

HARISH C. MEHTA

*People's Diplomacy of Vietnam: Soft Power in the Resistance War, 1965–1972.*

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Harish C. Mehta examines “people’s diplomacy” practiced by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1965 to 1972, the period when American ground troops were officially involved in the Second Indochina War. According to Mehta, “[t]hrough people’s diplomacy the embattled people of North Vietnam, in conjunction with the peace movement abroad, brought popular pressure on the White House to end the American intervention” (17). The book draws on an impressive array of sources. In Hà Nội, Mehta consulted the National Archives Center III (the archives of the communist state) and the National Library. In the United States, he gathered material from the Texas Tech Vietnam War archive, the National Security archive, the CIA archive, the Cold War International History Project, and the LBJ Library. In Canada, the author found some of the book’s most interesting material in the Bertrand Russell archive held at McMaster University. The book has five thematically organized chapters, each of which covers a different aspect of the DRV’s “soft power” diplomatic campaign.

According to Mehta, the term “people’s diplomacy” refers to “diplomacy conducted by ordinary people” (9). This form of soft power “involved unofficial contacts between the Vietnamese people and their counterparts abroad” (9). The practitioners of people’s diplomacy included such people as filmmakers, poets, journalists, trade unionists, lawyers, doctors, women, children, and so on. This “motley mix” of DRV citizens “gained the

sympathy” of people around the world, but especially in the Western democracies. The term “people’s diplomacy” conjures up images of civil society and spontaneous popular initiative. Yet Mehta points out that “[i]n a communist state such as the DRV, separating state actors from non-state actors is problematic because most organizations of workers, men, women, and artists functioned directly or indirectly under the ruling communist party or an affiliate of the party” (9). Similarly, he explains that “[p]eople’s diplomacy and the diplomatic front were creations of the leaders of the DRV and were orchestrated by the government and the communist party” (10). This sober qualification about the nature of the DRV state raises the question of whether, among citizens of North Vietnam, there was any such thing as “ordinary people” having “unofficial contacts” with foreigners.

The book’s first chapter covers the origins of “people’s diplomacy,” a concept that Mehta attributes to the father of Vietnamese communism, Hồ Chí Minh. The summary of Hồ Chí Minh’s early life is well done except that we hear nothing of his seventeen-year career working for the Comintern from 1923 to 1940. We hear only a vague reference to Hồ Chí Minh’s having “fled to the Soviet Union” in 1927. Looking at the founding of the DRV after the end of the Pacific War, Mehta promotes the “lost-opportunity theory” about the possibility of friendship between the fledgling DRV and the United States. According to the author, in 1945, Hồ Chí Minh hoped that the United States would become an important partner in Vietnam’s economic development (24). Then, however, we learn that, in October 1945, “Ho Chi Minh used the tools of reeducation and detention to erase undesirable bourgeois tendencies among state officials that might inhibit the formation of a new communist identity” (25). Mehta offers several other examples from Hồ Chí Minh’s career suggesting that he was, indeed, a dedicated communist (and, therefore, unlikely to have formed any real alliance with the United States). We also learn in this chapter that, in January of 1958, the party had carried out two “reeducation campaigns” for hundreds of DRV intellectuals who had worked as members of the regime’s various state associations (novelists, artists, actors, musicians, etc.). Mehta points out that these same associations, having been “suitably reformed,” were later set to work on the DRV’s diplomatic front (42). Given this

experience of repression, can these DRV associations be interpreted as reliable indicators of popular will?

Chapter 2, “Cracking the ‘Western Alliance,’” addresses the development of antiwar movements in the Western democracies of Europe and North America. As Mehta points out, DRV leaders were eager to facilitate visits to Hà Nội from leaders of various Western antiwar groups. Hà Nội wanted these foreign guests—activists such as Clive Ansley, Staughton Lynd, Tom Hayden, David Dellinger, Stokely Carmichael, Noam Chomsky, and others—to “witness the commitment of the Vietnamese people to the revolution” and to help DRV leaders spread the word about suffering caused by American bombing (57). According to the author, DRV leaders hoped that these activists, partly through the soft-power activities of their (carefully trained) North Vietnamese hosts, would gain a favorable impression of life above the seventeenth parallel. Ideally, these Westerners would return to their respective countries with heightened antiwar fervor. “Visits generated by people’s diplomacy enabled the antiwar movement to gain first-hand understanding of Vietnamese society, unfiltered by television and newspapers” (57). These DRV visits may have enabled Western antiwar activists to escape the Western media filter. But can we say that their DRV hosts allowed these activists to enjoy an “unfiltered” view of life in North Vietnam?

In chapter 3, “Globalizing the Resistance in Non-Aligned Countries,” Mehta explores the DRV’s soft-power relations with members of the Left around the world. (The term “non-aligned” here refers to countries that were not aligned with America’s intervention in Vietnam, not to countries of the Non-Aligned Movement launched at the 1955 Bandung Conference.) According to Mehta, “Peace movements and leftist parties in France, Belgium, Italy, Greece, and Sweden made it nearly impossible for Washington to gain West European support for South Vietnam” (87). The author stresses the popularity of Hồ Chí Minh and the challenge that this posed for the US government. “Many American antiwar activists admired Ho Chi Minh’s simple lifestyle and sincerity” (87). Yet Mehta also tells us that Hồ Chí Minh’s “ascetic image as a benevolent nationalist” was “carefully crafted,” suggesting that it was not entirely authentic (28). We see more Hà Nội visits from prominent Westerners such as Carol McEldowney,

Susan Sontag, and Jane Fonda. And Mehta describes various forms of support offered to the DRV from members of the Left around the world: a United Nations General Assembly speech by Che Guevara; two pro-DRV documentaries by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens; six million tons of sugar from Fidel Castro; condemnations of American intervention by Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre, and François Mauriac; a film on American war atrocities produced by Roger Pic; and French Communist Party efforts to have Paris grant diplomatic recognition to the National Liberation Front.

