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Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xxiv + 361pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780520256026; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9780520269934; \$27.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 9780520944602.

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Scholars have published a whole series of excellent monographs concerning the liminal years between colonialism and independence in Vietnam, beginning with Philippe Devilliers's *Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952* and including more recently David Marr's *1945: The Quest for Power*.^[1] Now, Stein Tønnesson's excellent *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* adds critical depth to an understanding of the choices made in France and Vietnam that led to a war that lasted from 1946 and 1954, rather than a paradigm-shifting postcolonial collaboration and transition that was never realized. To a greater degree than other texts, Tønnesson strives to present and understand the interior dialogue of the Communist leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and his dissection of the events in Hanoi in December 1946 are his greatest contribution to understanding how the *politique d'accord* that had been worked out between the French and the leadership of the DRV unraveled.

The book is focused quite tightly on the sixteen months following the end of World War II. Tønnesson points squarely at a radicalized local leadership in Hanoi for making a choice in mid-December 1946 that the whole communist movement would pursue conflict rather than continued cohabitation. Likewise, he targets a conservative French military for rejecting accommodation and evolution. In holding these two collective agents responsible for following a path to war, he leaves some questions that others will have to answer, such as the origin of violent radicalism within the Vietnamese communist movement and how a French military, so aware of its weaknesses and its isolation, could gamble on conflict once again.

Readers will notice that Tønnesson's *Vietnam: 1946* does not read exactly as a traditional scholarly monograph, even though Tønnesson himself is a dedicated historian with long years of experience in the archives. There is a certain excitement about the writing, along with some unguarded criticisms of both the French and the United States. The project itself developed over the course of twenty-five years, from a master's thesis written in 1981-1982, through an article published in 1984, and culminating with an invitation in 2005 from the University of California Press to write *Vietnam: 1946*.^[2] For this work, in addition to previous scholarship, Tønnesson draws on years of experience in Vietnam's and France's archives and from rare interviews with important members of the DRV's inner circle of leaders before death, dementia, or ill health silenced their voices.

Vietnam: 1946 is laid out in seven chapters which recount in chronological order the sudden grab in mid-August 1945 for independence by Vietnamese Communists that the fall of the Japanese Empire permitted, and addresses events through the end of 1946, when the forces of the Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh's government evacuated Hanoi and retreated to the mountains of northern Tonkin to prepare for a protracted guerilla struggle against the French. Along the way, Tønnesson takes the reader back and forth from the halls of the Prime Minister's residence at the Hôtel Matignon and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Quai d'Orsay in Paris, where tense negotiations occurred between French civilian

and military powerbrokers over Indochina's fate, to secret corners in Hanoi, where cool-headed Communist cadres struggled and ultimately lost control of hotheaded youth activists who formed the core of the armed self-defense groups, known as the *Tu Ve*.

Tønnesson argues that three forces worked in combination to produce the violent results of December 19, 1946. First and foremost, he blames the provocations of the proconsularic postwar High Commission of French Indochina, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, Supreme Commanding General Jean-Etienne Valluy, and the Federal Commissioner of Political Affairs, Léon Pignon, for willfully obstructing the spirit of the instructions they received from Paris to pursue peaceful solutions and instead pursuing a policy that suited their own, conservative and retrograde politics. Second, Tønnesson chides the government of the National Constituent Assembly in Paris for not guaranteeing the agreements that it had reached with Ho Chi Minh during his early 1946 visit to France intended to establish a *modus vivendi* and to promote an evolution of the Franco-Vietnamese relationship, and for not appreciating the independent-mindedness of the military leaders it agreed to send to Indochina. Finally, Tønnesson argues that the government of the DRV (particularly the leader of armed resistance, the future general Vo Nguyen Giap), had lost control of its activists on the street. Their behavior in late December 1946 was exactly what the French military wanted, as it allowed the military to portray the communist movement in Vietnam as violent, reckless, and untrustworthy.

