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A COMPANION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

Edited by

Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco

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CHAPTER ONE

Hanoi's Long Century

STEIN TØNNESSON

The Vietnam War was “the quintessential conflict in the long history of warfare in our century,” says Gabriel Kolko, who thinks it was “virtually preordained” that the USA would try to attain a vital military success to compensate for its failures in Korea and Cuba. He concedes, though, that “it was mainly chance that designated Vietnam as the primary arena of trial” (Kolko, 1994, pp. 419, 436–7). Eric Hobsbawm, the great British narrator of modern history, thinks differently. He finds it “almost impossible to understand” why the USA came to embroil itself in “a doomed war” (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 244). Although the two of them differ, they also have something in common: the notion of a short and tragic century. Hobsbawm has even subtitled his book “The short twentieth century, 1914–1991.” Kolko and Hobsbawm’s century was full of suffering and lacked a meaningful direction, starting as it did when lights went out in Europe, and ending in bewilderment. “Darkness” is Hobsbawm’s last word, and Kolko’s final sentence reads: “. . . a dark night of despair will overcome our world” (Kolko, 1997, p. 168).

From an Asian perspective the twentieth century was long and progressive. The Chinese started their century in 1842, with the Opium War and the loss of Hong Kong, and approached the year 2000 as an almost unified nation enjoying rapid economic growth. The long Vietnamese century began sadly with the French seizure of Saigon in 1859, followed by the “loss of country” in the years up to 1884. After colonization, however, a new generation developed nationalist ideas, formed strong movements in the 1910s–30s, and utilized a favorable opportunity for national liberation in 1945. Yet

This essay is based on a Norwegian-language article, “Utsikt over det 20. århundre – fra Hanoi,” *Samtiden*, No. 2–3, 1997, pp. 92–110. I’m grateful to the editor of *Samtiden* for permission to reuse the material. I would like to thank Philippe Papin for help concerning pre-colonial Hanoi, and express my gratitude to Luu Doan Huynh and David G. Marr for their helpful comments to an earlier draft. On most points I’ve followed their advice, but not always. Responsibility for mistakes and errors of judgment thus remains entirely with me.

thirty years of sacrifice and struggle were needed before the nation could be unified in 1975. "Mistakes" were later made (in the official, Vietnamese parlance), but reforms from 1986 opened a new progressive stage, this time marked by an attempt to catch up economically. Growth is expected to continue.

This essay is an attempt to see the twentieth century from Hanoi's angle, with a "long-century approach." It is a mixture of travelogue and historical introduction, not chronological, but looking at how some main global trends have manifested themselves in Hanoi and Vietnam.

Global Trends

Which are the century's main trends? The long century was marked by population growth, urbanization and advances in science, production and communication. It saw the dissolution of empires and the construction of nation-states to serve as building blocks for a new global order. There were revolutions, and there were wars, and they were linked to a fundamental struggle over the nature of the world order.

Until 1989, the order was contested between proponents of liberal capitalism and state-directed socialism. Both used nation-states as building blocks, but while the former emphasized free markets, individual freedoms, limits to state authority, and electoral democracy, the latter aimed for social justice through rational economic planning, collective ownership and trade based on reciprocity or solidarity. Towards the end of the century, the liberal order triumphed. Many countries abandoned socialism and integrated themselves in the capitalist world. Thus the prevailing order was one of increasingly free markets both nationally and internationally, and of nation-states with elected governments.

The history of these global trends is marked by four economic and political turning points: 1930, 1945, 1950, and 1978-9.

Turning Points

The long twentieth century had two halves, one imperial and one multi-national. In the first half, many countries were colonized by Europeans and Japanese, who expected the century to be imperial. However, their empires were challenged by nationalist movements, and also by two federations: the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Both were increasingly powerful; both aimed for a world of nation-states. The imperial system suffered a first blow in 1930, the first turning point, when the great depression caused immense poverty, leading to revolts, not the least in Vietnam.

