

HANOI'S ROAD TO THE VIETNAM WAR

1954–1965



PIERRE ASSELIN



Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Pierre Asselin



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B O O K

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Hanoi's Road to the
Vietnam War, 1954–1965

FROM INDOCHINA TO VIETNAM: REVOLUTION AND
WAR IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Edited by Fredrik Logevall and Christopher E. Goscha

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For my father

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FOREWORD BY THE SERIES EDITORS

The literature on the Second Indochina War is large and growing larger. Until recently, however, the literature suffered from a U.S.-centric focus and a tendency to look solely at decision-making in Washington. To paraphrase historian Gaddis Smith's classic description of Cold War historiography, it was the history of "one hand clapping." Too few studies placed U.S. policymaking into its wider international context; fewer still gave a voice to the "other side," the Vietnamese who fought so long and hard to defeat first the French and then the South Vietnamese government and its American allies.

But the picture is changing, as scholars with the requisite linguistic skills begin to work in depth in Vietnamese archival and other materials, as well as in voluminous French- and English-language sources. Pierre Asselin knows these materials as well as anyone, having mined them for several pathbreaking studies over the past decade. Now Asselin gives us *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, the first detailed scholarly assessment of the subject ever published in English. It is a penetrating, lucid, and compelling study of the period between the end of the First Indochina War and the large-scale escalation of the Second.

Other authors writing in English have examined North Vietnamese decision-making in this vital period. Few, however, have done so in the kind of detail—and using the wide array of primary sources—that Asselin does here. This book shows how Hanoi leaders viewed the evolving situation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, not merely in South Vietnam but also in the Cold War power centers of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. In Asselin's telling, the North Vietnamese were never puppets of the Soviet Union and China; for the most part, they were able to make autonomous decisions during the period in question. More than that, North Vietnamese

planners at times “exercised more leverage over their allies than the allies exercised over them.” Gradually, and despite sharp internal differences of opinion, policy-makers in Hanoi shifted from a cautious strategy focused on non-violent political struggle to what Asselin sees as a “risky, even reckless” approach centered on resumption of military action. They never wanted war with the United States, he maintains, but they were determined to have what war would bring them: the reunification of the country under their control.

In telling this story the author adds much to the understanding of one of the most important conflicts of the twentieth century. It is with pleasure that we include his study in our series.

Christopher Goscha, Université du Québec à Montréal

Fredrik Logevall, Cornell University

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Fredrik Logevall and Christopher Goscha, the editors of the "From Indochina to Vietnam" series at the University of California Press, also offered valuable guidance. Fred urged me to address the international context more diligently and shared the proofs of his latest manuscript (now published as *Embers of War*) to help me refine core arguments. Chris, for his part, scrupulously examined the manuscript. His consummate knowledge of Vietnamese history improved its quality in ways I cannot describe. Pierre Journoud, "Pierre 1," presented me with opportunities to share my research with colleagues and solicit feedback. I thank him for that, as well as for his hospitality in Paris and his friendship.

I am fortunate to be part of a coterie of scholars who not only have contributed in meaningful ways to our understanding of the Cold War and Vietnam's place in it but also became dear friends over the years. In addition to those already mentioned, I wish to acknowledge Ben Kerkvliet, Jim Hershberg, Pierre Grosser, John Prados, Larry Berman, Marc Gilbert, Lorenz Lüthi, Ed Miller, Jessica Chapman, Pete Zinoman, Balazs Szalontai, Jason Picard, Jay Veith, Mark Moyer, Marilyn Young, and Harish Metha. They are a big part of the reason I enjoy what I do; they have also made professional conferences interesting on so many levels.

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My parents and my little sister have been an outstanding support system. I thank my mother and my father for their infectious passion for life; words cannot describe the love, respect, and admiration I have for them. My sister, the kindest human being I know, is always there when I need her (unless she has fainted). I hope this book makes her proud of her big brother; it is the least I can offer, considering how proud I am of the person she has become.

