

2011

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume XII, No. 11 (2011)

28 March 2011

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Roundtable Web/Production Editor: George Fujii

Introduction by Pierre Asselin, Hawaii Pacific University

David Hunt. *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, December 2008. 288 pp., 2 maps. ISBN 978-1-55849-692-7 (paper, \$28.95).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-11.pdf>

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Introduction by Pierre Asselin, Hawaii Pacific University

David Hunt's *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* fills an important void in the historiography of the Vietnam War. Over the past two decades western scholars have paid closer attention to Vietnamese parties during the war, trying to elucidate a broad range of issues ranging from the nature of Diem's regime and leadership style to Hanoi's anti-American strategy.¹ As a result, we now have a better sense of the roles those parties played in the war, and of the agency therein of the Vietnamese generally. There is no denying that the United States had a profound impact on developments in Vietnam between 1954 and 1975. But it did not control events there, as earlier studies by American diplomatic historians had suggested.

Among those Vietnamese parties that shaped the course of the Vietnam War was the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF, the so-called "Viet Cong"). Consisting of southerners of disparate socio-economic backgrounds and political persuasions who joined forces to oppose the Saigon regime and American involvement in Vietnamese affairs, this umbrella organization presumably controlled by the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) in Hanoi spearheaded and for a period almost singlehandedly carried out the southern insurgency. Following the Americanization of hostilities in spring 1965, the NLF made seminal contributions to the "Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation" (*cuoc khang chien chong My, cuu nuoc*) launched by the VWP to counter Washington's policies in Vietnam and in the rest of Indochina.

¹ See among others William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2nd Edition (Westview: 1996); Robert Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Cornell, 1999); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam: The Making of Post-Colonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (North Carolina, 2000); Christopher Goscha, "The 'Two Vietnams' and the Advent of the Cold War: 1950 and Asian Shifts in the International System" in Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann (eds.), *Connected Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Asia, 1945-1962* (Stanford/Woodrow Wilson Center, 2010); Martin Grossheim, "Revisionism in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence from the East German Archives" in *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, no. 4 (November 2005), 451-477; Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, "The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War" in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 3, 1-16; Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Kansas, 2003); Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Robert Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966* (Kentucky, 2002); Jessica Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai" in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 30, no. 4 (September 2006), 671-703; Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communist Relations with China and the Second Indo-China Conflict, 1956-1962* (MacFarland, 1997), *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), and *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (Routledge Curzon, 2004); Lien-Hang Nguyen, "The War Politburo: Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tet Offensive" in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* Vol. 1, nos. 1-2 (February/August 2006), 4-55; Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge, 2006); Harish Metha, "'People's Diplomacy': The Diplomatic Front of North Vietnam during the War Against the United States, 1965-1972," Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 2009; and Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (North Carolina, 2002).

A number of studies have addressed the NLF. Among the earliest was Douglas Pike's *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (MIT Press, 1966), which offered interesting insights based on documents captured from insurgents. Other useful wartime studies included Melvin Gurtov's *Viet Cong Cadres and the Cadre System: A Study of the Main and Local Forces* (Rand, 1967); George Tanham's *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Vietminh to the Viet Cong* (Praeger, 1967; reprinted in 2006); Nathan Leites' *The Viet Cong Style of Politics* (Rand, 1969); and Joseph J. Zasloff's *Political Motivation of the Viet Cong: The Vietminh Regroupees* (Rand, 1975), which relied on interviews with NLF prisoners and defectors to relate the experiences of southern revolutionaries who had regrouped to the North at the conclusion of the war with France and the signing of the Geneva accords only to return to the South starting in 1959-60 to help launch the insurgency there. Arguably the most impressive wartime study was Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (University of California, 1972; reprinted in 2010). Though not concerned with the NLF specifically, it shed revealing light on the organization and on the mindset of its members. The study still has currency as a socio-political history of the southern revolution, and remains a staple in courses on the history of the Vietnam War at American colleges and universities.

Interestingly, few good works on the NLF have been published in the United States since the end of the war. Truong Nhu Tan's *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (Vintage, 1986) relates the author's experiences as a founding member of the NLF, a committed but ultimately disgruntled revolutionary. It is an engrossing read, but also a personal memoir limited in scope and perspective. David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai's *Portrait of the Enemy* (Random House, 1986; reprinted as '*Vietnam*': *A Portrait of Its People at War* by Tauris, 1996) is an engaging oral history of the experiences of leading as well as rank-and-file NLF members. Unfortunately, it offers no analysis or synthesis of the meaning of these individual experiences. Robert K. Brigham's *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, which traces the evolution of the NLF with an emphasis on its activities abroad, is an excellent albeit brief and narrow study of the Front. The same may be said of George Tanham's *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Vietminh to the Viet Cong* (Routledge, 2006).

