 'Deceptions and False Expectations', and it does explain ways in which the course of history can be influenced or changed by deception. One way to deal with the speculation which its author clearly indicates, therefore, is to congratulate him for his daring. It is indeed possible to read the passage as a dramatization of the action of the original deceptions in the text, and beyond that of the ambiguous, provisional nature of historical 'knowledge' itself. But as it helps admirably to destabilize existing 'knowledge' about the Vietnamese revolution, the speculation also does something else: it works to centre the influence of Roosevelt's idiosyncratic and or visionary ideas about French Indochina as the subject of the book.

What are the consequences of thus marginalizing the events Vietnamese Revolution of 1945 per se?

As it concentrates on the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945, the inter-national view of the Vietnamese revolution certainly rattles many old chains of cause and effect in the historiography of that event. From the book's inter-national perspective the ICP's approach to whether it wanted an 'Indochinese' or 'Viet' nation becomes more ambiguous than previously realized. Tran Trong Kim's national government arguably assumes greater significance than before. The makeshift mechanics of the revolution and the particular circumstances of the insurrection

in the south also emerge with new clarity, as unpredictable inter-national factors and chance shuffle the cards.

As it problematizes existing knowledge about the Vietnamese revolution, however, the view from the margins tends simultaneously to problematize itself. As they are constructed, the 'first' and 'second' causal chains may be unconnected before the Japanese coup which produces the power vacuum. But this is not necessarily so. In fact, what gives rise to the need for their construction in the first place is not only their intersection in the coup. It is also Roosevelt's uncertain vision and influence on that event. <sup>For</sup> The complexity of Stein Tonnesson's book is that, as it highlights the international causes and significance of the Vietnamese Revolution, it does this by centring a subject which partly implies the possibility of saving the West for its involvement in the Wars.

This is my reservation about a book which deserves to be widely read.

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