

— R · B · SMITH —

AN INTERNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

VOLUME II
THE STRUGGLE FOR
SOUTH-EAST ASIA 1961-65

AN INTERNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Volume II
The Struggle for South-East Asia, 1961–65

R. B. SMITH

M
MACMILLAN

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May 1984

R.B.S.

List of Abbreviations

For additional abbreviations, used in note references, see Bibliography.

United States and anti-Communist side

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Forces (Honolulu)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACTHAI	Military Assistance Command, Thailand
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SEATO	South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (Manila Pact)

Communist side (including North Vietnam)

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMEA	Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon)
COSVN	Central Office, South Vietnam (of VNWP)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DRVN	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
KGB	Committee on State Security (<i>Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti</i>)
NLF SVN	National Liberation Front of South Vietnam
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnamese)
PKI	Indonesian Communist Party (<i>Partai Komunis Indonesia</i>)
PLA	People's Liberation Army (Chinese)
PLAF SVN	People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam
TASS	Soviet Telegraph Agency (<i>Telegrafnoye Agentsvo Sovetskoy Soyuz</i>)
VNWP	Vietnam Workers' Party

A Note on Chinese and Vietnamese Names

Chinese names are given in the 'standard' Chinese form of Romanisation (*pin-yin*), which has been generally adopted by Western news media since January 1979. Vietnamese now has a Romanised script (*quoc-ngu*) which became 'standard' long before 1945 and requires no transliteration; diacritical marks, however, have been omitted. In the use of 'surnames' the Chinese usage is invariably to take the first (family) name, as in 'Chairman Mao', 'Premier Zhou'. The Vietnamese normally use the last (personal) name, as in 'President Diem', or 'Premier Dong', but in very special cases they may use the first (family) name, as in 'President Ho'.

Vietnamese terminology is used for the three regions of Vietnam, as follows:

North (Tongking):	Bac-Bo
Centre (Annam):	Trung-Bo
South (Cochinchina):	Nam-Bo.

Before 1954, non-Communist usage referred to the same divisions as Bac-Ky, Trung-Ky and Nam-Ky.

Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>List of Maps</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>A Note on Chinese and Vietnamese Names</i>	xii

1 Introduction

PART I 1961-2

2 December 1961: Counterinsurgency	21
3 Hanoi and its Allies	35
4 The Kennedy Strategy Takes Shape	55
5 China's Asian Strategy: a New Phase	77

PART II 1962-3

6 The Missiles Crisis and its Aftermath	93
7 Laos: the Limits of Détente	115
8 South-East Asia: the Regional Perspective	135
9 Vietnam: the 'Buddhist Crisis'	147

PART III 1963-4

10 Intensification of the Struggle	165
11 The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem	181
12 Diplomatic Impasse	197
13 Hanoi and Moscow: the 9th Plenum	219

PART IV 1964

14	Coercive Diplomacy	241
15	The Third Laos Crisis	259
16	The Gulf of Tonkin Crisis	277
17	'The Focal Point of World Contradictions'	305

PART V 1964-5

18	Washington Hesitates: the Autumn Debate	321
19	Hanoi Decides	345
20	February 1965: Escalation	363

	<i>Notes</i>	381
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	<i>Bibliography</i>	413
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	<i>Index</i>	421
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List of Tables

3.1	Communist Relations, January 1962	42
3.2	Communist Relations, February – March 1962	46
3.3	Communist Relations, April 1962	50
4.1	South-East Asia: Diplomacy and Conflict, February – March 1962	62
4.2	South-East Asian Diplomacy, June – July 1962	68
5.1	China and the Rest of Asia, September 1962	84
6.1	Two Crises: the Cuba Missiles Crisis and the Sino- Indian War, September – November 1962	98
6.2	Soviet Relations with the West, China and Vietnam, December 1962 – January 1963	108
7.1	Events in Laos in the Context of Communist Relations, February – May 1963	120
7.2	Laos in the Context of East-West and Sino-Soviet Relations, May – June 1963	130
10.1	Statistical Measures of Progress in South Vietnam, 1962 – 3	167
10.2	China and South-East Asia, August – September 1963	175
11.1	The United States and South Vietnam, October – November 1963	183
12.1	Indochina Diplomacy, November 1963 – February 1964	205
12.2	South-East Asian Regional Diplomacy, November 1963 – February 1964	214
13.1	Vietnam and the Communist World, November 1963 – February 1964	230
14.1	United States Decision-making in the Asian Perspective, February – March 1964	245
15.1	The Laos Crisis of May – June 1964	266
16.1	The Gulf of Tonkin Incidents: the American Perspective	280

