
Reviewed by Sergey Radchenko, Cardiff University

Once upon a time the idea of Communist China going to war against Communist Vietnam would have seemed nearly absurd even to most knowledgeable observers. Beijing and Hanoi were seen as the closest comrades-in-arms, locked in a life-or-death common struggle against U.S. encroachments in Asia. Did not their revolutions—the Chinese and the Vietnamese—share a common past and a common fate? In 1979 these preconceptions were shattered by a development that had seemed implausible a few years earlier: Chinese and Vietnamese troops were shooting at and killing each other with a passion and hatred usually seen only among the most implacable enemies. Even today, many years later, the brief but intense Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979 retains an aura of the grotesque, which is why the renowned Chinese historian Chen Jian has called it “one of the most meaningless wars in world history.” Zhang Xiaoming’s book is a valuable effort to add meaning to this story.

The book is important for several reasons. First, it is an attempt to spell out the rationale behind the war. Many wars appear pointless and unnecessary in retrospect, but the case of China and Vietnam is more intractable than most, simply because Beijing and Hanoi, unwilling to indulge in unhappy reminiscences, have kept the relevant archives safely out of public reach. Zhang makes the best of this paucity of evidence, offering the most detailed account thus far of what exactly Deng Xiaoping had in mind when he resolved to “teach Vietnam a lesson.” He favors a multicausal explanation: Deng wanted to check Soviet expansion (Vietnam had been Moscow’s ally), obtain Western support for China’s “four modernizations,” and mobilize the Chinese people for reform and integration into the world economy. Deng also sought to establish his control over the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and give the Chinese military a chance to prove itself in a real war. Evidently, then, what Deng had in mind was much more than to punish Vietnam for its invasion of Cambodia or force it to withdraw. Did Cambodia have anything to do with this war? Zhang offers a contradictory interpretation, arguing in one place that “China...engineered the border conflict to coerce Hanoi to withdraw from Cambodia” (p. 141) and claiming elsewhere that the PLA planned to strike even before Vietnam’s invasion (p. 43).

Second, the book is an account of the actual fighting, primarily as seen from China. This, too, is a useful contribution in that it adds much-needed detail and nuance to our knowledge of the war. One thing I found particularly interesting is Zhang’s surprising conclusion that China achieved “overwhelming victory” over Vietnam (p. 114). Most Western commentary on the war suggests it was at most a pyrrhic victory for the Chinese and that, if a lesson was taught, it was a lesson Vietnam taught China, not the other way around. Zhang argues, however, that these generalizations are inconsistent
with the evidence and, moreover, miss the broader picture. In that broader picture, painted in the fuzzy style of the Chinese strategic culture, Beijing won a victory even if the war did not exactly go as well as one might have hoped it would. (Dressing up defeat as victory is, I hasten to add, not a trait unique to the Chinese strategic culture.)

The book is marred by some shortcomings. In places, Zhang’s logic is hard to follow. For example, in discussing the longer trajectory of Sino-Vietnamese relations, he argues that their alliance “was formed largely because at the time they shared a common enemy: the United States. The alliance was doomed to collapse beginning in the late 1960s, when Beijing came to regard the Soviet Union, not the United States, as the greatest enemy” (p. 4). Yet, careful observers will note that close Sino-Vietnamese relations (“alliance,” a legal term, is inappropriate in this context) predated U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia by many years. Indeed, U.S. involvement was itself a response to perceived falling dominoes from Communist expansion. By the same token, a few pages later we read that “China’s involvement in Vietnam must be seen as more a competition with the Soviet Union for influence over Hanoi than a genuine commitment to support world revolution” (p. 33). But China’s involvement in Vietnam began many years before Beijing and Moscow engaged in any sort of a regional competition. The Soviet Union deferred to China’s leadership in Vietnam at least until the late 1950s.

This rather confused picture of Sino-Vietnamese relations, stripped, unjustly, of notions such as revolutionary solidarity, is even further complicated by the Zhang’s unconvincing introduction of the primordial hatreds argument. In a nutshell, this is the argument that Sino-Vietnamese relations have been characterized by “ill feelings, territorial disputes, and ethnic bitterness” (p. 27) formed in a rivalry extending “over more than a millennium” (p. 15). Zhang goes on to conclude that “given the history of Chinese-Vietnamese relations and Vietnam’s historical tendencies towards independence... conflict between the two countries and the two parties became inevitable” (p. 16). The problem with this sort of argument is that it fails to explain why, “given the historical tendencies,” Hanoi and Beijing managed to stay off each other’s throats in the 1950s and the 1960s. Indeed, they actively cooperated in defeating first the French and then the United States. How does one translate millennium-long rivalries (which, by the way, are not limited to China and Vietnam) to concrete policy decisions, such as those that Deng made in 1979?

The second difficulty with the book is Zhang’s tendency to buy into the Chinese rhetoric about Vietnamese perfidy. He talks about “the increasing provocations” by the Vietnamese, resorts to phrases such as Vietnamese “misbehavior” (p. 42) and “reckless intervention in Cambodia” (p. 218), relies on Chinese-supplied Vietnamese casualty figures to argue that China attained a victory (while acknowledging that these figures “may be inflated”), and cites, uncritically, Chinese memoirs to claim that Vietnam ultimately “admitted that [it] had wronged China and was willing to correct its mistakes” (p. 203). In the end, Zhang concludes with satisfaction that “Hanoi’s venture against China came to a bad end” (p. 218). Um... who invaded whom?
Despite these shortcomings, Zhang’s is a timely, readable, path-breaking, and, overall, convincing account that considerably advances our knowledge of this still rather poorly understood, if perhaps now a little more meaningful, war.


Reviewed by Poul Villaume, University of Copenhagen

This collection of seventeen essays focusing on the relationship between media in the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland) and the Cold War is partly the result of a Nordic conference on media and communication research in Oslo in 2013. With few exceptions, the contributors to the book are media and communication researchers rather than historians. Accordingly, readers looking for an introduction to the general history of the Cold War in the Nordic countries should look elsewhere. However, if you are looking for detailed case studies based on original research of Nordic media representations and (to some extent) cultural reflections of the Cold War, this is a book to consult, even if the selection of researchers and topics betrays a clear Norwegian bias (only three of the essays relate to Finland, three exclusively to Sweden, and one to Denmark).

The essays are structured reasonably in three main chronological sections. The first, covering the early Cold War period from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, focuses on the degree of Soviet influence. The second section stretches from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, covering such diverse issues as the space race, sports, and spy cases. The third and final section covers the end of the Cold War period from the late 1970s onward, focusing mainly on nuclear weapons issues and the impact of the final Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

In the introduction, the editors underscore that in addition to covering the entire Cold War period and all four Nordic countries, the volume differs from previous comparable research by including not only the press (newspapers) but also a variety of audiovisual media and cultural artifacts. In truth, not all essays of the book can make a fair claim of substantial novelty or eye-opening results. For example, it is hardly startling that the Norwegian personnel employed by Radio Moscow made systematic attempts, with some initial if modest post-1945 success, to influence public opinion in Norway. Similarly, painstaking documentation of the self-censorship of Finnish media on Cold War–related issues and on Finland’s nonaligned foreign policy emerges as less than surprising to anyone with basic historical knowledge of the country’s delicate position between East and West.

Still, taken together the essays, to varying degrees, bring forth intriguing details as well as fresh perspectives on media or cultural representations of the Cold War in the Nordic countries. This is no small achievement. One of the contributors, Marie