In the first chapter, "A Clash of Republics," Tønnesson explains the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the DRV) under the public leadership of Ho Chi Minh, with several competing personalities influencing decision-making behind the scenes. This leadership dissolved the larger front under which most Communist and some Nationalist Vietnamese had operated since 1930, the Indochina Communist Party. An elected multi-party front replaced it in public, with a mission to create a broad, nationalist, progressive political movement, but the government was in fact controlled by a *Tong Bo*, or standing committee, of dedicated Communists such as Truong Chinh and Hoang Quoc Viet. In France, the Interministerial Committee for Indochina, consisting of a stable group of French political personalities who had held multiple roles in Charles De Gaulle's 1944 Liberation Government, the subsequent National Constituent Government of 1945 and 1946, and the post-1947 Fourth Republic, formulated policy vis-a-vis Indochina.

The French returned to southern Vietnam (Cochinchina) in October 1946 with the tacit support of the British whose postwar zone of occupation was there, and badly wanted to return to the North as well, but wartime agreements had given northern Vietnam to the Nationalist Chinese to occupy for the purposes of disarming the Japanese. In chapter two, "The Chinese Trap," and chapter three, "Modus Vivendi," Tønnesson addresses the three-way struggles at hand in Indochina following the French re-occupation of the South between September and December 1946. The Nationalist Chinese knew of French desires to return to the North and used their massive presence to extract promises from both the French (in terms of surrendering rights in southern China) and the Vietnamese (more materially, in the form of gold).

The French and Chinese did come to an understanding that they put into effect in February 1946, and at almost the same time the French and Viet Minh worked out an agreement of cohabitation (The Sainteny Accords). The Chinese retreated and the French and Vietnamese began to work together, although the arrangement with the French to which Ho Chi Minh agreed caused severe stains within the Viet Minh leadership. The French in the North found that the Vietnamese government administered fairly, but the sentiments of the French military and the French settler population fundamentally rejected the gradual slide toward independence that the Sainteny Accords had set in motion, and further rejected the comprehensive settlement that Ho Chi Minh and his fellow leaders worked on at the Fontainebleau Palace in August and September 1946. Bad faith measures on the part of the French and the aggressive advancement of a potential local supporter (Dr. Nguyen Van Thinh) who favored the retention of the lower third of Vietnam as a French possession or an independent country under French

influence began to poison this cohabitation. Faced with a brewing conflict, Dr. Think committed suicide and D'Argenlieu and his staff secretly began preparing for a coup against Ho Chi Minh and the DRV.

Chapter six, "Massacre," and chapter seven, "The French Trap," illustrate the consequences of the bad faith on which the French in general operated in Indochina, despite the implementation of the Sainteny Accords and the subsequent negotiations in August and September 1946 for a comprehensive plan. At every turn, the local settler population, the French military command, and at least some members of the French government in Paris worked hard to ensure a complete return of the French to Indochina or at least the installation of a French-dominated government in Cochinchina. Tønnesson indicates that many French simply did not understand that the Vietnamese people had become a nation dedicated to unified independence. In late November 1946, a smoldering debate over the distribution of customs duties blew up into a wholesale French attack on the commercial core of Haiphong on the northern Vietnam's coast, where the customs conflict began. Many thousands died as French warships shelled Haiphong. Through such a massacre, the French military hoped to goad the DRV into behaving as they wanted the world to see them, as violent revolutionaries incapable of negotiation. Despite the atrocity they themselves had just carried out, this failed. The DRV remained essentially calm. Tønnesson points to the dependency in which the French placed themselves by this action; precisely counterproductive to the kind of independence they sought by preserving some or all of Vietnam as a colonial possession or within a strong sphere of influence.

