BOOK REVIEW

SHAWN F. MCHALE

The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 350 pages. $39.99 (hardcover), $32.00 (e-book).

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Most studies of the First Indochina War have focused on the confrontation between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the French. Shawn F. McHale brings a fresh look to this armed conflict by examining violence and competing political authorities in the Mekong Delta. The book draws on a trove of sources from France and Vietnam, including intelligence reports, memoirs, and religious documents. It asks, "Why did the communist-led Resistance in Vietnam win their anticolonial war against France and its Vietnamese allies (1945–54) in the rest of Vietnam, but fail in the South?" (2). To answer this question, the author uses violence as an analytical device to reveal tensions, conflicts, and contesting concepts of sovereignty. McHale argues that the First Indochina War cannot be fully understood if reduced to a confrontation between nation-states (6). In fact, several microwars (16) involving different actors, motivations, and geographies overlapped, and the violence derived from these confrontations drove the recombination of institutions (15).

Part 1, "Fracture," exposes how the Mekong Delta split in 1947 in two ways. First, the mobilization of Khmer minorities in French counter-insurgency operations created a "fracture" between the Khmer and the Vietnamese. Second, communists failed to keep the Việt Minh front united and both the Cao Đài and the Hòa Hảo defected to the French. From that point the armed conflict ceased being "free for all" violence erupting after the

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total collapse of central authority and became a war opposing the French, their imperial troops, and their local allies to a Việt Minh front now reduced into a Resistance. Part 2, "Dissassemblage/Reassemblage," explores different themes, such as representations and racial hatred (chapter 5) and the transfer of sovereignty from the French empire to the Associated State of Vietnam (chapter 6), while the two last chapters analyze how communists failed to make territorial gains, as religious groups gained autonomy from the French and ran para-states in the Mekong Delta. The third part, "Endgames," serves as an epilogue, extending the analysis into Ngô Đình Diệm's rise to power in 1954.

The book's contribution to the understanding of the First Indochina War cannot be understated. Not only does it illuminate other perspectives than the French and the DRV, but it also reinterprets a turning point in the war. Conventional narratives have long described 1949 as a key moment in the war because China's support to the DRV prompted Cold War superpowers to back Hà Nội or Sài Gòn. This transformed the violent decolonization of Vietnam into both a Cold War battlefront and a competition between two aspiring nation-states. But McHale shows us that the war had dramatically changed two years earlier, in 1947. The main belligerents tried to figure out how to best channel the explosion of violence reflecting ethnic divides, imperial categories, racial hatred, and religious fervor in the Mekong Delta. The Việt Minh's efforts to lead a wide nationalist coalition broke down, and French recognition of local sovereignties, a typical tactic of late colonial states, succeeded.

With strengths, however, also come weaknesses. The book could more robustly challenge the misconception that violence is irrational. Some forms of "indiscriminate violence" are still described as "arbitrary," "random," or "blind" (216), and the author declares that the Hòa Hảo and the Unités mobiles pour la défense des chrétiens (UMDC) were more prone to violence, whereas the Cao Đài were more disciplined (215), without further explanation. More importantly, the introduction could provide a stronger analytical framework to distinguish between reactive and calculated violence. While the book explores those forms (p. 54, for example), it would make a greater contribution to the recent field of violence studies if it examined the dialectics between the two (see *Violence: An International Journal* and its editorial

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board's previous works). The book shows that communists (56) and the French (109) understood and took advantage of local outbursts of violence, but a more systematic analysis of whether these two belligerents and the Associated State of Vietnam have dampened or encouraged violence would be a welcome addition. Lastly, part 2 contains digressions that are not self-evident. Chapters 5 and 6 explore racial hatred and forced displacement, but this violence does not reveal unseen and multilayered conflicts or contesting sovereignties central to the main argument. Rather, they describe enemy behavior or reasons for population movements. Chapter 7, however, returns to the idea of violence as a state attribute but instead focuses on legal aspects, such as the transfer of the Sûreté from the French to the Associated State of Vietnam, rather than on debates about how and why France and Sài Gòn should redistribute responsibilities to hold a monopoly on violence. Thankfully, chapter 8 deals with the crux of the problem: drawing part of its research findings from a database (217), it reveals that assassinations remained one last effective instrument of violence after the Resistance had exhausted all other conventional methods (220).

Does *The First Vietnam War* elucidate why the Resistance failed to win in the South? I hesitate to declare that the book fully answers its original question, as any conclusion about who won or lost the war would not do justice to McHale's nuanced and complex analysis. The richness of the sources and their interpretation, however, effectively demonstrate that the communists failed to lead a strong coalition in the South. The book also reveals, in yet another overlooked insight, how the French managed to channel local violence and conflicts while the Resistance did not. While communists tried to create a highly centralized one-party nation-state, many groups after 1945 preferred an imperial state defined by indirect rule, the empowerment of local elites, and regional autonomy. I wonder whether this different conception of sovereignty was unique to the Mekong Delta or whether this was related to developments elsewhere in Vietnam. Does the agreement between the French, the Cao Đài, and then the Hòa Hảo in 1947 have any link with the Nùng's autonomous commune of Hải Ninh created at the same time, or the Pays Montagneux du Sud, the year before? This microhistorical approach offers new perspective to the standard narrative of the war, yet it also invites a comparative overview of these local dynamics.

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I strongly recommend *The First Vietnam War*. Its complex discussion of how the war magnified power dynamics and local conflicts would appeal to specialist scholars, while general readers would appreciate how different the war looked from the Mekong Delta.

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