The second turning point was in 1945, when a Soviet-British-US alliance laid the foundation for a multi-national world by winning the first world war – often called "the Second World War" – and founding a number of new institutions with a global reach, notably the United Nations. The war's immediate losers were Nazi Germany and militarist Japan, but in a longer perspective the main loser was the imperial

Table 1.1 Total population in millions (Indochina and France), 1875–1997

	1875/80	1913	1926	1936	1950	1960	1975	1982	1997
France	39	41.5	40.9	41.9	41.8	45.7	52.8	54.4	58.6
Indochina	12	16.4	21.1	23.0	31.4	39.4	58.5	66.3	91.9
Vietnam*	10.5	14.2	17.7	19.0	25.3	31.7	48.1	56.0	76.4
Cambodia	1.1	1.6	2.5	3.0	4.2	5.4	7.2	6.9	10.5
Laos	–	0.6	0.9	1.0	1.9	2.3	3.2	3.4	5.0

Sources: Maddison, 1995, pp. 104–5; Brocheux and Hémery, 1995: 248; 2001: 249; US Bureau of the Census (<http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbagg>); UNDP 1999.

*The figures for “Vietnam” 1875–1948 are totals for Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. 1960 combines South and North Vietnam (NVN had two million more inhabitants than SVN).

Hanoi hosted a summit of Francophone countries, Vietnam alone had far more inhabitants than France.

The Vietnamese today are young. Some 35 percent are under 15. Thus the vast majority have no personal memory of the wars against France or America, not even the Chinese invasion in 1979, but many remember that troops were away in Cambodia during the Third Indochina War, 1978–89. The three Indochina wars may have cost up to six million lives, and they drove other millions away as refugees. So much suffering. So many dead. Yet in the statistics their numbers drown in childbirth. Nativity was always much higher than mortality. The only exception was 1945, when a famine in the north took an estimated one million lives (Marr, 1995, p. 104). Population growth continued in Vietnam through all three Indochina Wars, and only slowed down when they were over. The annual population growth, which as late as 1960 was almost 4 percent and in 1970 remained over 3, in 1997 went down to 1.8. The fertility rate (number of children for each woman) declined from 5.8 in 1975 to 2.6 in 1997 (UNDP, 1999). Thus Vietnam follows the East Asian trend.

Rural families usually have more children than urban ones. Thus urbanization is caused primarily by migration, not by urban fertility. In the 1990s, for the first time in world history, more people lived in urban than in rural areas. Back in 1900 there were less than twenty cities in the world with more than one million inhabitants, and only three Asian ones: Tokyo, Beijing and Calcutta. By mid-century the number of cities with more than a million people had risen to 50. Indochina’s biggest city, Saigon, had passed its first million by then. French-occupied Hanoi had only some 200,000 inhabitants, but in 1971, the year before the US “Christmas bombing,” it reached its first million, if we include the suburbs. In the years 1950–85, the cities in the world with more than a million inhabitants quintupled to 250.

Throughout the century, Europe remained the most urbanized continent, with Latin America closely behind. However, the most rapid urbanization happened in Africa and Asia. And here it will continue well beyond 2000, since two thirds of the population still live in the countryside. Vietnam remains a nation of village-based peasants, with only one fifth of the population in urban areas. The main explanation for its late urbanization is poverty, but the exodus from southern cities after 1975 also

the Citadel and declared free trade on the Red River. The French were compelled to withdraw after their commander was killed, and only kept the concession. This backlash led to acrimonious debates in the French National Assembly, paving the way for the assertive political climate that ensured French aggressiveness in Africa and Indochina during the 1880s.

Pre-colonial Hanoi had three separate parts: in the middle a Citadel with a long wall around it, in the south a Temple of Literature (*Van Mieu*) and "university" (*Quoc tu Giam*), and in the east, along the Red River, an agglomeration of commercial villages. The Citadel housed the mandarins with their horses and soldiers. Regular examinations to select mandarins were held on a big square where the National Library is now. In the Temple of Literature, which was dedicated to Confucius, those who successfully passed their exams got their names engraved on a stele mounted on the back of a turtle – a symbol of longevity. Three commercial villages or guilds (*phô phuong*) were inhabited by Chinese merchants, the rest by Viet artisans. Each *phô phuong* had its own specialty, be it silk, silver, hats or furniture, and each was separated from the next by a bamboo fence. Each had its village temple. Regular markets were held in front of the Citadel's five gates. The Tô Lịch River was Hanoi's artery, with busy traffic of river boats.

