

TUONG VU

Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 337 pages.

ALEC HOLCOMBE

*Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,
1945–1960.*
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020. 367 pages.

During the Cold War, debates and questions among Western citizens and scholars concerning the communist world simmered: Among communist leaders, what was the level of ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism and Stalinist thought in their regimes? Were independence movements in Asia and elsewhere more nationalistic or entirely controlled by communists? With the publication of landmark works of scholarship by Tuong Vu and Alec Holcombe, those debates now appear resolved: in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), communist ideology guided and shaped nationalism as a tool. Nationalism, the “truth,” equality before the law, and other virtues were, above all, simply means to achieve the more important goals of gaining and holding power. Vietnamese communist leaders understood, perhaps better than any other revolutionary movement since the Bolsheviks, the nature of revolutionary politics and how to harness and wield power against external threats and even self-made disastrous domestic policy.

Vu's book provides readers with a long view that begins with the Russian Revolution, continues through the many phases of the Vietnamese Revolution during the long twentieth century, and eventually concludes

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 17, Issue 1, pps. 58–66. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
© 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press' Rights and Permissions website, at <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2022.17.1.58>.

with an analysis of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The value of his scholarship is in demonstrating how consistently DRV and then SRV leaders followed Marxist-Leninist ideology until Đổi Mới [Renovation] in 1986, when leaders began to implement market-oriented economic reform. It demonstrates how Vietnamese communist leaders “took Marxism-Leninism seriously not as a dogma but as a living theory that guided actions while being embedded in and realized through concrete actions” (68). Vu argues that while ideology enabled Vietnamese communists to gain material and financial support from the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union, their manipulation of rural Vietnamese “did not lead them to success and left behind dismal legacies” (1).

Vu’s book is particularly valuable because of its organizational approach to specific periods in Vietnam’s revolutionary decades. For example, chapter 3, “The Making of a Cold War Outpost in Indochina, 1940–1951,” and chapter 4, “Patriotism in the Service of Socialism, 1953–1960,” not only align with Holcombe’s book but also contribute numerous perspectives and analysis that may assist graduate students assessing the DRV’s historical evolution into the SRV. Faculty teaching courses focused on the First Indochina War and its aftermath leading to conventional American military intervention will also find Vu’s periodized approach useful in providing a broader arc for students grappling with the Vietnamese Revolution’s complexity.

Methodologically, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution* employs a discursive narrative shaped by qualitative approaches found in political science and historical analysis. This integration is well articulated early on when Vu explains, “The main task I set out to do was to trace their [Vietnamese communist leaders’] thoughts over time through various sources with particular attention to how key concepts were employed to explain reality and assert foreign policy positions” (24–25). Historians will find his focus on “broad external relations” well developed, while political scientists and others will find much of value concerning ideology and state-building. Vu relies heavily on the *Collected Party Documents* [*Văn kiện Đảng toàn tập*] (*VKDĐT*) published by the Vietnamese Communist Party between 1998 and 2007, hundreds of other primary sources, his lived experience in Vietnam, especially, and well-chosen and extensive secondary sources.

Vu points to Vietnamese leaders' priorities in implementing and maintaining Marxist-Leninist ideology as the force guiding national reunification and the DRV's contribution to world revolution. He explains, "Vietnamese communists found innovative discursive formulations to justify class struggle during the war for independence against France. They translated foreign Marxist-Leninist arguments into concise Vietnamese formulations such as 'class struggle within a nationalist struggle'" (138). This was undoubtedly the primary challenge facing Vietnamese communists since the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party and its later re-emergence as the Vietnamese Workers' Party. However, what is not clear is how Vietnamese communists achieved this without a large proletariat within a predominantly agricultural, nonindustrial-based society. Further discussion of the challenges of developing class struggle—when there was such a weak proletariat as compared to agricultural workers—would have strengthened Vu's overall project. However, such analysis would also necessitate a discussion of the village-based communalism that Vietnamese communists displaced as they sought to build the revolutionary state.