Hunt's work differs from, and in fact stands out among, studies of the NLF because it represents the first serious attempt at making sense of – that is, at contextualizing – the very many and varied experiences of NLF rank-and-file members, and thus at offering informed conclusions on those “real” or “actual” forces that inspired the southern insurgency and motivated its supporters.² The protagonists in Hunt's narrative are not one-dimensional “freedom fighters” moved to action by an inherited spirit of resistance to foreign aggression, love of country, visceral hatred of the Saigon regime and its American

² H-Diplo recently released a roundtable on Mail Elliott's *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* which is accessible at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-1-5.pdf> Elliott's study complements Hunt's book on several different levels, most notably with Hunt's use of interviews of Vietnamese defectors and prisoners-of-war from the National Liberation Front and Elliott worked as an interviewer and translator in this RAND project.

patrons, and/or firm belief in the merits of Marxism-Leninism. They are instead average men and women who committed themselves to a protracted and dangerous struggle because they wanted to satisfy personal ambitions, to meet essentially selfish goals such as acquiring more land, achieving a higher standard of living, escaping village routine or the tyranny of not only the Saigon authorities but also of demanding in-laws and greedy landlords, and, for the young in particular, gaining respect from peers. The motive force behind the struggle was thus “revolutionary modernism,” in Hunt’s words, namely, a quest for greater personal – not national – autonomy and self-determination. The southern revolution was not one grand project; it was instead a collection of innumerable individual projects inspired by “the longing for an escape from feudal backwardness and for an unprecedented happiness” (8) and pursued under the aegis of a coordinating body, a centralized leadership.

To be sure, as the reviewers note, the book suffers from certain shortcomings. The author’s use of hyperbole and superlatives in reference to circumstances in the South during the war and to his subjects is both unnecessary and irritating. Unsubstantiated statements to the effect that in My Tho following Americanization of the war in 1965 “bombs and shells fell everywhere, tanks flattened orchards and plowed up rice fields, troops sacked houses and shot villagers” (154) undermine what is otherwise a strong and convincing narrative. Similarly, such editorializing as when the author notes that NLF members “made a heroic effort to control their own destiny” (9) undermines the central thesis of the work that these were regular men and women prompted by circumstances to do extraordinary things. Besides, the qualifier “heroic” is reminiscent of less nuanced national and personal polemics positing that there were “good” and “bad” sides in the Vietnam War (“heroes” and “villains”), which, ironically, is an interpretation Hunt’s findings dispel. The source material, consisting almost exclusively of transcripts of interrogations of NLF prisoners and defectors collected by the Rand Corporation, a think tank funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, is also problematic. Hunt does an excellent job of justifying his use of these materials, and addressing their limitations. Nonetheless, one cannot help wonder if the circumstances of these ex-insurgents prompted them to offer self-serving testimonies that did not fully capture the life experiences and attitudes of NLF members generally, and of those who were still fighting specifically. In other words, concerns about “strategic self-preservation,” as Ann Marie Leshkovich puts it, may have skewed the answers they provided to interrogators’ questions. A broader theoretical framework on peasant revolutionary action, she submits, would have enhanced the narrative’s credibility. Lien-Hang Nguyen posits that use of other sources could also have been beneficial. Local Vietnamese histories, for instance, would have given the author a chance to weigh the Rand testimonies against those of Vietnamese who fought to the bitter end, and thus to avoid the trappings of near exclusive reliance on a single set of materials. For Edwin Moise, a wider array of sources could have served to corroborate Hunt’s bold yet potentially valid argument to the effect that the NLF was highly autonomous, and even acted in defiance of orders from Hanoi on occasion, such as when it planned and instigated a popular uprising in My Tho in 1959-60.

All things being equal, the book’s shortcomings are few, and are outweighed by the wealth of information and quality of analysis it contains. As the distinguished scholars whose

reviews appear in the roundtable make very clear, Hunt excels at bringing his subjects to life, at giving his reader a clear sense of the men and women who were on the frontlines of the revolution south of the seventeenth parallel. This is “history from below” at its best, and a welcome as well as much needed addition to the body of literature on the war.

Participants:

David Hunt received his Ph.D. from Harvard University and is professor of history at University of Massachusetts Boston. His current research is on everyday life in the villages of the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War. Ethnography of Revolution (in progress) explores relations between the Vietnamese Communist Party and a peasantry animated by modernist currents that coincided with and diverged from party blueprints. The text includes discussion of household economies and the interplay between customary and monetized forms of exchange; religious practice; land issues and struggles; oral, scribal, written, and electronic communication; and other aspects in line with an “ethnographic” approach to the events of the 1960s.

Pierre Asselin is associate professor of history at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. He is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). His current book project examines Hanoi’s revolutionary strategy in the period 1954 to 1965.

Philip E. Catton an Associate Professor of History at Stephen F. Austin State University, received his PhD from Ohio University in 1998. He is the author of *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002). His current research focuses on the 1954 Geneva Conference and the refugee exodus from North Vietnam.

