Because language matters, the vernacular of the Vietnam War can be tricky to navigate. What should we call the war? How should we characterize it? How should we identify the parties involved? That last question provides a good starting point in analyzing Nu-Anh Tran’s excellent new book, Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam.

In the two decades that I have been teaching classes on the subject, I have regularly used the term “revolutionaries” to refer to those Vietnamese who took up arms against the French and the Americans to achieve an independent and, after 1954, unified Vietnamese state. I have opted for this term over the frequently used “Communists” because I believe it is more accurate. As we know, not everyone who fought against France and the United States was a Communist. But after reading Disunion, I realize that I might need to be more specific, though with a caveat.

The “conventional assumption,” Tran writes in Disunion, is that “only the communists” deserved the “revolutionary” label (6). In fact, she argues, so do the many anti-Communists who supported—though were often critical of the leadership of—the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). (While the anti-Communists lined up behind the Republic of Vietnam, earlier they had been divided over whether to support the RVN’s French-sponsored predecessor, the State of Vietnam.) Putting aside the too casual lumping of those traditionally considered revolutionaries as “communists,” Tran is clear about the revolutionary credentials of the anti-Communists. “Vietnamese anticommunists, like their communist counterparts,” she writes, “were subversive in organizing illegal, underground networks dedicated to toppling French rule and forming a sovereign government” (6). They were “also revolutionary insofar as they intentionally set themselves apart from the reformers [who wanted to work with the colonial government to modernize Vietnam] and refused to cooperate with French authorities as a long-term strategy” (6).

There is a lot riding on that last clause (“as a long-term strategy”). As Tran herself makes clear, the evidence of collaboration—or, more generously, “cooperation”—with French, Japanese, and/or US imperialism by much of the Vietnamese anti-Communist movement is abundant. As such, the nationalist credentials of many anti-Communists do not always seem obvious. But Tran’s work underscores the complexity of the issue.

This complexity was evident in the Republic of Vietnam, which was formed following a 1955 referendum in the southern regroupment zone that emerged out of the 1954 Geneva Accords.1 Indeed, as Tran lays out in

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1 The 1955 State of Vietnam referendum determined what form of government South Vietnam would assume. Voters were asked whether they wished to retain the current government under head of state Bao Dai or “recognize Ngo Dinh Diem as Chief of State of Vietnam with the duty to organize a democratic government.” Jessica Chapman,
great detail, the RVN was a very complicated society. This is seen even in its origin story. That 1955 referendum, Tran notes, was an “unfair election” marred by fraud but accepted by both the Diemists (i.e., those who supported Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem) and the sect parties “despite their professed respect for democracy” (86). The RVN’s complexity was baked into its everyday life. Newspapers flourished but often faced censorship. Writers published their work yet could find themselves tossed in prison. Elections were contested but only certain parties could run. It was, in other words, a place of contradictions, one whose relatively open political culture resulted in a vibrant contest of ideas with a seemingly never-ending factional struggle for influence and power. At times the factionalism was obvious, as when Diem, who dominated RVN politics until his overthrow in 1963, battled the religious sects of the Caodaists and the Hoa Hao or the criminal syndicate Binh Xuyen. And further pointing to the factionalism, more than once Diem found himself besieged by coup plotters, including from within his own government, leading his regime to brutally crack down on other elements of the anti-Communist movement (129, 135, 142-150, 161, 163).

It is true that historians of the war have not always addressed the RVN’s complexity. At the same time, it is rare nowadays to see a reference to Ngo Dinh Diem as an American “puppet,” and it is only slightly less uncontroversial to note that he was in fact a nationalist. The idea of Diem as a nationalist, and by implication the RVN as a nationalist project, is an argument that has been advanced by a number of scholars in recent years who have enriched our understanding of the authoritarian leader, showing his determined refusal to heed American counsel in favor of his own vision for the Republic of Vietnam’s development and modernization.2

Still, Tran is certainly correct that historians have rarely explored in depth the complicated internal dynamics that characterized the RVN.3 This is where Tran’s work is so valuable. Disunion rounds out our understanding of the contentious political disputes that were a hallmark of the Diem era. Identifying as a “fifth wave” historian of the Vietnam War—that is, one who has “made domestic developments within the RVN the primary focus of scholarly inquiry” (5)—she expertly addresses what she calls the “anticommunist nationalism” that flourished in the South. The book moves chronologically, beginning with the birth of this anti-Communist nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century and proceeding through the last months of the Diem administration (with some brief closing comments on the years that followed the 1963 coup).

