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Reviewed by **Trần Thị Lien**, University of Paris, Diderot

In this paper, Ronald H Spector, a specialist on U.S. foreign policy and military history, intends to demonstrate the specific features of wars in Asia during the Cold War, summarized in the three terms of the title: “Nationalism, Religion and Identity.” He takes the case of Phát Diệm during the ‘Franco Việt Minh War’ as a local example. To him, the war on the field in Phát Diệm, which is situated in the Red River Delta and characterized by a strong religious identity [a heavily Catholic region in an overwhelmingly non-Christian Vietnam” (36)], led by a very nationalist bishop, Lê Hữu Từ, illustrates well the specificity of the Cold War in Asia and “illuminates the true nature of the Cold War” (35).

This case study seems to be a part of his research project on the ‘hot wars’ of the Asian Cold War during 1949-54. The author entirely refutes the common idea of the Cold War as a “long peace period”¹ with regards to the numerous conflicts that broke out during the first decade after World War Two. To Spector, the Japanese occupation and the subsequent weakening of colonial rule opened a period of disorders in which “Old boundaries and bonds of community began to disappear and regional, ethnic, and religious differences were sharpened.” These insecurities permitted the arrival of “new rivals for authority, unleashed new political forces and ideologies and encouraged the renewal of older quarrels and causes” (35-36). Spector believes that the real nature of what he calls “the postcolonial wars” in Asia was not only a mix of “conflict between Communist and non-Communist forces and colonialists and independence movements”

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

but “almost always had many of the aspects of civil war, brigandage, and religious, ethnic or regional conflicts.” (36).

Void of any cultural or military significance, the Phát Diệm bishopric, he argues, is but a “microcosm of cross-currents of regionalism, nationalism and religion” (36). His argument is based on a description of Phát Diệm from 1945 to 1954, he evokes some major battles (the French offensive in Fall 1949 which put an end to the autonomy of the area, or the Đáy battle in Spring 1951, during which a large scale Việt Minh offensive was repelled by the French). He calls the area “a feudal domain, an ecclesiastical fief,”² citing the words of the famous French journalist Lucien Bodard, and highlights the controversial personality and policy of Bishop Từ with his private militia. Portraying the Bishop through his supporters’ eyes as an advocate of “justice, reason, humanity, and tolerance” (37) and as he was as seen by his detractors as a “near-absolute secular ruler,” (36) Spector admits Bishop Từ’s strong nationalism in defending Phát Diệm autonomy from the French and Việt Minh, and his determination to defend Christian values against Communism, with the support of his priests and people. Indeed, Spector describes the evolution of a man who at the end of 1945 agreed for nationalist reasons to become the personal adviser of Hồ Chí Minh and by the end of 1949 had rallied to the French-Bảo Đại government for political ones.

Spector sets the factual context of the French Indochina War from the breakdown of the peace, and the negotiating phases to the great battles. He describes the international context at the crucial turning point of 1949-51, when General Võ Nguyên Giáp began receiving weapons from the Communist Chinese and when the French General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny won the military support of the Americans, leading to the transformation of a colonial into an ideological war. While the general framework of the conflict at the local, national, and international level is faithfully and well summarized, my criticism focuses on the article’s general vision of the conflict, the perception of Vietnamese nationalism, and of the Catholic political stake in the war, not to mention the pertinence of the Phát Diệm case as a microcosm of Cold war in Asia.

First, the idea that the Cold war in Asia was not cold but hot is absolutely not new. The only reference on Cold War historiography in the article is John Gaddis’s *The Long Peace*³ which was published before 1989. Specialists of International Relations in Asia, such as Michael Yahuda, argued as early as 1994 that: “The first hot war of the era (of Cold War) had been fought in Asia,” and Samuel S Kim argued in 2008 that “While Europe enjoyed a

² Lucien Bodard, *The Quicksand War* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967), 211, quoted on 36. He was a war correspondent in Indochina from 1948 to 1954 and is well known for his book *La guerre d'Indochine* in five volumes published from 1963 to 1967 (Paris: Gallimard) [I *L'Enlèvement*, II *L'Illusion*, III *L'Humiliation*, IV *L'Aventure*, V *L'Épuisement*].