Ann Marie Leshkowich is Associate Professor of Anthropology at College of the Holy Cross (Worcester, MA). She has conducted extensive research in Vietnam on gender, marketplaces, economic transformation, globalization, fashion, and transnational adoption. Her publications include “Wandering Ghosts of Late Socialism: Conflict, Metaphor, and Memory in a Southern Vietnamese Marketplace” *Journal of Asian Studies* 67:1: 5-41, 2008; “Woman, Buddhist, Entrepreneur: Gender, Moral Values, and Class Anxiety in Late Socialist Vietnam” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1:1-2: 277-313, 2006; Niessen, Leshkowich, and Jones (eds), *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress* (Berg, 2003); and Leshkowich and Jones, “What Happens When Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?” *Fashion Theory* 7:3/4: 281-300, 2003. She is currently completing a book manuscript about socioeconomic transformation and female cloth and clothing traders in Ho Chi Minh City. Leshkowich holds a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from Harvard University.

Edwin Moise is a professor of history at Clemson University. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1977. He is the author of *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), *The A to Z of the Vietnam War* (2005), and other works on the Vietnam War and the modern history of China and

Vietnam. His electronic bibliography of the Vietnam War, accessible at his webpage, is a great resource for anyone interested in the topic.

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Kentucky where she offers courses on U.S. foreign policy and the Vietnam War. She is currently working on her book manuscript tentatively entitled, "The Dark Side of Victory: the War for Peace in Vietnam, 1968-1973." She has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes on the modern wars for Vietnam.

As U.S. forces poured into South Vietnam in the wake of Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war, the CIA's George Carver penned an article for *Foreign Affairs* entitled "The Faceless Viet Cong." His intention was to unmask the nature of the enemy that confronted the United States. Trumpeting the standard interpretation of the conflict held by the powers-that-be in Washington, he charged that the National Liberation Front (NLF) was nothing more than an organizational cover for Hanoi's war of aggression in South Vietnam. Carver's "Viet Cong" were "faceless" in another sense as well. Since he was intent on identifying the organizational leadership of the revolution, he devoted almost no attention to the ordinary southerners who joined the insurgency, implying that they were simply duped or coerced into supporting it.¹ Although scholars have long since moved beyond such crude characterizations, the southern insurgents still remain something of a mystery. David Hunt is not the first scholar to attempt to penetrate their world, but he provides the most intimate portrait to date of the lives of southerners who joined the insurgency, their hopes and dreams, and the toll taken by the escalating conflict in the South Vietnamese countryside. *Vietnam's Southern Revolution* restores agency to those who participated in the resistance and puts a human face on people who appear only as shadows in most works on the war.

Studies of the southern revolutionaries are relatively few in number when compared to the vast literature on the Vietnam conflict. Much of that literature is devoted to the American side of events, and most works on the war focus on diplomacy, high politics, and military campaigns. As Hunt states at the start of his book, he wanted to write "a different kind of history" of the conflict – a social history, or "history from below," that would provide an insight into the world of the southern insurgents and "everyday realities at village level" (p.1). To do so, he drew on interviews of NLF prisoners and defectors conducted in the period 1965-1968 by the Rand Corporation, as part of a Pentagon-commissioned study of "Viet Cong motivation and morale." He focused on the transcripts of 285 interviews with former insurgents from the Mekong Delta province of My Tho (Dinh Tuong), materials that David Elliott also used in his impressive study of the insurgency in My Tho.² While Elliott's work covers the history of the revolution in the province from 1930 to 1975, Hunt concentrates on the period 1959-1968, from the start of the uprising against the South Vietnamese government through the Tet Offensive, and is more concerned with the attitudes and sensibilities of the revolutionaries that underlay the development of the insurgency. The Rand materials represent a treasure trove for analyzing these concerns. Indeed, Hunt notes that although begun for quite utilitarian purposes, the study took something of an "ethnographic turn" as the Rand personnel seemed to become increasingly drawn into the lives of their interviewees (p.234).

¹ George A. Carver, "The Faceless Viet Cong," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1966, 347-372.

² David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (New York: Sharpe, 2003).

Hunt argues that southern militants were motivated by a utopian-flavored “revolutionary modernism.” They were cultural, as well as political, radicals who wanted to free themselves from the *ancien regime* in all its forms – the inequities of land ownership, the urban-rural divide, village customs, the deference shown by the young to the old, and the subservience of women to men. He connects this desire for change not only to conditions in South Vietnamese society but also broader trends in the postwar world as the pull of cities and the spread of consumer culture generated new aspirations, a revolution of “rising expectations.” Consequently, he places less emphasis on certain factors commonly cited elsewhere as key causes of the insurgency. Land tenure was not the be-all-and-end-all for many southern militants, he notes, nor did national reunification come high on their list of priorities. The role that the policies of the South Vietnamese government may have played in fomenting unrest in the countryside also receives less attention than in most other accounts. Hunt seems to suggest that revolutionary change was in the air almost regardless of what the Saigon regime may have done. In fact, the concerns that he attributes to the insurgents suggest that the Diem government, for all its failings, appreciated the tenor of the times better than it is generally credited. Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu often spoke of the need to satisfy a yearning for change in the country, but were never able to fashion policies capable of meeting this desire.³