The Viet Minh response to these outrageous provocations and despicable attacks on civilians at Haiphong reveals, just as in the French case, a multiplicity of interests at play. In response to the actions, the local population of Hanoi began throwing up barricades in Hanoi and French security forces began stocking supplies. In mid-December, a critical transition occurred in Paris, with the appointment of the Socialist Léon Blum as Prime Minister, replacing the pro-colonial centrist Georges Bidault. Blum had acknowledged that he would need to deal with the problems in Indochina right away, but the need to form a government, to get information through the reactionary screen that existed between him and Indochina, and to his coalition partners in the French Chamber of Deputies in discussion all took time, and he only definitively took power on 18 December. Ho Chi Minh had actually floated a peace proposal on 15 December, but Blum knew nothing about it. Blum also had sent a message to Ho Chi Minh asking for communication, but the military authorities in Indochina purposefully delayed it. Chapter six, "Who Turned Out the Lights?," describes the results.

On December 19, 1946, at either 8:03 or 8:04 p.m., the electricity and water supply for Hanoi was cut. The *Tu Ve* forces and other Vietnamese spread out across the city and took French hostages, attacked French civilians, and engaged with the French troops. The Viet Minh leadership feared a coup because French troops in Hanoi had been distributed across the city, although they were often in fact simply out for a drink. A meeting of the Standing Committee of the clandestine Indochinese Communist Party—including Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Ho Chi Minh—came to a decision by around 4 o'clock in the afternoon to launch an attack against the French as a precursor to evacuating the government to the hills and beginning a war of resistance. French troops responded quite quickly after the start of hostilities, but it took two months to root out of Hanoi all communist forces.

Tønnesson's conclusion, chapter seven, "If Only..." discusses how the war might have been prevented. The French military, led by Thierry d'Argenlieu, could have worked to avoid conflict, but the leadership saw it as a way to make a definitive French claim for Indochina through violence. General Vo Nguyen Giap could have restrained his troops but did not or could not do so, and thus created the preconditions for additional French intervention. Successive French governments in Paris could have held a tighter rein on their forces in Indochina but instead focused on the politics of negotiation rather than the implementation of decisions. Georges Bidault wanted to preserve the empire, Léon Blum arrived too late to prevent popular indignation over events in Hanoi on 19 December, and other influential French groups, such as the French Communist Party, staked their political lives on supporting nationalism over

the struggles of the world's oppressed. Tønnesson does not ignore international actors such as the United States. He focuses on the anti-communist sentiment developing within the American government that acted as a muffle that prevented President Truman from hearing from Asia experts such as Abbot Low Moffat, the head of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs from 1944-1947. Indeed, Abbot's expertise later "proved" to Macarthyites that he has communist sympathies.

Stein Tønnesson's exceptional archival research, privileged access to Vietnamese political leaders who experienced the events addressed in the book, and broader expertise about Vietnam make this an important contribution to the debate about the start of the wars in Indochina that would last thirty years. *Vietnam: 1946* does an excellent job at putting its readers closer to the minds and thoughts of those who made the decisions that could lead Indochina to either peace or war. Tønnesson quite obviously has greater insights into Vietnamese thinking, because he doesn't expend much effort in plumbing the perceptions of the French. According to his characterization of them, D'Argenlieu and Bidault wanted to preserve Indochina out of greed and pride, but *Vietnam: 1946* does not explore the deeper motivations of the French. It is hard to sympathize with them in the same way as one might the Vietnamese, and yet a historian should approach the figures in his story in a balanced way. Also, the South receives short shrift, and Tønnesson does not reflect seriously on how the more radical approach and actions of communist activists and their leader in the South, Tran Huy Lieu, particularly influenced the ardent youth of the North goes undiscussed. However, readers can find other recent, equally excellent resources in which they might research these factors and thus engage with the broader debate about exactly what happened in Vietnam, France, the United States, and elsewhere in 1945 and 1946 that led the world into a bitter, devastating, and ultimately avoidable conflict.

NOTES

[1] Philippe Devilliers, *Histoire Du Viet-Nam de 1940 a 1952* (Paris Editions du Seuil, 1952, 3rd ed.); David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[2] Stein Tønnesson, *The Outbreak of War in Indochina, PRIO Report No. 3* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute, 1984).

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