

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 79

Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007. 374 pp. Sources, index. \$22.95 (pb). ISBN: 0-674-02392-7.

Review by Edward Wehrle, Eastern Illinois University.

Despite its obvious significance, the First Indochinese War--the agonizing struggle between the French and Viet Minh between 1945 and 1954--never has received the scholarly attention generated by the Second Vietnam War. Significant studies by Alain Ruscio, Yves Gras, Philippe Devillers and others are now "dated" and tend to focus more narrowly on French and Indochinese actors (p. 310, n.3).

Fortunately, if the collected essays that make up *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* are any indication, a new generation of talented, sophisticated historians is contributing to an important reappraisal of the war and the complex issues surrounding it. The volume's editors, Fredrik Logevall and Mark A. Lawrence, are among the best practitioners of the "new international history"--the movement to consider international decision-making in its full, multifaceted, global context. The editors bring this outlook to their collection of thirteen essays, which aim to illuminate the "connections between political-military events within Vietnam and the geopolitical currents in the wider world that gave those events meaning among the governments that possessed the power to influence Southeast Asia's postwar order" (p. 2). All told, the editors succeed admirably in realizing their ambitions.

Mark Bradley, a historian whose command of Vietnamese has allowed him insight into key cultural questions regarding American-Vietnamese relations, opens the collection with a trenchant historiographical review. Until recently, treatments of the First Vietnam War, such as that offered by George Herring in his important study *America's Longest War*, have shared an "overdetermined" nature, in which events leading to Dien Bien Phu serve as inexorable steps toward French and eventually American defeat. Lost, according to Bradley, are "the broader uncertainties and ambiguities through which contemporary state and nonstate actors viewed the French war" (p. 19). As revealed in the recent works of Mark Lawrence, Sophie Judge-Quinn, and Kim N. B. Ninh, a host of complex contingencies and factors played themselves out in France, the United States, Vietnam, and elsewhere--forces that hardly lend themselves to simplistic formulas. "The result is an admittedly messier picture, although probably one truer to the period itself," explains Bradley (p. 39). Fittingly, the essays that follow reflect the messiness and complexity necessary for a full appreciation of the First Indochinese War.

While Bradley touches on Vietnamese contributions to the historiography, the topic is taken up in full in a useful essay by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. Vietnamese treatments hardly have resulted in vigorous scholarly debates and are "still not entirely divorced from presentist needs," yet new scholarship, Nguyen argues, does provide insights (p. 51). She points, for instance, to Vietnamese studies of the experience of Maghreb soldiers who deserted their posts in the French army to join the resistance in Indochina.

A number of strong essays follow the historiographical treatments, each, prism-like, shedding light in different directions and adding density to our understanding of the war. Among the richest essays from the standpoint of new research, is David Marr's fascinating account of Vietnamese preparations for war in the immediate period following World War II. Offering an exciting preview of his forthcoming sequel to *Vietnam: 1945*, Marr depicts the Indochinese Communist Party's struggle to control and direct the outpouring of energy into militia groups as tensions rose in the months leading to the official

outbreak of war in December 1946.

From there, the scope widens considerably with Stein Tonnesson's reappraisal of American policy on the eve of the war, in which Franklin Roosevelt is shown to have remained to his death an active opponent of reimposing French colonialism. Mark Lawrence also contributes an essay chronicling Britain's shifting response to the Indochinese crisis. Building on themes developed in his excellent recent book, Lawrence demonstrates how early on the British aggressively pushed a reluctant United States to take a more assertive stance in favor of maintaining French colonialism. By the early 1950s, however, with the transfer of substantial portions of its empire, Britain's interests were transformed, and it now sought to dissuade a considerably more motivated United States from expanding its interests in the region.

The French side of the story—of particular interest to H-France readers—is depicted in three especially interesting essays. Party divisions, competition, and awkward coalitions, argues Martin Thomas, produced an “unprecedented imperialist consensus” dominating French politics in the wake of World War II (p. 130). A “closed environment” resulted, which effectively froze out anti-imperialist discourse until the early 1950s (p. 131). The rise of the Fourth Republic in which center-left political parties, such as the *Mouvement républicain populaire*, played major roles offered real opportunity for “radical reform,” according to Martin (p. 131). But alas, the ever shifting political tides of the period left stillborn such possibilities. Broadening the discussion, Laurent Cesari considers France's fragile place in the evolving Western European balance of power. Presenting Indochina as at best a “marginal asset” to the struggling Fourth Republic, the realities of the U.S.-underwritten Western European rearmament (especially the threat of a resurgent West Germany) forced French leaders to face a discomfiting question: “what mattered more—Europe or Indochina” (p. 178)? As early as 1952, the French decided the answer was Europe, but the war continued as officials sought an elusive “graceful exit” (p.188).