In several other respects as well, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution* paints a picture of the insurgents, and the larger peasantry from which they came, that challenges the assumptions made in other studies. Hunt’s portrait contrasts sharply with those works on the war that view Vietnamese peasants as passive and parochial, concerned only with maintaining a quiet life and prepared to back whichever side could guarantee them security.⁴ It also bucks the trend in most studies of treating the Vietnamese Communist Party as the embodiment of the insurgency. From this perspective, the course of events in the southern countryside was determined by the dissemination of high-level decisions through the party apparatus and down to those at the sharp end of the conflict. As well as making the point that there could have been no revolution without a grassroots’ movement willing to implement these directives from above, Hunt argues that the party and the popular movement in South Vietnam were not one and the same thing. Southern militants certainly drew on the party’s agenda but they also had their own vision of the future, one that went beyond the latter’s conception of a proletarian revolution. This insight helps shed further light on the tensions that we know existed between the party leadership and southern revolutionaries and on the “slippage” that occurred between the making of high-level decisions in Hanoi and their implementation on the battlefields of South Vietnam.

One of the great strengths of *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution* is that the use of the Rand interviews enables Hunt to bring his subjects to life and paint a rich picture of the situation

³ Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 37-38.

⁴ For example, see Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 92-94.

in My Tho. In a broader sense, the book illustrates the value of devoting more attention to the Vietnamese side of the conflict – or, as the authors of a recent article put it, of the “Vietnamization” of Vietnam War studies.⁵ Hunt’s analysis of such issues as gender relations and the generational divide within the revolution, peasant loyalties and responses to violence, and people’s attitudes towards the Americans is fresh and illuminating; his descriptions of the countryside, such as how noise, light, and sound traveled, are atmospheric – indeed, I cannot recall reading another work of history that so effectively captures the “feel” of rural South Vietnam. Hunt clearly sympathizes with his protagonists and, whatever one’s position on the war, it is hard not to share some of that sentiment because he is so successful in putting us into their shoes and providing a birds-eye view of the growing conflagration in the countryside. In this sense, he also sensitizes us to the costs of the conflict, in the process reminding us, as Andrew Rotter recently warned, of the danger of becoming inured to the violence that is part-and-parcel of studying the Vietnam conflict.⁶

The book does raise some questions. While the Rand materials represent an incredible resource, one wonders how representative were the interviewees of those who joined the insurgency. Does the fact that most of them defected from the NLF have any bearing on how we should weigh their testimony? I do not mean in the sense of whether their comments can be trusted – besides the fact that they had good reason to be forthcoming with their interlocutors, Hunt is a shrewd and careful analyst of their transcripts – but whether their decision to leave the revolution meant that they shared certain attitudes and experiences that were not typical of others. For example, how characteristic of southern insurgents and the larger Vietnamese peasantry was the “revolutionary modernism” that Hunt ascribes to the interviewees? As he suggests in his discussion of gender relations within the insurgent movement, such forward-thinking certainly had its limits; traditional attitudes died hard. His descriptions of the utopian yearnings of the revolution’s supporters – and use of phrases such as “revelatory fervor,” “paradise on earth,” and “apocalyptic rumors” – also seem as reminiscent of traditional peasant millenarianism as a newfound “revolutionary modernism” (pp.38, 153, and 221). In fact, Hunt uses the term “millenarian fervor” to describe the popular support that preceded the launching of the Tet Offensive in 1968 (p.221).

How representative also was My Tho of the forty-odd other provinces that made up South Vietnam? Thanks to the work of Hunt and Elliott, we now know a tremendous amount about this particular province, and our understanding of the insurgency as a whole has benefitted accordingly. Yet their studies also serve to highlight the paucity of information on events elsewhere. No doubt much of the Mekong Delta, described by Hunt as the “most revolutionary section of the country” (p.7), exhibited patterns similar to those associated with My Tho. For example, Jeffrey Race’s older study of neighboring Long An province

⁵ Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, “The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Fall 2009, 2.

⁶ Andrew Rotter, “Thoughts From SHAFR President Andrew Rotter,” *Passport*, January 2010, 4.

identifies many of the same dynamics.⁷ Nevertheless, even in the Delta the situation could differ from one locale to another. David Biggs' recent article on U.S. nation-building efforts in An Giang province – where a Hoa Hao Buddhist majority and an influx of Catholic refugees significantly reduced the base of support for insurgent activity – reminds us of the “particularities of place” and the problem of assuming that one-size-fits-all.⁸ Thus, when we look beyond the Mekong Delta to the provinces of the central coast of South Vietnam, not to mention those of the Central Highlands, one wonders how the conditions there compared to My Tho. Did cities like Danang, Quang Ngai, and Qui Nhon influence the sensibilities of their surrounding populations in a similar way to the cities of My Tho and Saigon; and how did factors such as local histories and land-tenure patterns affect the development of the insurgency in these areas? The very richness of *Vietnam's Southern Revolution* makes it clear how much more about the insurgency – and, indeed, the Vietnamese side of the conflict in general – we can still learn.