The mandarins did not themselves trade, but the Viceroy depended on the river for communication with the provinces and the imperial court in Hue. The proximity to three rivers gave the Citadel an ideal, strategic position, but also made it vulnerable to attacks from ships mounting the Red River. The French captured the Citadel in 1873, and again in 1884. In 1883–5, the French defeated Dai Nam as well as China in war, and the court in Hue was forced to accept two separate French protectorates for the two remaining parts of the imperial realm, Tonkin and Annam. The southern region, Cochinchina, had been colonized 1863–7, and the King of Cambodia had accepted a French protectorate in 1863. These four entities – Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina, and Cambodia – were made parts of the French Indochinese Union, founded in 1887. In 1893 a French protectorate was also established for the Lao principalities on the eastern fringe of the Siamese empire. They were merged into a new state, Laos, which became the fifth part of Indochina.

The French thus merged five lands into a Union, a number of principalities into Laos, and in Hanoi they fused the Citadel, the *phô phuong* and the French concession into an integrated city under a French mayor. Most of the Citadel was torn down and new French quarters constructed, with a big cathedral, broad avenues, and spacious villas. The walls between the *phô phuong* were torn down, and ditches were transformed into streets so Hanoi got its "native quarter," close to the *Ho Hoan Kiem* (Lake of the Returned Sword).

Hanoi was conceived as a Eurasian amalgam, in a century believed to be imperial. The French laid streets and a tramway, built a long bridge over the river, a row of piers, installed telephones and, eventually, an airport. The city-planner Ernest Hébrard fashioned out a new "Indochinese architecture" from a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Southeast Asian and European styles. Many immigrants settled down, not only Viets, but Chinese, Indian Muslims and European Christians. Yet Hanoi preserved much of its village atmosphere. In 1943 it had only 120,000

communist rule were less destructive, from an architectonic point of view, than transitions to capitalist modernity. There was decay, but not destruction. Even the French streetcars ran in 1989, although they moved so slowly that one could almost walk as fast. In the 1990s the tramway was scrapped. The destruction of the imperial legacy began.

Second Contradiction: Empire–Nation

World history in the long century was a history of rise and fall of empires. Europeans tried to tie up their colonies in relationships of mutual dependence, but failed. In the 1950s–60s, most colonies gained independence. Europeans turned inwards, concentrating on their own modernization and building the European Union. When France left Vietnam in 1954–5, Western Europe ceased to play a role in the country, but some of the French role was taken over, in the north by China and Russia, in the south by the USA.

Was there anything left of the colonial project, apart from the buildings? Yes, such obvious features as frontiers, infrastructure and administrative culture. Just as in Africa the European empires had outlined the modern state system. They mapped territories, initiated wars and negotiated treaties to define borders, and they linked up cities through modern infrastructure. Or to be precise, the Europeans decided, planned and administered; the work was done by Asians, sometimes forcefully recruited.

The two foremost state builders in Indochina were Governors General Paul Doumer (1897–1902) and Albert Sarraut (1911–14, 1916–19). Government revenue derived from state monopolies on opium, salt and alcohol, and was used to build a system of “colonial roads,” a north–south railway, and two railways to China. Roads were also built to Laos and Cambodia, and the French encouraged Viet migration to these countries, where the Viets functioned as merchants, artisans, fishermen and officials. In 1900 Hanoi became the capital of all of Indochina. A number of monumental buildings were constructed: The Governor General’s Palace, the Palace of the Superior Resident for Tonkin, a theater modeled after the Paris opera, a main post office, new military headquarters within the Citadel, a hospital, and a Pasteur Institute to fight malaria. Albert Sarraut founded the Hanoi University.

Why was Hanoi selected as the capital? The Nguyen dynasty, who continued to rule Annam and Tonkin in name, had its court in Hue. Saigon, which was Indochina’s capital in the period 1887–1900, was by far the largest city, including many European settlers (*colons*). Those factors were used as arguments for choosing Hanoi. An impartial administration was needed, at safe distance from the reactionary court in Hue and the self-interested *colons* in Saigon. A more important reason was Hanoi’s proximity to China. The French purpose in colonizing Tonkin was to cultivate markets in southern China. This was why the railroads to China were built. They never returned the French investments, but proved useful for the transportation of arms to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Because of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, the railways were closed in 1978, but reopened in 1996.

