

# The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs

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**STEIN TØNNESSON: *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*. Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War.** Oslo, London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: International Peace Research Institute, Sage Publications, 1991. 458 pp.

Of all the works I know dealing with the arrival in power of the Communists in Vietnam and the proclamation of the Vietnamese Democratic Republic this book seems to be the most solidly written, being based on the best archival sources (the author explored 62 archives in the USA, France, the UK, Sweden and Vietnam) and the best biographical records (over 300 documents, monographic publications and articles). In addition, in the autumn of 1989 Tonnesson conducted interviews with Phan Van Dong, a long-serving prime minister in both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Socialist Republic, and a close collaborator of Ho Chi Minh, with Le Tu Dong, leader of the revolution in Hue in August 1945, and with Tran Van Giao, an eminent Vietnamese historian. While Tonnesson could be criticized for almost totally ignoring Soviet publications and partially also those that have appeared in the Chinese People's Republic, these do not really contribute any new elements, nor do they contain any sensational information that might undermine his conclusions. It might be surmised that there are still some unknown documents lying in inaccessible archives of the former USSR (whether Party or state archives); however, given Stalin's foreign-policy priorities in the years 1941-45 and the interest he displayed in Vietnam, this seems highly unlikely. It is also improbable that the archives of the Chinese CP could furnish more on this subject than was contained in the records of the Nanking Government, which were in part shipped out to Taiwan.

This reviewer would consider Stein Tonnesson one of the "new wave" of modern historians, often referred to as the "new generation"; historians who are engaged in a critical re-evaluation of the results of earlier investigations, together with the assessments and judgments of their older colleagues. Their principal merits include youth, an unconventional approach, a more detached attitude to events now more distant in time, and access to archival sources unavailable to their predecessors. They are free from the psychological burden of the Cold War, thus appearing more objective and critical. The present reviewer believes this to be a refreshing development, even if many of the opinions put forward by these "new wave" historians do not subsequently withstand the test of time.

The book under review is written in excellent, lucid language. It represents an attempt to provide a new interpretation of events in and around Indochina during

World War II and immediately afterwards. The subject matter analysed includes both the internal situation in the peninsula and the great international manoeuvrings concerning the future of this region, the main protagonists here being the USA, France, China, Great Britain and Japan. The research performed by this Norwegian historian sheds new light on the policies regarding the colonial question pursued by the USA and its European allies during World War II and indicates just how thorny a problem this was in Washington's relations with Paris and London. Perhaps the author slightly exaggerates the role played here by F.D. Roosevelt, although there can be no doubt that America's critical attitude to the colonial system and its vision of the new postwar world order were a major factor in the changes that occurred in Asia in the first postwar years. The clearest example here is Indochina, treated by Paris as the "pearl of her colonial empire", one that necessarily had to revert to France once the war was over. Tonnesson puts forward the thesis, meticulously argued, that in terms of the external factors at play, the conquest of power in Vietnam by the Viet Minh in August 1945 was to no small extent the result of US policy. "The August revolution," he writes, "obviously did not form a part of Roosevelt's original idea – he had imagined an international trusteeship – but Ho Chi Minh's great occasion was indirectly induced by the President of the United States." (p. 413).

The Norwegian historian goes on to demonstrate that the Vietnamese revolution of August 1945 was neither the result of a deliberate plan drawn up by Ho Chi Minh and carried out step by step by the Communist Party of Indochina (as is claimed in Hamo), nor of an accurate prediction of developments by the CP leadership, but rather the consequence of the very specific, unexpected and unrepeatable situation produced in Vietnam by the sudden capitulation of the occupying Japanese troops, who had no intention of waiting for the arrival of allied forces to hand over power to them. In August 1945, Vietnam found itself in a "political vacuum". Power "lay on the street" – there to be "picked up" by the largest and best organized political force, one that enjoyed broad popular support, i.e., the Viet Minh (which did in fact "pick it up"). The authority and influence of this anti-Japanese resistance movement, led by the Communists, were additionally reinforced by the persecution meted out by the French colonial authorities. The nationalist, anti-Communist forces proved too weak to compete.

The author tries to answer two key questions related to the phenomenon of August 1945: (i) what led to the development of the "political vacuum" that was to permit the "August revolution"? and (ii) why, of the various forces in place, was it none other than Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh he headed that were able to take advantage of the opportunity that presented itself – taking power and on August 3 proclaiming the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam? It would be quite impossible here to discuss all the aspects covered by this lengthy work: it constitutes an enthralling history of Indochina during World War II, written by someone personally fascinated by Vietnam.

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