⁷ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁸ David Biggs, “Americans in An Giang: Nation Building and the Particularities of Place in the Mekong Delta, 1966-1973,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Fall 2009, 139-172.

What forms of everyday experience and radical visions motivate rural farmers to initiate or ally with violent political struggle? How do generation, gender, and economics shape their attitudes and activities? How does the daily experience of war change these identities as well as more abstract aspects of life, such as conceptions of time?

These are some of the questions that David Hunt addresses in *Vietnam's Social Revolution*. Drawing on interviews conducted from 1965-1968 by the Rand Corporation, Hunt uses the rich biographical tales of 42 National Liberation Front (NLF) members and 243 defectors from the NLF to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to counter top-down narratives about the Vietnam/American war that focus on power politics and military milestones. Hunt's is a history from below that "retrieve[s] from obscurity the vicissitudes of everyday life unfolding alongside the events that are highlighted in the dominant narrative" (2). Building toward an account of the 1968 Tet offensive in the Mekong Delta region of Mỹ Tho as both a spontaneous uprising borne of local conditions and part of a national revolutionary movement organized from above, Hunt depicts revolutionary peasants as mobile, worldly pragmatists. Neither passive tabula rasa indoctrinated by cadres nor collectivities motivated by nostalgic moral economy or rational utility, peasants in Hunt's account pursue a modernist project to demand autonomy and self-determination in the midst of escalating war.

The strength of Hunt's analysis clearly lies in its rich details that resist facile claims about "peasants" or models of "peasant revolution." No single reason or set of factors emerges to explain why a farmer from Mỹ Tho would join the NLF. Instead, Hunt consistently pushes readers to see the unique totality of particular individuals' lives as they narrate them. Characters upon whom Hunt bestows such monikers as "The Instigator," "The Ethnographer," and "The Platoon Leader" jump off the pages as whole, thinking, feeling persons trying to carve out places for themselves and their families. In the midst of this diversity of perspectives and experiences, Hunt does offer contextualized analysis of some patterns motivating peasant uprising. For example, family difficulties – interpersonal, economic, or the two combined – might compel a potentially radicalizing migration between rural and urban areas.

Peasant insurrection in Vietnam has long provided fertile terrain for academic theorizing about the causes of revolution, most famously in the debate between James Scott and Samuel Popkin that pitted visions of a moral economy against the idea of a rational peasant engaged in projects of material accumulation.¹ By the 1990s, the debate stalled, in part

¹ James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1976; Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1979.

because of a confusion of terms.² Scott's idea of the moral economy in fact seemed more about defending basic subsistence in precisely the rational, individualistic sense advanced by Popkin, even as the latter derided Scott's romanticism. Hunt himself provocatively argued more than twenty years ago that both scholars neglected the role of class consciousness which was central to E.P. Thompson's original articulation of "moral economy."³ At the time, Hunt called for scholarly recognition of peasants' revolutionary or utopian visions. It is ironic, then, that it is precisely this attention to a radical Marxist vision that seems under-emphasized in the present work.

Despite its confusion of terms, the Popkin/Scott debate raised fundamental questions about what motivates individuals to risk their lives in pursuit of change. What mix of morality, ideology, economy, and pragmatism are involved? Hunt provides ample evidence for the salience of all of these in varying degrees and with varying force according to the particularities of experience. Ultimately, peasants are motivated to join the NLF out of what Hunt terms "revolutionary modernism." Reacting against American-directed schemes of modernization, peasant modernism represents a claim for autonomy and self-determination. As detailed throughout the book, however, this "modernism" comes to encompass such an eclectic array of material, cultural, and personal identity projects that it is hard to discern the extent to which revolutionary actors shared a radical political or economic vision.

As an anthropologist, I applaud Hunt's commitment to conveying the variety and particularity of individuals' perceptions of their circumstances, but I am left wishing that he had articulated a broader theoretical framework to explain peasant revolutionary action. Are there patterns to the elements of personal circumstance that incline people to be more receptive to moral revolutionary visions or economic ones? What material conditions make people more likely to risk their lives? What kinds of utopian calls motivate people, and how do they articulate with prior cultural, social, and religious themes? Hunt asserts that peasant modernism was neither derivative of nor lesser to urban intellectual modernism, yet it likewise seemed formulated through circuits of mobility and contact. Philip Taylor has documented forms of modernism among Mekong Delta village elites, but Hunt in a footnote characterizes these claims as more intellectual and hence tangential to his project of charting peasant modernism (261n22).⁴ I see here a missed opportunity, for tracing the intellectual history of peasant perspectives would likely enhance, rather than undermine, Hunt's goal of considering peasants as equally thoughtful, critical, and radical interrogators of "what it means to be modern" (9).