None of this suggests that implementing and cultivating socialism—as Vu powerfully argues—was not the principal goal of Vietnamese revolutionaries. It is arguable that the most grievous mistakes made by Vietnamese communists, such as land reform in 1953 and collectivization in 1956, offered a preview of the catastrophe of the Great Leap Forward in China (between 1958 and 1962), leading to the deaths of millions. The disastrous policy decisions in forcing the industrialization of agricultural-based societies indicated a lack of a proletariat, let alone factories from which a proletariat class could emerge to make socialism a viable path. In chapter 4, Vu points out that "[i]deological goals, specifically, the desire to create a socialist society, informed and motivated Hanoi's decision to launch the land reform and socialist development in the North and the revolution in the South" (148). He adds:

However, ideologically inspired but vague categories of classes applied to the land reform led to the persecution and deaths of thousands of innocent farmers. The rush to collective farming and to eliminate private industry and trade would soon bring agricultural decline, economic stagnation, and chronic hunger to the North Vietnamese for the following two decades. (148)

Vu demonstrates that it is simply not enough to claim that ideology blinded Vietnamese communist leaders to the potential disaster that forced industrialization would create. However, more information on how the Vietnamese Communist Party misread their own political and social environment, whether due to ideological blindness or not, would have strengthened his argument.

Vu also provides important details and analysis on the ideological differences between Lê Duẩn and General Nguyễn Chí Thanh after the 1960 Moscow Conference. According to Vu, Lê Duẩn believed that Soviet interests prevented the Vietnamese Revolution from remaining within the socialist camp while also achieving national liberation. Similarly, Vu analyzes the Ninth Central Committee Plenum held in December 1963, at which the Lao Động Party “decided to side with China against the Soviet Union” and break its ideological link with Stalinism. Vu writes, “I argue that the 1960 shift was far more important in terms of foreign policy thinking, while the 1963 Plenum merely provided the opportunity for Lê Duẩn’s faction to defeat its opponents and convert its preferences into Party policy” (154). Vu certainly does not suggest that Lê Duẩn began to prioritize nationalist-oriented policy; his point is to analyze how Lê Duẩn “dissociated the Soviet Union from the socialist camp” (157). Key leaders held different positions, and Trường Chinh remained pro-Soviet until mid-1963, as Vu notes. In these and other respects, Vu’s book has great value in dissecting the evolution of Vietnamese communist ideology vis-à-vis the Sino-Soviet division and as it bore upon revolution in North and South Vietnam leading up to the Second Indochina War.

Vu’s argument is sound, and his evidence supports his views regarding the orientation and dominance of Vietnamese communist ideology and its role in supporting international Marxist-Leninist revolution. Yet, as he notes, ideological purity could only go so far in several respects. First, he demonstrates how external forces and economic realities circumscribed ideological purity. Second, as the USSR eventually and similarly confronted its limitations, reform became the only means to endure, and this led the SRV to adopt Đổi Mới in 1986. Vu’s work is brilliant in recounting these developments because he provides evidence and analysis pointing to ideological limitations confronting Vietnamese communist leaders as the world

around them changed and as economic realities chipped away at their often-blind communist ideological purity.

Holcombe's book focuses on the DRV leadership's policies and mobilization of the population in the northern half of the country between 1945 and 1960 through land rent reduction, land reform, reinspection, and collectivization. In a succinct summation, Holcombe writes, "I argue that the mass mobilization campaign was, under the guise of class warfare, a massive and thorough round of terror imposed on the entire DRV countryside, including poor peasants" (305). The centrality of finding scapegoats for failed policies, as Holcombe observes, was a consistent phenomenon in the DRV's mass mobilization campaign. Nothing top DRV leaders developed in terms of policy was ever "wrong." Instead, the party's only "failings" existed among incompetent cadres whose "incorrect" class consciousness rendered them unable or unwilling to implement the "correct" policies DRV leaders created. Building on Vu's argument that Marxist-Leninist ideology was all-encompassing, Holcombe adds that, in their refusal to share power, "[o]nly the Communist Party and its supporters were legitimately nationalist" (11).