The book's fourth chapter, "Navigating the Sino-Soviet Split," covers the ways in which Hà Nội used "people's diplomacy" to secure material aid and political support from the Soviet Union and China (119). Again, Mehta implies a distinction between official and unofficial contacts in the DRV, Soviet Union, and China. "People's diplomacy generated an enthusiastic response from ordinary people in the Soviet Union and China, who zealously provided economic aid, which was separate from the official aid given by their governments to the DRV and NLF" (120). Again, we see the strong implication of something akin to civil society in these communist countries. "Meetings with North Vietnamese revolutionaries inspired Chinese theater directors, film producers, ballet dancers, and opera singers to produce works depicting their brave resistance" (121). Were those efforts spontaneously generated or were they ordered by party leaders? Using semantics to transform choreography into spontaneity, Mehta writes that the "Chinese people were allowed to send economic and humanitarian aid to the North Vietnamese" (121). What about the Soviet Union? "Similarly, the Soviet government approved of the effort of Soviet mass organizations to assist the Vietnamese" (121). In mid-1964, China's Writers' Publishing House in Beijing released a Mandarin translation of the DRV book *Letters from the South*. Mehta tells us that, according to the Beijing press, the book "became an instant bestseller in China" (139). What does the term "best-seller" mean in the China of 1964? At times when reading the book, I wanted more engagement with these difficult issues.

The fifth and final chapter, "Creating the War Crimes Tribunal with Bertrand Russell," is well worth the wait. Mehta did good detective work in the Bertrand Russell archive, picking through the correspondence between the legendary British intellectual and Hồ Chí Minh and between officials of

the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF) and their counterparts in Hà Nội. In the book, we see how the tribunal came together in 1966. Mehta argues that the North Vietnamese played “an important, though largely unacknowledged, role” in this event held in Stockholm (154). In February of 1966, during the lead-up to the tribunal, members of the Russell Foundation traveled to Hà Nội and held talks with Hồ Chí Minh and Phạm Văn Đồng “to determine the nature of the tribunal and to persuade the North Vietnamese to provide evidence regarding the American use of chemical weapons” (154). According to Mehta, the tribunal “urgently needed funds” to continue its work. The DRV leaders, though financially strapped, decided that the cause was worth investment and became “the foremost foreign contributor of funds to the BRPF” (154). Indeed, as Mehta explains, “North Vietnamese money began helping Russell’s foundation by generously extending hospitality (free hotel stay, food, local transport, and translation services) to teams of the IWCT [International War Crimes Tribunal] investigators visiting Vietnam” (154).

Mehta shows that the relationship between the BRPF and Hà Nội was not all smooth sailing. The two sides did not see eye to eye on the tribunal’s composition and on its way of operating. Archival materials show that members of the Russell Foundation accused their DRV counterparts of “attempting to seize control of the tribunal.” Russell warned Hồ Chí Minh that the tribunal would lose credibility among Westerners if they suspected it of lacking independence, of being too closely allied with the DRV. The British Nobel Prize winner also asked Hồ Chí Minh to release imprisoned North Vietnamese intellectuals who, inspired by Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech and Mao Zedong’s Hundred Flowers movement, had called for reforms during the later months of 1956 (the Nhân Văn–Giai Phẩm movement). Hồ Chí Minh never commented on this complaint, and Russell soon moved on from his concern about DRV censorship and human rights violations. As Mehta explains, “Like many antiwar activists, Russell maintained that an authoritarian strain had developed within the DRV due to the pressures and exigencies of war” (157). At another point, the British intellectual “complained to the NLF’s president, Nguyễn Hữu Thọ, about the failure of the NLF to honor their commitment to give access to the tribunal’s investigative teams to the liberated areas of South Vietnam”

(154–155). The chapter is full of interesting details about the internal workings of the tribunal and the affectionate but sometimes contentious back-and-forth between the Russell Foundation and Hà Nội.

In conclusion, more skeptical scholars may interpret differently some of the book's information. They might, for example, see "people's diplomacy" as an Orwellian term used to disguise the soft power diplomatic strategy of a totalitarian regime. Some scholars will share my doubts about Mehta's suggestion that there was an equivalence between the Western antiwar activists who visited the DRV and the "motley mix" of North Vietnamese intellectuals and officials who interacted with them. Were both sides of this anti-Washington alliance participating equally in a "new global civil society" (203)? Other scholars may lament the book's abrupt end in late 1972, when the Paris Peace Accords brought America's official troop presence in South Vietnam to a close. In the succeeding years, there occurred in Indochina many events that shed light on the fundamental dove-hawk disagreements of the period from 1965 to 1972. All in all, though, Mehta's book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of DRV relations with the outside world and to our understanding of how those relations contributed to North Vietnam's ultimate victory.

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