It should be noticed that the French did not make Hanoi the capital of a country matching the territory of today’s Vietnam. Hanoi was given a double function. First,

Thirty years of fanatic warfare followed. Le Duan, who was secretary general of the party from 1960–86, was not perhaps a scoundrel, but he wet-blanketed all economic, cultural, and intellectual life while letting cliques and opportunism grow. When he died, the party loosened its grip. This helped unleash economic growth and cultural creativity, while at the same time making it easier for scoundrels to trade influence for black dollars. In the late 1990s, the Communist Party was torn by factional struggles between market-oriented reformers, disappointed veterans, and worried military officers with security and budgetary concerns.

Back in the intellectual phase, the would-be national leaders had been subjected to severe French repression. The clandestine parties and the French security police indulged themselves in a drawn out, cynical power struggle, learning from each other, recruiting agents within each others' ranks. Le Duan was one of the victims in the 1920s–30s. The young historian Vo Nguyen Giap was also arrested, but the French interrogators were so impressed by his intellect that they set him free, perhaps in a vain hope that he would moderate his views.

At that time the Vietnamese debated intensely how to achieve their liberation, and there were many rival parties, with varying degrees of support in different regions. The revolutionary struggle also transcended colonial borders, using modern communicative networks in a wider region (Goscha, 1999). Inside Indochina, Saigon was the main center of revolutionary politics, but the communists were solidly entrenched in some rural regions of south and central Vietnam. The Red River Delta was the main area of recruitment for a Chinese-inspired nationalist party which attempted a revolt in 1930 that was crushed by the French. Abroad, the main leader was a veteran by name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, who later changed his name to Ho Chi Minh. He took part when the French Communist Party was founded in 1920, presided over the foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party in Hong Kong 1930, and also played a leading role in creating the communist parties of Thailand and Malaya. In 1931 he was imprisoned in Hong Kong, and given a prison sentence. After he had served his term, the British did not expel him to Indochina where a death sentence was waiting, but sent him, in January 1933, to China. Not long after, he arrived in the Soviet Union where he barely survived Stalin's purges. Meanwhile, in Indochina, the French Popular Front Government instituted political freedoms so the local communists could emerge from clandestinity. It was then that Giap examined the conditions in the villages, as assistant to Pierre Gourou. By 1938–9, the French had reverted to harsh repression.

In 1940, when Indochina was under threat from Japan, the communist leaders in Saigon attempted a revolt, but their comrades in the north refused to take part. The French drenched the revolt in blood, thus virtually destroying the south-based communist party. A sectarian Buddhist movement, the Hoa Hao, took over formerly communist strongholds. From 1941 to March 1945 the Communist Party survived mainly in the colony's jails – and in exile. Ho Chi Minh left the Soviet Union in 1938, and traveled through China to Yunnan, near the Indochinese border. Some activists, including Giap, came across the border from Hanoi. Together they formed a national liberation front: Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, *Viet Minh* for short, and at the same time, a new communist leadership was established in the north. A guerrilla army was also formed, under Giap's command, to join the Allied struggle

However, the main new building was to be a mausoleum. Ho Chi Minh died on September 2 1969, exactly 24 years after his proclamation of independence, and the year after the Tet offensive had failed to fulfill his hope of national unification. The unmarried President, often just called "the Uncle," had written one of the century's loveliest political testaments. All peasants were to be exempted from tax for a full year as soon as the war was over. Ho wanted his body to be cremated, and the ashes should be divided in three, one pile for each of the regions. Suitable hills should be selected, where trees could be planted around the grave, and a small shelter be built so visitors could have a place to rest.

The party ignored Ho's wishes, removed all of the above from the testament before its publication, and had the body embalmed by Soviet experts. Then they replaced the Governor General's Residence with a small-scale copy of the Lenin mausoleum. Thus they did their best to distort the peculiar myth that Ho had constructed around himself. He had known Lenin, Stalin and Mao, but wanted his own kind of legacy. Ho's shortsighted lieutenants had other plans. By having the mausoleum ready for the victory parade in 1975, they wanted to demonstrate Hanoi's precedence as capital, as well as its alignment with Moscow. The mausoleum is still in place, so the will of Ho Chi Minh remains to be fulfilled (Boudarel and Nguyen, 2002, pp. 142-4).

