

HEATHER MARIE STUR

*Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties.*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 292 pages. \$89.99 (hardcover), \$29.99 (paperback), \$24.00 (e-book).

In recent decades, an increasing number of Vietnam War scholars have used Vietnamese-language sources to shed light on the role of Vietnamese actors during the war. Philip Catton, Edward Miller, Jessica Chapman, and others have mined Vietnam's state archives to upend many widely held views about South Vietnam and its place in Vietnamese and Cold War history. Lien-Hang Nguyen and Pierre Asselin, among others, have done the same for the North. Heather Marie Stur, a scholar of American diplomatic and military history, follows in their footsteps.

*Saigon at War* is a study of popular politics in the post-Ngô Đình Diệm era. It comprises eight thematic chapters arranged in roughly chronological order, spanning events from the death of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 to the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975. Stur aims to understand Vietnamese actors outside the halls of power, those who belonged to neither the South Vietnamese government nor the National Liberation Front (NLF). She eschews high politics and military strategy, focusing instead on an "ensemble cast responsible for organizing demonstrations, giving speeches, making international connections, and publicizing reports daily about the state of South Vietnam's political development" (5). These educated, urban activists demanded self-determination, neutralism, peace, and human rights, often in the streets and almost always in opposition to the government. A few promoted the Republic of Vietnam's (RVN) cause at home and denounced North Vietnam abroad. That *Saigon at War* comes on the heels of Sophie Quinn-Judge's *The*

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*Third Force in the Vietnam War* (I. B. Tauris, 2017) indicates a growing interest in nonstate actors during the war.

*Saigon at War* begins with the premise that the RVN was no US puppet, that it was home to a relatively free and diverse society, that its citizens developed a distinct national identity, that it was a genuine democratic experiment, and that South Vietnamese voices deserve to be examined alongside those of North Vietnam and the United States. According to Stur, before the fall of Sài Gòn a vibrant political culture had thrived below the 17th parallel, where a wide range of ideas about the nation vied for attention. This freewheeling environment rested on a raucous popular press and a politically engaged citizenry. The state was powerful but not all-powerful. Yet political diversity also meant a lack of national cohesion. The RVN government and its American patrons saw potential chaos. Given this outlook, they viewed criticism of and protest against the government as inherently nefarious. So they treated activists old and young with suspicion.

Stur describes the Second Republic as a “democratic skeleton covered in authoritarian skin” (8). The government employed violent and extra-legal measures to suppress dissent—which, in Stur’s view, pushed otherwise nonideological activists toward the NLF. American officials shoulder some responsibility for this. Stur describes them as at once obtuse and obdurate—they failed to understand the political scene and were confused by the seeming chaos on the ground. They clung to the partners they knew instead of cultivating popular support among young and educated groups, namely activists and students. The Tết Offensive heightened the government’s fear that communists were behind the protests, leading to further crackdowns. Even some Catholics—long a source of support for the anticommunist government, but now influenced by liberation theology—became disillusioned and openly critical of the regime. The government’s credibility abroad suffered as well when foreign correspondents relayed the cycle of protest and repression to their home audiences, decisively shaping global opinion.

Based on this sketch of Sài Gòn’s political landscape, Stur tries to diagnose the RVN’s demise. She attributes the fall of the RVN almost entirely to repeated missteps by the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime and its American patrons. “South Vietnam,” Stur states, “had a working democracy that failed

because of political repression at the hands of South Vietnamese government regimes, not because of National Liberation Front actions or widespread commitment to communism among the RVN population” (16). If only the RVN government and the Americans had not viewed activists and students with disdain; if only the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime (and those before it) had not treated dissidents so harshly; if only the United States were more open to seeing anti-government elements (especially Huỳnh Tấn Mẫm and Ngô Bá Thành) as part of a political solution rather than a threat; if only the Americans had been more willing to jettison the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime in favor of opposition elements.

Yet to boil the RVN’s demise down to state repression of activists is more than a little reductive. Tuong Vu and Sean Fear, in their introduction to *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975* (Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2019), acknowledge that the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu regime damaged its domestic and international legitimacy by engaging in vote-rigging, corruption, and the suppression of dissent and the press. Keith Taylor, on the other hand, blames the United States for abandoning its ally while China and the Soviet Union remained committed to North Vietnam. Despite this divergence in perspective, all three scholars point to the reality that a large communist armed force remained in the South after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 and was regularly replenished by troops from the North, all with Chinese and Soviet support. The RVN, therefore, could very well have collapsed in the face of North Vietnamese military power even if it had been a shining example of liberal democracy. A more significant problem with Stur’s critique is its overemphasis on the effect of urban street politics on the outcome of the conflict. The war was, in fact, won and lost in the countryside—the RVN’s greatest weakness and the NLF’s greatest strength.

Stur’s argument is especially problematic given the fact that Huỳnh Tấn Mẫm and Ngô Bá Thành were both secret members of the NLF. In fact, she tells readers that the NLF had infiltrated an array of student and activist groups. Since this book amply documents the NLF’s function as a North Vietnamese proxy, its manipulation of popular politics in the South, and its use of terror and intimidation against officials, journalists, and ordinary citizens, it is unclear how the author can label the two activists as

“independent and non-communist.” Stur insists that there was “no real way to prove that Mam, Thanh, and others were communists, even if enough evidence linked them to the NLF” (183). But whether these individuals were ardent Marxists or not is beside the point. Notwithstanding their marginalization after the war, they had clearly been agents of a hostile state. In light of this, it is all the more perplexing that Stur blames the United States for lacking “the will or the foresight to imagine a Vietnam forged through self-determination, even if it featured some type of communist or socialist government” (266). The author’s attempt to valorize her protagonists, however, does not comport with her own account of NLF terror and political manipulation.

For a book aimed at uncovering Vietnamese voices, *Saigon at War* is remarkably dependent on English-language sources. Despite her ambition, Stur is much more comfortable gleaning insights from the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), the US Embassy, or CIA sources than Vietnamese-language ones. Materials from the Vietnam National Archive Center II are used to reconstruct particular events (e.g., RVN investigation of the Movement for Self-Determination), while newspapers from the General Sciences Library play an ornamental role. Substantive interpretations turn on the words of American officials. In chapter 3, for instance, Stur derives her understanding of youth attitudes not from Vietnamese newspapers, archival files, or even interviews, but from embassy officials and a US military-funded study. What the author provides is not a view of Vietnamese politics according to the Vietnamese, but one through the blinkered lens of Americans.

It is especially disappointing to see that a study of Sài Gòn’s political scene fails to make systematic use of the city’s vaunted popular press. This period saw major political debates take place on the pages of newspapers, often owned and operated by political parties themselves. What were Vietnamese political and intellectual figures arguing about? What types of positions were being discussed in the press? How were anti-government protests and state responses covered? A proper panorama of the South Vietnamese political scene can best be constructed through a survey of the newspapers. No doubt, this would have been labor-intensive and time-consuming work. But this reader wonders why the author, given her access to the capable

translators mentioned in the acknowledgments, did not employ them to survey such important and relatively accessible sources.

A political history from below would have been a major contribution to Vietnam War and Vietnamese history. But *Saigon at War* represents a missed opportunity.

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