Tran argues that the RVN was not simply a manifestation of US imperial designs for Vietnam. In fact, she writes, it had “deep roots in the Vietnamese past,” with a politics that “developed from a strand of revolutionary nationalism that long predated French efforts to sponsor a nominally independent Vietnamese regime” (13). Yet, she notes, “despite the revolutionaries’ professed commitment to democracy, none ever established a political system in which all groups would be allowed to participate” (13-14). This was certainly true of the Diemists, who built an authoritarian regime that repressed political dissent. But it was also true of others. Indeed, if there is a common dynamic that linked much of the Vietnamese anti-Communist movement across the decades, it was an unwillingness or inability to accept some competing factions as legitimate actors in the Vietnamese political struggle.

For the anti-Communists—a diverse group of intellectuals, religionists, businesspeople, writers, military officials, and others—this meant not just Communists but often other anti-Communists. But the anti-Communists’ vision was not simply negative. It was positive, too, according to Tran. Most of the anti-Communists wanted—at least in theory—a constitutional republic that generally respected civil liberties


(though not always) and tolerated a competitive electoral system (though, again, not always). Theirs would be “a democratic republic that incorporated all ethnic Vietnamese” (5), she writes. (As for non-ethnic Vietnamese, Disunion doesn’t clarify where they fit into this vision of the republic.) As Tran makes clear throughout her book, however, what was meant by “democratic” was a matter of fierce dispute.

Yet there did seem to be general agreement on at least one facet of the envisioned “democracy.” From Ngo Dinh Diem to dissident Phan Quang Dan, the anti-Communists were adamant that Communists had no place in their state. Writing of the mid-1950s, Tran explains that anti-Communists “worried that unfettered liberty and free elections would leave the state vulnerable to communist subversion,” as there were thousands of “underground communists” in the South who “might infiltrate the government or incite dissatisfaction against the regime” (77). (Years later, both US Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, who believed Vietnamese lacked the “necessary sophistication and understanding” to make a “two-party democratic system work” [159], and US diplomat Joseph Mendenhall expressed similar concerns [141]). Here, further comment would have been helpful, particularly given that the fraudulent 1955 southern referendum establishing the RVN, together with planned National Assembly elections in early 1956, was in many ways an end run around the 1956 national election required by the Geneva Accords. It is unclear what “infiltrate the government” means. Would being elected be considered an act of infiltration? Similarly, Tran writes about the opposition “incit[ing] dissatisfaction against the regime,” but is not railing against the status quo how virtually every challenger in a democracy mobilizes support? And what of the “press regulations” blocking “communist propaganda” supported by Phan Quang Dan, who, Tran notes, would go on to become “the foremost oppositionist under Diem’s rule” (91, 94)? What exactly is “communist propaganda,” which in 1956 would be banned by the RVN constitution (102)?

Given the residual popularity of the Viet Minh after 1954, this raises serious questions about what was meant by “democracy.” Can a state legitimately claim to be democratic if it forbids its most popular political group? To her credit, Tran repeatedly notes the RVN’s political shortcomings and the limitations in the anti-Communists’ calls for a democratic order. And she explains how things changed after Diem’s assassination in 1963. The RVN evolved into “a more democratic hybrid regime” that was “a far cry from Diem’s dictatorial republic,” she writes (168). Yet she still faults scholars for earlier judging the RVN based on “Western norms” that “assumed that Western democracies represented a universal standard of political progress” (168). This is an important and noteworthy point; after all, Tran correctly says that “Western democracies suffered from their own contradictions and shortcomings.” But Tran’s effort to “liberate the RVN from the Western paradigm” (169) is less convincing. If the whole point of the anti-Communist movement was to create a “democratic republic” (5) that contrasted with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s (DRV, or North Vietnam) one-party Communist state, one cannot help but wonder what standard of “democracy” allows for the prohibition of South Vietnam’s most popular political force.

Without a doubt, Disunion is an important book. Incisive and revealing, it shines an essential spotlight on the Vietnamese anti-Communist movement that, for a time, found expression in the Republic of Vietnam.

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