16.2	Chinese and American 'Signals' Relating to Vietnam, July 1964	285
16.3	Laos Diplomacy, July – August 1964	290
16.4	The Gulf of Tonkin Incidents: the Communist Perspective	294
17.1	China and South-East Asia, August – September 1964	314
18.1	Analysis of William Bundy's 'Scenario' of 11 August 1964	324
18.2	Analysis of United States 'Options' in Indochina, Autumn 1964	332
18.3	Washington Decision-making and Events in South Vietnam, November – December 1964	340
19.1	The International Perspective, November – December 1964	356
19.2	Asian Relations, December 1964 – January 1965	360
20.1	The Beginning of Escalation, February 1965	369
20.2	Final Steps towards 'Rolling Thunder', February – March 1965	376

List of Maps

1	Kingdom of Laos	119
2	The War in Nam-Bo, 1962-3	170
3	South Vietnam, Showing Tactical Zones of I, II, III and IV Corps, as Reorganised in December 1962	189
4	South Vietnam, Showing Location of Communist Attacks, February 1964	223

I Introduction

I

Volume I of the present work took as its central theme the gradual breakdown of the 1954 Geneva settlement in Indochina and the almost imperceptible return to revolutionary armed struggle in South Vietnam which occurred during the years 1957-61. In terms of United States policy, it traced the consequences for Indochina of a strategy based on the principles of 'containment' and 'massive retaliation', which followed on from the establishment of NATO in 1949 and the United Nations intervention in Korea in 1950. Essential to that strategy was the notion of a powerful and rich American government providing economic aid and defence support to Asian countries belonging to the 'free world'. From the Communist point of view, the same period saw the beginning of what would eventually become the most ambitious – as well as the most traumatic – of 'wars of national liberation' across Asia and Africa. In both the American and the Marxist-Leninist context, South Vietnam – an agrarian country of fewer than 15 million people – thus acquired an international significance out of all proportion to its size.

When John F. Kennedy entered the White House in January 1961, his initial response to the situation in Indochina was somewhat cautious. By the end of his first year in office, however, he had succeeded in formulating a strategy of his own for both South Vietnam and Laos. What might be called the 'Kennedy Strategy' – as opposed to the 'Dulles Strategy' of the 1950s – is one of the principal starting points of the present volume. Later chapters of the book will explore the stages by which Kennedy's policies eventually disintegrated, in the face of a rapidly changing

situation during the years 1963–4; with the result that, following Kennedy's tragic death in November 1963, Lyndon Johnson inherited even greater problems than those which had confronted his predecessor three years before. Johnson's own response to the developing crisis was even more hesitant than Kennedy's had been, and it was not until the end of the period covered by the present volume (early 1965) that he began to commit himself to what would become a distinctive 'Johnson Strategy'.

At a time when the war in Vietnam was being fought by more than half a million American troops, it was easy to see the decisions of 1961–3 as no more than the prelude to that larger war. But the historian, whilst he must not become an apologist for any one individual or group, has an obligation to examine each period in its own terms. There is need for a serious reassessment of Kennedy's decisions on Indochina in relation to his own long-term objectives – and to his awareness, as a young and ambitious president, of the importance of what was coming to be called the 'Third World'. Seen in its own terms, and not as a prelude to escalation, Kennedy's strategy of 'counterinsurgency' in South Vietnam was not necessarily at variance with the supposedly more 'moderate' aspects of his strategy elsewhere in Asia. Nor should it be assumed that he would have given in to Communist demands in South Vietnam had he continued in charge of United States policy in 1964.