² For an overview of the key claims of the Popkin/Scott debate and an analysis of the contemporary applicability of the moral economy argument, see Pamela McElwee, "From the Moral Economy to the World Economy: Revisiting Peasants in a Globalizing Era," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2:2, 2007, 57-107.

³ David Hunt, "From the Millennial to the Everyday: James Scott's Search for the Essence of Peasant Politics," *Radical History Review* 42: 1988, 162-3; E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50: 1971, 76-136.

⁴ Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 2001.

The seeming absence of an overarching radical vision may also reflect the nature of the sources on which Hunt relies. In an appendix, Hunt describes the complex circumstances in which the Rand interviews were conducted. Prisoners from the NLF may have been tortured and probably engaged in evasion and dissimulation to protect themselves, their comrades, and their cause. When they talked about their backgrounds, they likely emphasized happenstance in their joining the NLF to downplay that they might be true believers. The defectors to the RVN were in better positions, but their questioning in detention centers meant that their fates as well rested on strategic self-presentation. Hunt convincingly demonstrates that these circumstances make the interviews no less compelling, but given contemporary concerns in the U.S. about the reliability of information from wartime interrogation, the lack of extended, concerted analysis of the archive within the main text seems to sidestep key questions of historiography and context. To pose just one issue: do the mercurial aspects of people's allegiances reflect a broader pattern, or the kinds of self-presentation likely to be generated for the benefit of Rand and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) interviewers?

These reservations about perspectives that the book neglects should not, however, lessen appreciation for the significance of Hunt's accomplishment. *Vietnam's Southern Revolution* makes compelling reading for its multifaceted and innovative perspectives on an array of rural residents engaged in insurrection. A chapter on women suggests that the revolutionary promise of gender equality, greater personal freedom, and autonomy from elders faltered in the face of sexual intrigue and adherence to more traditional morality and gender roles. Hunt's analysis of how this hampered women's ability to contribute to the movement provides an instructive complement to Hue-Tam Ho Tai's account of similar dynamics among radical urban intellectuals in the 1920s-30s.⁵ An innovative chapter on experiences of time suggests that war caught villagers in a time-space compression between American-sponsored, fast-paced modernization, attempts by the NLF to slow things down, and the rhythms of agricultural and lunar calendars. As vexing as the Rand interviews may be as a historical source, Hunt beautifully navigates their richness to offer an important contribution to our understanding of the dailiness of peasant insurrection in southern Vietnam.

⁵ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1992.

[This review appeared previously as an H-Net Review, August 2009].

Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up

Most American scholarship on the Vietnam War deals with the actions of Americans, and to the extent that it looks at the Vietnamese, tends to focus on the organized forces and leaders of the two sides. In *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*, Professor David Hunt (University of Massachusetts, Boston) looks at the way the revolutionary movement in one province southwest of Saigon was experienced by actual participants at the local level. He argues that this bottom-up view is vital to an understanding of the revolution, because there was more low-level initiative, and less control by top leaders, than is usually acknowledged.

What has made this possible was the Viet Cong Motivation and Morale Project, run by the Rand Corporation (today, the RAND Corporation), a “think tank” financed by the U.S. military. During the war, Rand interviewers questioned a large number of defectors from the revolutionary movement, and a smaller but still significant number of prisoners who had been captured by U.S. or South Vietnamese government forces. They asked more open-ended questions than military interrogators usually would have, seeking not tactical intelligence but opinions, personal experiences, and life stories.

The project had a particular focus on the province for which Hunt uses the traditional name My Tho (called Dinh Tuong on the Saigon government's maps), where it interviewed 285 people between 1965 and 1968 (p. 1). David Elliott has already published a hugely important (and just plain huge) study of the revolution in this province, using the Rand interviews.¹ Hunt's much shorter study has still found interesting new things to say, by focusing more on the way the revolution was experienced by its individual participants than on the way it was organized and led.

He looks at assassinations and executions, for example, not just as incidents of political struggle, but as wrenching emotional events for people in the communities where they occurred. He makes it clear that there was broad support for the revolution in villages in My Tho, but he says this did not translate into broad enthusiasm for the deaths of landlords and officials. “When blood was shed, people fainted or fled from the scene.” The few who “liked to kill,” and carried out large numbers of assassinations for the revolution, inspired “fear and revulsion” on the part of their neighbors (p. 55).

He considers at some length the extent of urban influence in rural society. This influence was greater than some authors have suggested. Substantial numbers of peasants had had

¹ David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, 2 vols. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

significant experience of urban life. They had gone to towns or cities for employment in a remarkable variety of occupations, for education, or to escape the wars going on in the countryside. Those who had not actually lived in towns might have gone to markets there. People living in the towns also visited the villages, for various reasons. The Viet Minh in the late 1940s had to a considerable extent isolated the villages it ruled from enemy-controlled towns. The National Liberation Front in the 1960s was much less able to do this, though it sometimes still tried.

