SOPHIE QUINN-JUDGE


After the Korean War ended with an armistice in July 1953, and the First Indochina War with the Geneva agreement of July 1954, East Asia enjoyed what Timo Kivimäki in his book The Long Peace of East Asia (Ashgate, 2014) calls “the short peace of East Asia.” (The “long peace” came in the 1980s and has continued until this day.) The 1954 Geneva agreement, which recognized the independence of Laos and Cambodia while dividing Vietnam preliminarily north-south, was an essential component in the short East Asian Peace. The agreement forms the background for Sophie Quinn-Judge’s important study of South and North Vietnamese searches for peace before and during the Second Indochina War.

The short peace was inspired by the communist doctrine of peaceful coexistence and the emergence of a nonaligned movement based on neutrality. Norodom Sihanouk, the leader of independent Cambodia until 1970, was a neutralist. So was Souvanna Phouma, prime minister of Laos for most of the period 1951–1975. Neutralism was at the core of the 1962 Geneva agreement on Laos. In August 1963, the French government of Charles de Gaulle also came out strongly in support of a neutralist solution for Vietnam.

With US encouragement, however, the South Vietnamese government of Ngô Đình Diệm (1954–1963) resisted calls to live up to the Geneva agreement and hold national elections in the whole of Vietnam by July 1956. Instead, it built a strongly anticommunist, personalist regime in the
south. Only in the crisis preceding his demise in November 1963, in a US-supported coup, did Ngô Đình Diệm explore the possibility of a deal with the north. Sài Gòn’s first post–Ngô Đình Diệm junta leader, the French-inspired General Dương Văn Minh, also probably looked north for a solution. But he was quickly replaced by the much younger general Nguyễn Khánh, who was closely connected with the United States, and—like his successors—opposed any rapprochement with the north.

Quinn-Judge’s book explores the continued search for a neutralist option in the years of military escalation. Her chronologically organized chapters alternate between Sài Gòn and Hà Nội, and she claims that on both sides influential personalities or groups were ready to make peace on a neutralist platform. Therefore, the onus of responsibility for the tragedy of the Vietnam War rests squarely on US shoulders. Washington was adamantly opposed to a neutralist agenda for South Vietnam. When John F. Kennedy agreed to neutralize Laos in 1961–1962, he aimed to guard his South Vietnamese ally against communist infiltration through Laos. By contrast, Hà Nội saw Lao neutralism as a stepping-stone for creating a neutral South Vietnam.

Quinn-Judge’s book makes a valuable contribution to diversifying Vietnam’s political history by drawing attention to the people in the south who did not support any side in the war yet had a potential for political influence in Sài Gòn or Hà Nội. This “third force” had many members, but they were divided among themselves. She discusses the cautious approach of General Dương Văn Minh, who returned to power briefly in April 1975 so he could capitulate to North Vietnamese forces and save Sài Gòn from being destroyed. She looks at a number of Buddhist, Catholic, and other religious leaders who organized protest movements in favor of peace, and at Trương Đình Du, who, in spite of widespread fraud, came second (after Nguyễn Văn Thiệu) in the 1967 presidential election, with 17 percent of the vote. Trương Đình Du used a dove as his symbol. By drawing attention to the many different strands of thought in South Vietnam, the author contributes to providing new generations of Vietnamese with a sense of historical diversity. She may perhaps pay excessive attention to some personalities and not enough to others, but this may inspire other historians to diversify even further. A rather different version of
what was going on in the south may be found in a new edited volume by Tuong Vu and Sean Fear (*The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building*, Cornell University Press, 2020), which reminds us of the people who tried their best to build a national non-communist community.

I also see value in Quinn-Judge’s attempt to question the by now prevailing view of Tuong Vu, Pierre Asselin, Lien Hang T. Nguyen, and others that North Vietnam’s decision making was dominated from the late 1950s by a hard-boiled Lê Duẩn (1907–1986), who single-mindedly pursued a strategy of revolutionary warfare aimed to secure Vietnam a place in the vanguard of the world revolution. Yet it is unclear if she thinks Lê Duẩn himself remained open to a neutralist solution after 1958–1959, or if she thinks that other leaders such as Lê Đức Thọ and Trường Chinh, or the aging Hồ Chí Minh with support from Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp, might have been able to keep Lê Duẩn at bay and uphold their peaceful unification agenda from the 1954–1956 period. At any rate, her argument that the Hà Nội leaders were always ready in principle and practice to make peace suffers from the fact that this was predicated on US military withdrawal and the unification of Vietnam under a coalition government, which would in all likelihood have been dominated by the North. This was exactly what the United States fought to prevent.

In my view, the book suffers from two weaknesses. One is its lack of attention to the period of the First Indochina War. It begins with an unnecessary chapter about Vietnamese responses to French colonialism up until 1940. Although it serves to demonstrate a deep sense of Vietnamese nationalism and a rich civil society, no explicit links are drawn from this chapter to the later ones, simply because the book omits any discussion of the 1940–1954 period. There is no account of the impact of World War II, nor the emergence of the Việt Minh movement that came to power in the 1945 August Revolution and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV); no description of how Hồ Chí Minh entered the world political scene in 1945–1946 as the leader of a new Democratic Republic, negotiating with France; no analysis of how the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was officially dissolved in November 1945; nor how, after leading a precarious, neglected existence as Marxist study groups, it was
rebuilt during the war between France and the DRV from 1947 onward, so it could hold a congress in 1951 and adopt the name Vietnam Workers Party. Quinn-Judge does not tell the story of how the DRV came to depend on Chinese and Soviet help, nor how it had to demonstrate its commitment to genuine Leninism through a brutal land reform during 1953–1956. Neither does she tell how, in 1949, the French-controlled State of Vietnam was set up under former Emperor Bảo Đại, after an experiment with Cochinchinese separatism, nor does she describe the diversity of political groups vying for power in Bảo Đại’s French-controlled state. These facts are of course well known, but their absence from the book prevents the author from exploring the origins of the various neutralist groups and strands of thought she explores.

The other weakness is that the book does not discuss, although it often mentions, the role of Charles de Gaulle’s French government in the 1960s, when it promoted a neutralist solution for its former colony. Admittedly, the author sees as her aim to search for local rather than international forces working for peace. Yet it would have been good to see a discussion of the French influence—or its weakness—since so many local third forces had French education and connections and were linked to a Vietnamese diaspora in France with third-force views. To situate the history of Vietnam’s third force within a context of French policy could have been done by making use of Pierre Journoud’s thoroughly researched De Gaulle et le Vietnam (Tallandier, 2011), which provides an enlightening side view on the Vietnam War from the Paris angle up until 1969, when de Gaulle left the scene and peace talks began in Paris.

*The Third Force in the Vietnam War* is not the definitive work on its subject. Nor is it meant to be. It is inspiring because it contributes to opening up venues to diversifying contemporary Vietnamese history by focusing on the many people who searched for peace in a time of devastating war.

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