

## PREFATORY NOTE

### THE NOMENCLATURE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Language is political. This may especially be so with the Vietnam war.

As a case in point, consider that last sentence. Should we, in fact, call the state of conflict in Indochina before 1975 the “Vietnam war”? Vietnam, after all, has engaged in a number of wars, and the conflict in question was also fought in Cambodia and Laos. To refer to the “Vietnam war” is to thus reveal a certain bias. Should we therefore call it the “American war,” which could help to distinguish the conflict from the earlier “French war”? This, too, presents problems. American support for the French before 1954—financial, military, diplomatic—was considerable. And in using these terms, which denote only the principal Western actor in that phase of the conflict, the Vietnamese themselves—the majority of the combatants and overwhelmingly the majority of the casualties—seem to undergo a linguistic process of erasure. So, too, do the Australians, New Zealanders, Koreans, Filipinos, and other foreign nationals involved in the conflict. Given the extent to which American culture and memory have reimagined the war as a uniquely “American tragedy,” to borrow from the title of two well-known American works, this presents a considerable problem.<sup>1</sup>

Some Vietnamese refer to the conflict as the “anti-American resistance war for national salvation.” Others prefer the “war against Communism.” Yet both of these are fraught with pitfalls. The former overlooks the substantial southern Vietnamese role in the war (a reminder that itself elides the fact that many of those in the south who supported the Saigon government were originally from the north), and the latter overlooks the nationalist fervor that inspired many Vietnamese to take up arms against France and the United States. To refer to the conflict as a Vietnamese civil war, or as a “North–South War,” which is how Lonely Planet frames it, falsely implies a comparable legitimacy among the competing parties and a

uniformity of opinion in the northern and southern zones. Some scholars, hoping to avoid these linguistic traps, employ the terms First Indochina War and Second Indochina War. This sort of compartmentalization, however, tends to obscure the temporal continuity of the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle and the American commitment, beginning in the 1940s, to combating it.

In short, there is no getting around the many problems inherent in all of these terms. With much trepidation, and fully aware of their shortcomings, in this study I most often use the terms “Vietnam war” and “American war.”

The question of nomenclature with respect to the various Vietnamese parties is—in the most important cases, at least—a much simpler matter. Countering their characterization in an untold number of contemporary accounts, throughout this book I generally refer to the forces of the National Liberation Front and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as the “insurgents” or “revolutionaries” instead of the “Communists”—or as the NLF and People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) instead of the “Viet Cong,” “vc,” “North Vietnamese Army,” or “NVA.” (I recognize that the military units of the NLF were popularly known as the People’s Liberation Armed Forces, but I have opted to designate them simply the NLF to avoid even greater confusion.) The word “Communists” not only retains a pejorative and overly broad connotation in the United States, but it is also misleading with respect to the composition of many of those fighting in Vietnam. Although this fact has too often been overlooked since the war officially ended in 1975, there were many non-Communists who resisted the Americans, although the Communist Party in its various incarnations was arguably the most effective and certainly the most dominant segment of the revolutionary movement, often wielding considerable influence or control over southern insurgent decision making.

The terms “Viet Cong” and “North Vietnamese Army” obfuscate far more than enlighten. It is little wonder that the governments in Saigon and Washington found them such useful propaganda contrivances. “Viet Cong,” or “vc,” predates the formation of the National Liberation Front and originated as part of an effort by the Ngo Dinh Diem regime to portray the war as one waged, in the words of the Saigon authorities, by “communists, traitors, and agents of Russia and China” seeking to “turn Viet Nam into a colony and the Vietnamese into the slaves of Red im-

perialism.”<sup>2</sup> Not only does “Viet Cong” overlook the broad-based opposition to the Republic of Vietnam government and the opposition’s origins in the anticolonial movement that opposed the French, but it more easily collapses the Vietnamese revolutionaries into the supposedly bipolar Cold War struggle pitting the “free world” against Communist totalitarianism. And it is simply not true, as several recent guidebooks either imply or directly state, that “Viet Cong” or “vc” — abbreviations for *Viet Nam Cong San* — literally means “Vietnamese Communist.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, *Viet Nam Cong San*, which is grammatically incorrect, is a dehumanizing term more closely akin to “Commie.” In Vietnamese, a literal translation of Vietnamese Communist would be *Nguoi Cong San Viet Nam*; *ngui* gives the term its human dimension. Nevertheless, it must be noted that, in spite of its origins, “Viet Cong” in the years since 1975 has lost some of its pejorativeness among many former insurgents and has in fact been appropriated by numerous individuals for various reasons.

The appellation “North Vietnamese Army,” which like “Viet Cong” was a propaganda concoction, was — and often remains — a means of representing the war as an invasion of a country called “South Vietnam” by a country called “North Vietnam.” This mythical construction, which may be more widespread among Western tourists in Vietnam than any other myth today, disguises not only the geographical origins of many of those resisting the Americans, but also the fact that among the soldiers of the People’s Army of Vietnam — again, what guidebooks casually refer to as the “North Vietnamese Army” — were many southern volunteers who traveled north to be trained, armed, and organized to fight more effectively for Vietnamese independence and reunification.

For several reasons I avoid using “North Vietnam” and “South Vietnam.” Having interviewed over 170 tourists during two research trips to Southeast Asia, it is abundantly clear that far too many Westerners believe the war to have been one fought principally between these two entities — so much so that many of those I interviewed were unaware that a southern insurgency even existed. The “Viet Cong” were “North Vietnamese,” they told me. In other words, that “South Vietnam” fought “North Vietnam” meant that the southern Vietnamese people fought the northern Vietnamese people. The reality, of course, was far more complex. Yet the tourists’ beliefs are emblematic of the widespread ignorance that historians must constantly confront. The crucial southern role in the revolu-

tionary struggle has become so overlooked since 1975, in fact, that even iconic markers of the southern struggle, such as the famous Cu Chi tunnel complex, have become, according to promotional materials for a 2002 trip organized by the Alumni Association of the University of Michigan, “the tunnels the *North* Vietnamese used during the war.”<sup>4</sup> Scholars were hardly immune to such misconceptions. One historian, for example, referred in a recently published article to the “National Liberation Fronts of Algeria and North Vietnam.”<sup>5</sup> With the emergence of Vietnam war video games, it was inevitable that comparable confusion would arise at a mass level. It did so with “Vietcong: Purple Haze,” which promised opportunities to “run reconnaissance missions deep into the jungles of Northern Vietnam to track the Vietcong.”<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to sidestep this popular ignorance, I have used not “South Vietnam” and “North Vietnam” but both “southern Vietnam” and “northern Vietnam” and the territories’ formal designations: the “Republic of Vietnam,” or “RVN,” and the “Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” or “DRV,” respectively. Of course, this also presents problems. The governments of both considered themselves the legitimate authority in all of Vietnam. And my use of “Republic of Vietnam” implies a political legitimacy for the Saigon-based entity that, I believe, was neither justified nor widely embraced. Nevertheless, I believe the inevitable shortcomings in employing these official designations are fewer than those of using “South Vietnam” and “North Vietnam.”

Finally, I have not used the diacritics of the Vietnamese language, and, with the exception of the map, I have opted for the American spellings of Vietnamese words (for example, Saigon rather than Sai Gon and Hanoi rather than Ha Noi). In the case of the latter, exceptions appear when I have quoted materials that use a different version; unless otherwise indicated, I have quoted the Vietnamese words in all documents and other sources as they originally appeared. The same applies to the issue of capitalization. When quoting documents or the secondary literature, I have retained the original capitalizations or non-capitalizations, as in “communists” and “Communists.”