In exploring the larger context of the Kennedy and early Johnson decisions, the present volume seeks to apply the same principles which governed the approach of Volume I. It looks at both sides of the conflict simultaneously; and it places events in Indochina into the wider international picture – both of Asian relations and of conflict among the global powers – on the basis of a historical rather than a thematic or conceptual approach. The most important conclusion to emerge is that the war to which the United States became committed in the early months of 1965 was not the outcome merely of a self-imposed, purely bilateral obligation to defend South Vietnam; nor can it be explained in terms of a single theme in United States foreign policy – 'anti-Communism'. At the beginning of the Kennedy period, South Vietnam was one among many areas of tension in Asia and Africa. The question for the historian is how it became – a mere four years later – a strategic focal point which had to be protected: by the use of tactical air power, and if necessary by the deployment of United

States combat troops. That is not a question we can hope to answer by studying events in Washington and in Vietnam alone. The war was the product of a global pattern of conflict which must be analysed in global terms.

In attempting to come to terms with the sequence of debates and decisions on the Communist side, we must recognise that the problems for the Western historian studying the early 1960s are even greater than for the preceding period, making it more difficult than ever to come to firm conclusions. With the 'benefit of hindsight' which is now possible the historian has an opportunity to re-examine the connection between events on the ground and the course of Soviet-Chinese-Vietnamese relations between 1961 and 1965. Nevertheless, he will be wise to admit that at certain critical moments during the evolution of the conflict in South Vietnam, it is difficult if not impossible to assemble the available fragments of hard information into a coherent story. Certainly American scholars – in published writing at least – failed to produce an effective analysis of the politics and strategy of the Vietnam Workers' Party while the war was still going on. That failure may help to explain why so many outside observers were taken aback by the intensity of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict which broke out in 1978, leading to actual hostilities the following year.

Primary sources on the Communist side are essentially the same for the 1960s as for the 1950s: the most important being, for our purposes, the output of the North Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviet media – including broadcasts monitored (and in part translated) by the FBIS and the BBC. These can, however, be supplemented to a limited extent by reference to two other kinds of information. While the war was still going on, a large number of Vietnamese Communist documents were captured by American and South Vietnamese military and security forces. For the most part they were low-level reports and directives; but sometimes they included also communications from a higher level, providing insight into decisions too secret to be mentioned in the public media.

Secondly, in the period since 1975 both the Vietnamese and Chinese governments have been more ready to publish details about past events which they were unwilling to reveal at the time. Vietnamese Communism has not experienced any internal up-

heaval comparable with China's 'cultural revolution', which might have led to the dramatic revelation of internal political secrets. Consequently we have no Party sources which approach the candour of Mao Zedong's 'unrehearsed' speeches, circulated by various groups of Red Guards. The Vietnamese have however published a number of memoirs and other accounts of the war, notably an official history of military decisions (in 1980) and a much more controversial analysis of the last stage of the war by one of the leading Communist generals in the South. None of these recent writings makes any secret of the fact that the whole campaign of the NLFSVN and PLAFSVN was directed from the beginning by the Politburo and Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers' Party in Hanoi. Unfortunately they do not tell us much about North Vietnam's own dependence on Soviet, as well as Chinese, aid at various stages of the conflict. But the 'White Book' of October 1979, dealing with the history of Sino-Vietnamese relations since the early 1950s, made a number of accusations which led the Chinese to produce revelations of their own concerning the extent to which they had aided both the Viet-Minh war effort and the anti-American struggle.¹

It is most unlikely that decisions in Hanoi were based on specific directives from either Moscow or Peking. Nevertheless the documentary record of the statements and decisions of a number of different Communist Parties – including the CPSU, the CCP and the VNWP – suggests that their respective debates about tactics and strategy at a given time were often closely interrelated. In some cases the decisions of one Party may well have been predicated on those of another; and the Vietnamese were probably especially sensitive to Soviet and Chinese attitudes both to the struggle in South Vietnam and also to the provision of material aid for 'socialist construction' in the North. Only access to the internal archives of all three Parties and governments would allow us to know precisely how such debates were conducted, and how far decisions were truly international in character.