³ John L. Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

cold peace, with no major armed conflict, the Asian Cold War turned into hot war in Korea and in Vietnam. With three of the four major Cold War fault lines (...), East Asia acquired the dubious distinction of having engendered the largest number of armed conflicts (...) between 1945 and 1994 than any other region.”⁴ Moreover, the author analyzes the Cold War by “lumping together” all the contemporary conflicts in Asia (China, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia (36), whereas these conflicts had very different causes and forms. The French historian François Joyaux ⁵ has shown that North East Asia (China, Japan, Korea) was characterized by Cold War rivalry, whereas Southeast Asia was marked by the constant interference of national questions on the Cold War competition. However, the strong ethnic and religious dimensions of conflicts in Southeast Asia, as in Malaysia, has nothing to do with Vietnam, which is characterized by an exceptional homogenous population (*kinh*).

Second, Spector’s approach to Asian nationalisms, and Vietnamese nationalism in particular, doesn’t take into account the numerous works on the genesis of nationalisms in Asia. Speaking about the arrival in 1945 of “new political forces and ideologies” and “new rivals for authority” because of external factors (the Japanese occupation and weakening of colonial rule), the author ignores the works on the strength of Vietnamese nationalism since the end of the nineteenth century, such as those of David Marr.⁶ Following the Africanist Frederick Cooper in considering Communism as the result of external infiltration, [arguing that “different groups among a colonized population might bring their own histories and their own interests to a complex engagement with a colonial power”⁷ (35), he also ignores the early graft of Communist ideas in the Vietnamese nationalist movement that has been demonstrated by Huỳnh Kim Khánh and Sophie Quinn Judge.⁸ The presentation of the political situation in 1945 as a time of disorders where “regional, ethnic, and religious differences were sharpened” (36) in comparison with the previous period appears a bit exaggerated, whereas during the colonial period, regional, ethnic, and religious differences were promoted by the colonial authorities,

⁴ Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia –Pacific, 1945- 1995* (London: Routledge 1998/2004, 29) and Samuel S Kim, “The Evolving Asian System, Three Transformation”, in David Shambaugh, Michael Yahuda (ed.) *International Relations of Asia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008, 46)

⁵ François Joyaux, *Géopolitique de l’Extrême Orient, T 1: Espaces et politiques* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1993)

⁶ David G Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925* (University of California Press, 1971) and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, (University of California Press, 1981).

⁷ Frederick Cooper, “The Dialectics of Decolonization: Nationalism and Labor Movements in Postwar French Africa,” in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 436, quoted on 35.

⁸ Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945* (Cornell University Press, 1986), Sophie Quinn Judge, *The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley, California University Press, 2003).

according to the divide-and-rule strategy. Moreover, the use of the term “Franco-Việt Minh War” for what is more often called the “Indochina War” or “French-Vietnam War”⁹ seems to underestimate the colonial nature of the war, reducing the conflict to a struggle between the French and the nationalist league directed by Communists, thus endorsing the French justification of this colonial war: the struggle against communism.¹⁰ It denies the presence of non-communists in Việt Minh ranks, in particular during the period 1945-50, including some Catholics from Phát Diệm-Bùi Chu and is at odds with the regular contacts between Bishop Từ and Hồ Chí Minh.

Third, the depiction of Catholic politics seems not very subtle, mostly viewed from Western eyes, those of the British writer Graham Green, the French journalist Lucien Bodard, or the American journalist Eric Gibbs, who discovered Phát Diệm in 1951, after the French reconquest and give their impressions of it. Their insistence on the feudal character of the Catholic society, as quoted by the author, remain superficial, even caricatured (“a feudal domain, an ecclesiastical fief in the name of the Lord...The cure was lord and the parishoners his serfs. For the good of their souls the peasants were dominated by a litle army of Asian priests with fat faces and shining cassocks”¹¹ (36- 37)). This view does not permit us to understand the complex situation in the very specific area of Phát Diệm. The inclusion of books on Bishop Từ published by his close collaborators such as his secretary Đoàn Độc Thư would have contributed to highlight the perspective of Catholics in Phát Diệm.¹² When the author speaks about Catholicism as “a French-imposed religion” (37), he should also have mentioned that it was brought to Vietnam in the mid-sixteenth century by the Portuguese Jesuits, and Spanish Dominicans - that is to say, three centuries before the French conquest. At the French arrival in the mid-nineteenth century, the Vietnamese Catholic community was already deeply acculturated and structured by an ancient and numerous Vietnamese clergy and laity, which was the only way to preserve Catholicism from persecution by a suspicious Confucian power. Respect for the clergy has to be understood in that context of persecutions, and the Confucian tradition of respect for literati.