Fourth Contradiction: War-Peace

Like many other centuries, the twentieth was a century of war: international wars, wars of national liberation, civil wars. One often hears that there was more suffering in the twentieth century than in any other century. This is true in a numerical sense. Since there were so many people in the world, there were also more who suffered. But the number of people living long and peaceful lives also grew tremendously, not the least in Vietnam. The widespread western view that the twentieth century was particularly tragic, and also without a meaning, does not seem right from an Asian perspective.

The Vietnam War was tragic. Did it still have meaning? Some say that even though America lost in Vietnam, it did prevent the further spread of communism. Thus the war was meaningful from an anticommunist perspective. This is hardly convincing. Vietnam was one of the countries in the world where the communists had the strongest popular following, the best leaders, the most effective organization, and the least effective adversaries. To much of the world, Vietnam became a symbol of national resistance, an example of how a poor people could withstand the onslaught of the world's mightiest power. Such a place was a poor choice for America to take a stand. No polls or votes were taken to measure public opinion, but it seems likely that a clear majority of the Vietnamese, although they did not share the communist vision, identified themselves with their leaders in the struggle for national independence and unification. For the communist leaders, the war was full of meaning, and the victory was worth all the suffering. But could they have reached their goals with less sacrifice?

In 1995 and again in 1997, the former defense ministers Vo Nguyen Giap and Robert McNamara met in Hanoi to discuss the war they had waged. In the 1960s, McNamara had loaded the Pentagon's computers with figures showing that the

an agreement with Ho Chi Minh. However, Franco-Vietnamese relations soon deteriorated, and the First Indochina War broke out in Hanoi on December 19 1946, only days after Moffat had left. By then the government had already evacuated a significant part of the population. During the subsequent fighting, Hanoi was almost emptied. The government urged people to stay away from the city and take part in the resistance struggle. Patriots and leftists followed up, but the majority of Hanoi's citizens returned. After some time there was an influx of newcomers, people who found it difficult to live in villages controlled by the communists. Thus Hanoi became a spawning garrison and merchant town with relatively few Viet Minh supporters. The enthusiasm in Hanoi when Giap's Army came back in October 1954 was not overwhelming. Business people, officials and Catholics left the north for the south, where they would form the main foundation for the South Vietnamese regime. In Hanoi, party leaders and public institutions took over the best French villas, and streets were named after communist martyrs.

The French had made Hanoi an integrated city with a mayor and modern administrative services. The Democratic Republic was more ambitious and instituted a system of districts, subdistricts, wards, blocks and cells. This made surveillance easy. Instructions went down and reports came back up. The system stood its test when the US bombing began in 1966 (Logan, 2002, p.149). It generated a natural sense of solidarity, thus reinforcing social discipline. The main impact of the bombing was probably to facilitate the government's efforts to motivate the citizens for further sacrifice, but the bombs also destroyed the industries which had been built with Chinese and Soviet help. Relatively speaking, US bombs did not kill many people in the Red River Delta. The worst aspect of the war for the northern families was to send their sons south, and never see them again. There was enormous relief in 1975, when the war was over, and the surviving sons could return.

In his book about the conquest of Saigon in April 1975, General Van Tien Dung tells how he, on victory day in Saigon, received a phone call from "the heart of the Fatherland": "Hanoi, the capital of the whole country, heroic Hanoi, home of Uncle Ho and our party, had accomplished this victory, along with the entire country. Forests of people, seas of people, flooded the streets singing" (Van Tien Dung, 1977, p. 246). Thus spoke the general who had commanded so much sacrifice. To him, the war had been full of meaning.

The tone was different when, many years later, one of the surviving conscripts, Bao Ninh, published the novel *The Sorrow of War*. It tells about the soldier Kien who came back to Hanoi, after taking part in Saigon's conquest. He and his friends had not called themselves Hanoians, but "Thang Long soldiers," thus proudly reviving their home town's long lost dragon name. (The idea that the Vietnamese had a long tradition of fighting foreign [Chinese] domination was a strong motivating force during their wars). Now, in the autumn of 1975, most of Kien's friends were dead, and the Hanoi that greeted him, was not as he had expected: "The streets revealed an unbroken, monotonous sorrow and suffering. There were joys, but those images blinked on and off, like cheap flashing lights in a shop window. There was a shared loneliness in poverty, and in his everyday walks he felt this mood in the stream of people he walked with" (Bao Ninh, 1994, p. 138).

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