Pushing French communist George Boudarel's view, which Holcombe cites, land reform was not only about destroying opposition but also used to ensure continued Chinese and Soviet aid in the name of internationalism. The malicious targeting of peasants accused of being landlords "were not 'errors' but a specifically intended result" (300). The proposed number of landlords, which was entirely false, was set at a mostly Chinese-communist-imposed and arbitrary 5.86 percent of the population in the central and northern provinces. Holcombe notes further that "[t]he imposition of this unrealistic ratio guaranteed that most people targeted as 'landlords' in the campaign would be regular community members" (301). Ultimately, Marxist-Leninist ideology was the all-important justification for gaining and maintaining power and control no matter the cost. Through targeting anyone, including soldiers who fought for the DRV at Điện Biên Phủ and loyal party members, and by claiming that they were the Việt Minh's enemies and in league with "cruel and despotic landlords," DRV leaders' campaigns "showed rural communities that the DRV state could make facts and truth mean nothing" (306).

Holcombe, like Vu, also makes effective use of the VKDTT and other extensive primary sources, including *The Complete Writings of Hồ Chí Minh* [*Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*]. He also considers numerous French documents, especially the General Files of the DRV held in the Archives nationales d'outre-mer in Aix-en-Provence on which David Marr based much of his landmark *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)* (University of California Press, 2013). While lengthy excerpts from party documents add precise details, Holcombe contextualizes how policy pejoratively affected local populations through one of the most turbulent, violent, and dynamic decades in twentieth-century Vietnam. Thus, the book is as close to a definitive study of land reform in the DRV as readers are likely to read in the first half of this century.

Holcombe's attention to the Hồ Chí Minh cult of personality and its manipulation by Nguyễn Tất Thành are among the threads used to shape the book. The several phases of land reform—rent reduction, land reform, and reinspection—as the tools for mobilizing state power against France's forces and after the Geneva Conference in 1954 form the other larger framework. As Holcombe points out early on, “Ultimately, I argue that virtually every oddity of the [land reform] campaign's structure and accompanying media campaign can be traced back to the Politburo's overriding fear that mass mobilization cadres would not find enough ‘landlords’ to make into targets of struggle” (15). This targeting of innocents demonstrates why ideological narrowness and insatiable control over financially poor and often hungry rural Vietnamese led to so many problems. These problems surfaced not only in terms of famine imposed by the DRV's agricultural tax and DRV leaders' disastrous approach to economic planning but in the devastations that Vietnamese had to endure while fighting French, noncommunist Vietnamese, and American military forces over decades.

Holcombe's intense study of land reform provides the groundwork for his later study on collectivization completed in the North in 1959 and 1960. In assessing the fulfillment of DRV plans, leaders restricted reporting failure. In government papers, such as the “Draft Proposal for Guiding the Content of General Conclusions on the Movement to Mobilize Agricultural Collectivization Combined with the Completion of Democratic Reforms in

Mountainous Areas,” failure—or at least reporting failure—was not an option. Holcombe notes that “while the ‘Draft’ instructed cadres to report on the ‘results and remaining tasks’ of the movement, the specific directions about how these were to be reported strongly suggested that the party’s policies were not up for discussion. Any bad results needed to be framed as a problem with ‘implementation’” (289). Collectivization, like land reform, was a campaign for which DRV leaders accepted zero blame. “Drafts proposals and guidance,” Holcombe notes, were “carefully constructed to ensure that the results of collectivization were not the measure of the policy itself” (290). As with earlier failures, leaders blamed the cadre implementing plans and workers and farmers who lacked “class consciousness.” Ultimately everyone in the DRV, including Party Secretary Trường Chinh, was forced to endure mind-numbing forms of gaslighting. Even at the highest levels of leadership, authoritarianism functionally depended on everyone’s potential guilt, which then rendered them deserving of censure, if not physical punishment or incarceration, when problems surfaced.