The Moscow meeting of Communist Parties in November 1960 proved to be the last point at which it was possible to produce an agreed definition of the Marxist-Leninist 'international line'. By 1963, when a similar conference ought to have been convened, the world at large was becoming aware that the Soviet and Chinese communist Parties took radically different positions on the issues of the 'nature of imperialism' and the 'question of war and peace'.

Instead of a meeting there began a long and bitter series of polemical exchanges. Equally important from our present point of view is the accumulation of evidence for important divisions *within* both the CPSU and the CCP – which again are more difficult to study than those of the late 1950s.² It is impossible in the present volume to attempt a thoroughgoing re-interpretation of events in the international movement as a whole during this critical period. But neither can the subject be ignored, since it is quite obvious from their own statements that Vietnamese Communist leaders paid close attention to what was happening amongst their fraternal allies.

It was logical for the North Vietnamese to behave with caution in the face of the growing complexity of international Communist relations. Anxious to retain the support of both Moscow and Peking for their own struggle against the United States and the regime in Saigon, they had more interest in preserving the unity of the communist world than in contributing to further 'splits'; and on a number of occasions the CPSU was able to exploit Hanoi's caution and to dissuade the VNWP from joining the Chinese in open revolt against its own line. The obvious importance of the Sino-Soviet dispute for North Vietnam led some Western commentators to study its own internal politics entirely in terms of a conflict between 'pro-Moscow' and 'pro-Peking' factions – even though they had difficulty in identifying the individual members of the two groups. The reality was clearly far more complicated than that.

Relating the various sources to one another, however, it is possible to define at least the main outlines of Vietnamese Communist decision-making and even to identify some of the issues which appear to have caused differences of opinion amongst them at especially critical moments. It is also possible to trace some – probably by no means all – of the occasions when one or more of the Vietnamese leaders visited the Soviet and Chinese capitals; and when high-level Soviet and Chinese delegations were received in Hanoi. Although we can do no more than guess what may have been said at such meetings, they were probably at least as important for decision-making as the frequent visits of top American officials to Saigon during these years.

In the absence of firm knowledge we are likely to be reduced to speculation. But from the point of view of understanding North Vietnam the international dimension is too important to be left out

of account merely because it is inadequately documented. The 'international' character of a great deal of Marxist-Leninist writing in this period moreover, seems to belie the tendency of Western scholars to study individual Communist countries (or Parties) as separate entities. Each historical perspective has its own source material, and to some extent its own 'methodology'; but that is not a reason for treating each perspective as a hermetically sealed compartment of scholarship. In the words of Mao Zedong, 'ever since the monster of imperialism came into being, the affairs of the world have become so closely interwoven that it is impossible to separate them'.³ The way the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists viewed Western 'imperialism' certainly deserves to be taken seriously in a study of an international conflict in which they were leading protagonists.

II

By comparison with the relative poverty of research on the Communist side, the historian of United States policy in the early 1960s faces an embarrassment of riches. In addition to finding a substantial body of 'primary' source materials, he has also to come to terms with a larger output of secondary writing – and consequently with the existence of a number of established interpretations of key events which will tend to influence the initial direction of his own enquiries.

Vietnam was already sufficiently important in world affairs by the mid-1960s to merit a growing number of books by authors with first-hand experience of what was going on there. Some were by journalists, trying to elucidate for the benefit of a Western public the problems and politics of a 'small' Asian country about which very little was known.⁴ Already there was a tendency for some journalists – not all – to emerge from a period in Saigon as critics of both United States policy and the government of South Vietnam. Even so, the books published at that time evidence a measure of respect for Vietnam as a country worthy of attention in its own right. (The heyday of the war correspondent who saw only the war would come later.) In addition, a few books were published by people who had worked in Vietnam in one or another official capacity, and who were able to write with greater authority than