⁹ Christopher E. Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945-1954). An International and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2011).

¹⁰ The only quoted French reference on the Indochina War is the book of General Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: Plon, 1979), which is not in France considered as a book of reference on the order of Jacques Dalloz's *La guerre d'Indochine* (Paris, Seuil, 1987), Alain Ruscio's *La Guerre française d'Indochine* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1992), or Laurent Cesari's, *L'Indochine en guerres* (Paris: Belin, 1995).

¹¹ Bodard, *The Quicksand War* 211.

¹² Đoàn Độc Thư & Xuân Huy, *Giám mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm, 1945-1954.- Những năm tranh đấu hào hùng*, Bishop Lê hữu Từ and Phát Diệm, *The years of heroic fight* (1973) and *Giám mục Lê Hữu Từ* (Edition Hoa-Lư, 2001).

The militia of Bishop Từ in 1945 cannot be understood through references to Western feudalism, but rather in terms of recent history, when Catholics, accused of being the Trojan horse of the French invaders, had to organize to defend themselves from persecution during the French conquest. The militia was organized in 1945 by Father Quỳnh, in order to defend the autonomy of Phát Diệm from the French as well as from their powerful Communist allies. The respect for the authority of Bishop Từ and Vietnamese priests was all the stronger given that that Phát Diệm - Bùi Chu was one of the oldest Catholic areas, and was one of the only bishopric administered by the Vietnamese clergy without any French missionary presence. The extreme nationalism of Bishop Từ can only be explained by his desire not to be associated with French colonialism. It led him from 1945 to 1950 to collaborate with the Việt Minh, to meet Hồ Chí Minh on a number of occasions and to determine his policy of autonomy in a strategic region situated at the border of the area controlled by the Việt Minh. At a minimum the focus on only the position of Bishop Từ, even if he was largely predominant, obscures the political debate that existed among bishops, priests, and Catholics. Indeed, the Hanoi Bishop Trịnh Như Khuê and some priests decided to stay, and many Catholics didn't leave North Vietnam.

To conclude, Spector's interest in the Phát Diệm experience appears justified, it should not have been focused on the area as an indicator of 'the true nature of the Cold War' but, on the contrary, as a very specific local reality with no equivalent, and which has to be studied as such. More generally, conflicts in East Asia during the Cold War cannot be approached only from the top and through the filter of Cold-War perspectives (which are Western), but should also be approached from the bottom and through a local, national, and regional perspective, which would permit us to understand another important issue during that period: the relationships between Catholics and Communists in Vietnam during one of "hottest war of the era of Cold War". That would also require us to take Catholic and Communist sources¹³ into account.

Trần Thị Lien is Assistant Professor at Paris Diderot University. She is a member of Cessma (*Centre d'Etudes en Sciences Sociales sur les Mondes Africains, Américains. et Asiatiques*). A historian, she is working on Contemporary Vietnam and in particular on history of Catholicism and State/Religion relations in a comparative perspective with other Communist countries. Among her latest publications are "Communist State and Religious Policy in Vietnam: A Historical Perspective", in *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, Special issue "Developing the Rule of law in East Asia" ed. Adriaan Bedner, Vol 6, issue 2, September 2013, 229-252 and "The Challenge For Peace Within South Vietnam's Catholic Community: History Of Peace Activism," in *Peace and Change, A Journal of Peace Research*, Special Issue "Narratives of reconciliation: the Vietnamese case," Vol 38,

¹³ *Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh với đồng bào Công giáo* (President Hồ Chí Minh with Catholic comrades) (Hà Nội: Nxb CTQG, 2004).

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Issue 4, October 2013, 447-474. She is finishing a book on *Les catholiques vietnamiens entre la reconquête coloniale et la résistance communiste (1945-1954)* to be published in 2015 and is working on Left Catholics faced with Communism in Vietnam.

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