While forcing land reform and collectivization on Vietnamese farmers depended on ideology and on appeasing Chinese and Soviet leaders to keep foreign aid flowing in the name of internationalism, human failings were also a factor. As Holcombe astutely observes,

Despite the failure of these collective farms from the perspective of productivity, the party leaders pushed forward with the system. Economics was not the only motivation. Pride was a factor. The party leaders had staked their reputations on the superiority of the socialist system. To acknowledge that the collectivized economy was a failure was to acknowledge that three decades of revolutionary belief, often expressed in a tone of shrill contempt for doubters, had been misguided. To abandon collective farms was to abandon the socialist dream.” (291)

Much the same applied to French and American leaders’ failures—in terms of pride, perceived legitimacy, and power—after 1945 and later again after 1965. With the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in August 1964, human failings, bias, and narrowness of anticommunist ideology blinded American leaders and rendered them unable to acknowledge limits to American power.

While Holcombe concludes his book with Lê Duẩn taking power and the period of collectivization and “re-Stalinization” in 1960, his

tremendously powerful and edifying book provides a keen perspective on why so many Vietnamese fought with so much effort to combat communism. Through building on scholarship by Edwin Moise, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Tuong Vu, Christopher Goscha, and others, Holcombe's work is a critical contribution to the field of Vietnamese studies and twentieth-century Vietnamese history. As perhaps the most important study of land reform to date, *Mass Mobilization in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945–1960*, will remain indispensable among scholars seeking to understand the First and Second Indochina Wars, the DRV's formation, and its remarkable dysfunctionality through the 1950s. Like Vu's work, Holcombe's book deserves a prominent place on comprehensive exam lists, graduate courses, and future bibliographies on Vietnam's revolutions.

Vu's and Holcombe's scholarship on the DRV, its leaders, and ideological orientation is critical, expertly researched, and brilliantly executed. More broadly, among scholars interested in twentieth-century Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Vu's and Holcombe's respective books position them as foremost scholars in the field. While their books are demanding in time and effort, they are perhaps the most essential books on the DRV since David Marr's *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)*. These well-organized studies are especially commendable in the amount of archival research supporting their arguments and respective analyses of the DRV's formation and its leaders' ideological worldview. Moreover, the books are well written, mitigating the complexity of the subject matter.

At the same time, no book is perfect. Unfortunately, both authors omit key scholarship, specifically Bernard Fall's earliest research on the DRV; accounting for Fall's perceptive analysis would have strengthened their respective arguments. Fall's first book, *The Viet-Minh Regime: Government and Administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*, published in 1954 through the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University and revised and copublished by the Institute of Pacific Affairs in 1956, was based on research conducted throughout Vietnam over ten months in 1953. While Holcombe does cite Fall in reference to the Navarre Plan on page 203 and includes two of Fall's sources in his bibliography, Vu does not mention Fall's scholarship. While Holcombe briefly situates Hoàng Văn Chí's *From Colonialism to Communism: A Case History of North Vietnam* (Frederick

A. Praeger, 1964) and Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture's 1969 study, *The End of a War: Indochina 1954* (Frederick A. Praeger, 1969) in his introduction, Fall's earliest work preceded these authors' works by ten years. To be sure, Fall was not the only early DRV critic, but he made it clear that communist ideology dominated the DRV from the beginning. While the National Assembly in early November 1946 included a few posts not controlled by communists, Fall noted in 1954 that nobody could "fairly contest the fact that it was on the road to one-party rule" (*The Viet-Minh Regime*, 16). Acknowledging Fall's earliest scholarship on the centrality of Marxist-Leninist thought in Vietnamese leaders' thinking, as indicated in the quote above, would have historiographically situated Vu's and Holcombe's books and supported their already convincing arguments.

In almost all other respects, however, Holcombe and Vu have produced critical works that any student of Vietnam, the First Indochina War, and the Second Indochina War must read. Their use of new archival material offers an unprecedented look into the regime's workings and top leadership. Moreover, the quality of the authors' efforts deserves—and demands—a careful reading to account fully for their arguments and narratives charting the uncompromising Marxist-Leninist orientation of Vietnamese revolutionary leaders' ideology. These two essential books will help all scholars recognize how narrow ideological orientation created opportunities, encouraged authoritarianism, and led to disastrous policies for which innocent Vietnamese paid the greatest price.

Nathaniel L. Moir, Harvard University