Lastly, I wish to thank my family, Selma and Grace. Selma, you understand me like few people do. You took good care of Grace when I was away researching for this book, and you were at my side, literally, as I put the finishing touches on it. It should not have been that way; I should have done a better job taking care of you, providing for you. You are, after all, a cat. I look forward to spending time at your side, when we reunite over the rainbow bridge. My wife Grace has for years nurtured my passion for Vietnam and tolerated my obsession with this project. Her virtues are without parallel. Grace, you scintillate as brilliantly as ever, and my love for you has only grown stronger over the years. Much of what I have become, the good part, and what I have achieved, the best things, I owe to you. You are exceptional in every way; I am so glad you are you. I am in your debt, eternally.

I dedicate this book to my father, for his unconditional love and support throughout the years. He is the best man I know.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam; formerly the Vietnamese National Army; armed forces of the RVN
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COSVN	Central Office (Directorate) for Southern Vietnam; Politburo-run organ in charge of coordinating communist activity in the southern third of Vietnam (former Cochinchina), 1951–54 (including all of Cambodia) and 1961–75; “upgraded” incarnation of the Nam Bo Executive Committee
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DRV/DRVN	Democratic Republic of Vietnam; government of northern Vietnam, controlled by the VWP and based in Hanoi from October 1954; claimed sole jurisdiction over all of Vietnam
GPD	General Political Department; organ in charge of ideological conformity within the PAVN
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party; previous incarnation of the VWP; founded in 1930
ICSC	International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam; organ consisting of representatives from India, Canada, and Poland set up after July 1954 to supervise implementation of the Geneva accords
Interzone IV	Northern central Vietnam, including a portion below the seventeenth parallel

Interzone V	Southern central Vietnam, including the Central Highlands
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina (1950–55), Vietnam (1955–62); created to promote military partnership between the United States and France and the SOVN/RVN; incorporated into MACV and renamed Field Advisory Element, Vietnam, in 1962
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam; U.S. military command in South Vietnam, 1962–73
Nam Bo Executive Committee	Politburo-run organ coordinating communist activity in the southern third of Vietnam (former Cochinchina), 1954–61; “downgraded” incarnation of COSVN
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization; United States–led organization for collective defense in Europe and North America, 1949–present
NLF	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam; southern Vietnamese broad-based umbrella organization created in 1960 and controlled by Hanoi to oppose the RVN
PAVN	People’s Army of Vietnam; armed forces of the DRVN controlled by the VWP
PCSVN	Party Committee of South Vietnam; southern branch of the VWP to 1962
PLAF	People’s Liberation Armed Forces; armed wing of the NLF
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PRP	People’s Revolutionary Party, formerly the PCSVN; ostensibly an independent southern Vietnamese communist party established in 1962, in actuality part of the VWP
RVN	Republic of Vietnam, formerly the SOVN; proclaimed in October 1955 by President Ngo Dinh Diem from its capital at Saigon; claimed sole jurisdiction over all of Vietnam
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization; United States–led organization for collective defense in Southeast Asia, 1955–77
SOVN	State of Vietnam; purportedly independent Vietnamese government organized by France in 1949 under Emperor Bao Dai as head of state; became the RVN in 1955
VFF	Vietnam Fatherland Front; mass organization promoting national unity, loyalty to the DRVN and VWP, and resistance to foreign aggression and internal subversion in the DRVN

Viet Cong/VC	Pejorative term used in reference to southern communists and their sympathizers, including, after 1960, members of the NLF; abbreviated form of either <i>Viet Nam Cong san</i> (Vietnamese Communist) or <i>Viet minh Cong san</i> (Viet Minh Communist)
Viet Minh	United front organized in 1941 by the ICP to fight the Japanese occupation of Indochina; served as the main nationalist front in the war against the French between 1946 and 1951, when it was officially dissolved and became part of the Lien Viet Front; blanket term used in reference to those who fought against the French during the Indochina War (1946–54)
VWP	Vietnamese Workers' Party, also known as Lao Dong Party; replaced the ICP in 1951 and controlled the DRVN government after 1954; renamed the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1976