If Martin and Cesari provide potent insights into the politics behind the beginnings of the First Vietnamese War and the graceless French exit, Kathryn Statler offers a fascinating account of the reconstruction of Franco-South Vietnamese relations in the years after the war. In the immediate aftermath of the division of Vietnam, Franco-Vietnamese relations declined precipitously, especially with the ascension of the outspokenly anti-French Ngo Dinh Diem. Having sacrificed their political and military presence in Vietnam, French officials strove, without much success, to build economic and cultural bridges with nascent South Vietnam. Meanwhile American influence expanded proportionally. But by the late 1950s, Diem had grown wary of American aid, which he lamented “always came at a price” (p. 274). When France threw its support behind an unsuccessful effort to admit South Vietnam to the United Nations and moved to follow through on promised transfers of French public property, the stage was set for a “French resurgence” (p. 126). Soon Diem's influential brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was expressing a desire “to work more closely with the French since he could not trust Americans” (p. 280). By the time DeGaulle was proposing the neutralization of Southeast Asia, France again was a cultural and political force in South Vietnam (although never North Vietnam).

Insightful essays by Chen Jian, depicting Zhou Enlai's skillful handling of the Viet Minh at the Geneva Conference, and Ho Chi Minh biographer William Duiker, arguing for the imaginative and original skills of Ho in formulating revolutionary strategy, also merit mention. In the wake of the Korean War, Zhou, as Chen reveals, desperately sought to avoid American intervention by pressing his Viet Minh allies to accept a divided Vietnam. Although “not generally considered an original thinker,” Ho, Duiker argues, effectively and pragmatically offered “a patchwork of ideas designed to meet the particular circumstances of the Vietnamese revolution” (pp. 153, 173).

Two scholars more associated with the first wave of scholarship examining the Vietnam Wars, Andrew Rotter and Marilyn Young, also contribute essays. Young argues that French officials, in particular General Jean-Marie Gabriel de Lattre de Tassigny, explicitly sought to link their battle in Indochina

with the American struggle in Korea, thereby justifying their war as a similar “struggle for liberty” as opposed to a “dirty war” for colonialism (p. 210). The American media (at least Henry Luce publications), Young insists, quickly picked up this line. Yet Young offers no examples of this discourse surviving the first fifteen months of the Korean War. With America bogged down in Korea and French struggles continuing in Indochina, one imagines—in the absence of contrary evidence from Young—the potency of the Korea analogy quickly passed. By 1952, the suggestion that Indochina might proffer the “same struggle” as Korea, no doubt, hardly would be a selling point.

In the final contribution to this fine collection, Andrew Rotter, explaining that the American Vietnam War was “an agony foretold,” attempts to identify eight salient themes from the Franco-Vietnamese War that would “characterize the war after 1965” (p. 284). It is always difficult to paint with a broad brush, and, while Rotter makes some constructive points, his analysis flounders. Like their French predecessors, Americans were beset by an “ignorance and racism,” marked by an inclination to view the Vietnamese as “childish” (p. 285). Rotter offers three impressive examples of this tendency, but one wonders if this is sufficient; when does one reach critical mass on this sort of thing? Another great theme for Rotter is a “desire to avoid...exposing American soldiers to harm, by seeking others—the French and the Vietnamese from 1945 to 1954 and the South Vietnamese after 1965 to fight the war themselves” (p. 299). But a manifest willingness *to expose—not shield*—Americans from combat was the outstanding feature of American policy through to the late 1960s. It is scarcely necessary to cite the several million U.S. soldiers who served in Southeast Asia (over 58,000 of whom did not return) to reinforce this point. Bold generalizations can bring clarity, but in a collection that rightfully stresses nuance, contingency, and complexity, the Rotter and Young essays seem out-of-place.

The essays collected by Lawrence and Logevall offer a strong testimonial to the benefits of international history. One sees the First Vietnam War from multiple and varying perspectives in all its complexity. As Mark Bradley suggested of the current scholarship in the field, we are left with an “admittedly messier picture.” And one easily could imagine an even messier one. The intricate and important story of nationalist Vietnamese, such as Ngo Dinh Diem, who chose not to cast their lots with the Viet Minh would lend yet another crucial layer to this multifaceted story. Yet the supreme challenge awaits the scholar who will seek to weave these multi-dimensional stories into a coherent narrative. Fortunately, both Frederick Logevall and David Marr are directing their considerable talents to histories of the Franco-Vietnamese war. The results should be both messy and fascinating.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, “Introduction”

Mark Philip Bradley, “Making Sense of the French War: The Postcolonial Moment and the First Vietnam War, 1945-1954”

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, “Vietnamese Historians and the First Indochina War”

Stein Tonnesson, “Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and Indochina: A Reassessment”

David G. Marr, “Creating Defense Capacity in Vietnam, 1945-1947”

Mark Atwood Lawrence, "Forging the 'Great Combination': Britain and the Indochina Problem, 1945-1950"

Martin Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950"

William J. Duiker, "Ho Chi Minh and the Strategy of People's War"

Laurent Cesari, "The Declining Value of Indochina: France and the Economics of Empire, 1950-1955"

Marilyn B. Young, "France, the United States, and Indochina"

John Prados, "Assessing Dien Bien Phu"

Chen Jian, "China and the Indochina Settlement at the Geneva Conference of 1954"

Kathryn C. Statler, "After Geneva: The French Presence in Vietnam, 1954-1963"

Andrew J. Rotter, "Chronicle of a War Foretold: The United States and Vietnam, 1945-1954"

Edward Wehrle Eastern Illinois University efwehrle@eiu.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 79

ISSN 1553-9172