There was tension in the villages between traditional cultural patterns, the modern patterns emanating from the towns, and a different set of modern patterns promoted by the revolutionary movement. The impact of modern culture on gender norms was especially complex. The revolution offered a wider sphere to women than had been possible in traditional society, but stopped well short of giving them real equality.

Hunt traces the revolution in My Tho/Dinh Tuong by stages, from its beginning to about 1968. The periodization is important; the movement was more different in 1962 from what it had been in 1960, and more different in 1966 from what it had been in 1962, than most readers will be aware. First came what Hunt calls the “concerted uprising” (p. 1), occurring in various villages at various dates mostly in 1960, in which a few revolutionaries—so few that only one of them ended up among the Rand interviewees—broke the Saigon government's control and began the establishment of revolutionary power in large areas of the countryside. Next came the “golden period” (p. 47) of the early 1960s, when the revolutionary organizations, which had become much larger, were able to exercise power openly in the villages. Popular support was strong, willing recruits for military service were plentiful, and the revolution was less dependent on coercion than in earlier and later years.

Escalation of the war from 1965 onward placed both the revolutionaries and their communities under severe strain. Indiscriminate bombing and shelling of the countryside increased dramatically. Many peasants were killed, far more fled, and the revolutionaries' demands for taxes and service became a heavier burden on those who remained than it had been in the golden period. Hunt's picture of the impact of the escalation, illustrated with numerous quotes from numerous individuals, is among the best parts of his book. Peasants who did not flee to the government-controlled zones often found it necessary to move out of their traditional hamlets, because an isolated hut was less likely to become a target than a group of homes all in one place. Revolutionary cadres had to cut short the process by which policy directives had been studied and discussed before being implemented, because meeting in groups was dangerous. The revolutionaries did not respond to their tribulations with stoic heroism, serene in the confidence that the revolution would triumph. Many despaired, unable to see a path to victory. There was a revival of hope for the victory of the revolution in 1968, at the time of the Tet Offensive. Hunt does not discuss the post-Tet period at length.

The weakest part of the book is its argument that the initial stage of the uprising in My Tho was primarily a local initiative, in which revolutionaries in the province went far beyond what Communist leaders at higher levels wanted. Hunt's evidence for local initiatives is good, but his evidence that top Communist leaders were opposed to these initiatives is

weak. He does not cite any source for his statement that the Communist leadership in Hanoi, when authorizing in January and May 1959 some use of force, “stipulated that violence should be in self-defense only” (p. 30). His statement that in 1959-60 the Communist leaders “did not want a revolution in the South” (p. 56) seems very strange. He quotes from Gabriel Kolko's 1985 study the statements that top leaders, in an effort to restrain violence, directed that “only the provincial level Party could authorize executions,” but in practice, “at least two-thirds and possibly four-fifths of the executions were never sanctioned, as local village organizations meted out their own justice” (p. 56). Kolko provided no sources for these statements.² [2] In the absence of any citation of primary sources, the reviewer is left to suspect that Hunt and Kolko are showing the residual influence of some of the early scholarship on the war, published in the 1960s, which significantly exaggerated the policy differences between Hanoi and the southern revolutionaries.

Hunt clearly is more sympathetic to the revolutionary movement than to the Saigon government, but this sympathy does not seriously bias his analysis.

One cannot attain an overall understanding of the Vietnam War without looking at the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam. Anyone seriously interested in this topic needs to read either Hunt or Elliott, and should consider reading both. Elliott proves his arguments more solidly, doing a better job of fitting the Rand interviews into the context of evidence from other sources. But Hunt proves most of his arguments adequately. And Hunt is much more readable; even the 2007 “concise edition” of Elliott's *The Vietnamese War* is about twice the length of *Vietnam's Southern Revolution*.

David Hunt has made a significant contribution to the literature. *Vietnam's Southern Revolution* can be recommended to the specialist, the undergraduate and graduate student, and the educated general reader. Serious libraries, even amid today's budgetary problems, should try to acquire it.

² Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 129. Hunt's citation was of the same page in a 1994 reprint of Kolko's book.

Every so often a book is able to capture a glimpse of “history from below” to trace the quotidian of everyday life amidst wrenching historical change. David Hunt’s *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* chronicles the experiences of the inhabitants of My Tho located in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam through 1955 to 1968 – the years of peace, revolution, and war – and provides a much-needed intervention in the Vietnam War scholarship that focuses primarily on the United States, political leaders, and big battles at the expense of the local, of the masses, and of the every day. By decentering the reigning paradigm in Vietnam War studies, in U.S.-centric but also Party-dominated histories, Hunt’s study not only captures what the elusive war was like on-the-ground, but its perspective allows the author to weigh in on some of the “big-picture” debates that have consumed Vietnam War historians, many of whom have been constrained by their top-down analyses.

What is remarkable about Hunt’s work is that it draws from a controversial source: 285 interviews conducted by RAND to understand “VC motivation and morale” in the province of My Tho located in the Mekong Delta-Plain of Reeds region of southern Vietnam (243 of the interviewees had defected to the Chieu Hoi Centers while 42 were prisoners).¹ Hunt handles these documents deftly, however, by pointing out the inherent limitations of these interviews since all of them took place under duress – regardless of the interviewee’s status as prisoner or defector – while their interviewers hailed from the opposite end of society as affluent Saigonese or even different cultures as Vietnamese linguists from the United States. Nonetheless, Hunt correctly insists, the RAND interviews still provide “rich commentary of village life.” Through Hunt’s careful and expert treatment of the documents as an historian of the war conversant in social theory, his analyses of the interviews provide the basis of a new paradigm to understand the revolutionary impulses in this region of the world that underwent some of the most massive changes in modern history.

In twelve well-crafted chapters, Hunt challenges the oftentimes simplistic portrayal of South Vietnamese villagers as either blind followers of the communist leadership in Hanoi and their allies, the National Liberation Front, or at the other end, as subsistence farmers lacking political consciousness under the Saigon regime. In these misguided narratives, the backwards peasant never ventured from the confines of the village and remained passive victims in the face of either U.S., GVN-, or VWP/NLF-sponsored violence. Hunt shatters this portrayal by revealing that the divide between the city and countryside was a mere construct. So-called “*nha que*” villagers traveled, worked, and lived in Saigon for long periods of time. Far from being parochial peasants, then, My Tho villagers were active agents not only in the shaping of the nation’s future but also their own. More importantly, Hunt argues that villagers refused to be “pawns of modernization” (particularly of the American-exported variety) and that My Tho villagers, as elsewhere in the South

¹ For an excellent study of RAND during the Vietnam War and the background to this project, see Mai Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), esp 45-90.

Vietnamese countryside, possessed dreams and aspirations of changing the world around them. As such, Hunt positions *Vietnam's Southern Revolution* as a study of My Tho's "revolutionary modernism" (9).

In the first half of the study, Hunt paints a very vivid picture of My Tho during the early 1960s and reveals who joined the revolution and why, and what changes these revolutionaries made to society. In Chapter Two entitled, "The Itinerant Peasantry," Hunt underscores the heterogeneity of what has been presented as the uniform peasantry and he traces the life of one person he calls the "Ethnographer;" through his eyes, we see what life was like in the Delta in the 1950s. In chapters three and four, entitled "The Peasant Revolution of 1959-1960," and "Concerted Unities of the Golden Period," respectively, Hunt correctly identifies the success of the revolution within the villages in the South and not the decision-making centers in Hanoi or even the jungle headquarters of the National Liberation Front leadership. Hunt argues that the demand for revolutionary change and the pursuit of utopian dreams in the villages during the late 1950s and early 1960s (known as the "golden period," compared to what came after) instilled fear in both sides – GVN troops on one end and the Party on the other. "The Popular Movement and the Generational Divide" and "Modern Girls and Women," chapters five and six respectively, reveal the celebration of youth and the rise of "new women" as My Tho peasants tested the limits and boundaries of revolutionary modernism. Hunt is shrewd to note, however, that this period did not witness the total upheaval of traditional society, especially in his discussion of gender politics within the revolution.

The latter half of Hunt's study examines the deleterious effects of war on the revolution in My Tho. In Chapter Seven, "Escalation at Ground Level," Hunt renders palpable what American intervention was like for the villagers who remained in My Tho, where in wartime, running became a sin and wearing the usual black pajamas rendered one a Viet Cong. In the next chapter, entitled "Mapping the Exodus," Hunt turns his attention to the villagers who relocated to Government of Vietnam (GVN) zones where he argues that peasant modernism came under "extreme duress," but did not die. In "The American Other," Hunt expresses surprise at the lack of xenophobia and racism in the interviews and attributes that to the "humanist and internationalist ideals" of the movement culture of the southern revolution. Although the Americans brought death, destruction and dislocation to the villagers of My Tho, they also brought with them modernization. Nonetheless, Hunt points out, that despite what American leaders believed they could bestow to the Mekong Delta, "U.S. modernism...couldn't compare with NLF modernism" (166). In Chapters Ten and Eleven, "Fate of the Liberated Zone" and "Live Hour, Live Minute", however, Hunt shows that as the war dragged on, both sides inflicted violence and hardship on the villagers and nearly robbed the peasants of any agency in shaping their own futures. By 1967, the customary rhythms and agrarian routines were obliterated, leading many villagers to feel that there was no future. Revolutionary modernism, then, reached its nadir on the eve of Tet, prompting villagers in My Tho to join the "General Offensive and General Uprising" in 1968.

My criticisms are few. I must reiterate that Hunt's work, in addition to the welcome new social histories of the war, reveals much more about the war than other purported broader

histories.² That said, Hunt could perhaps have relied on alternate sources for his study, which would have better insulated him from charges of appearing anecdotal or perhaps even venerating his subjects. If he had, he would have found plenty of local official histories that echo his theme that the Party did not dominate the resistance in the South. For instance, according to the history of Military Region 9 where My Tho was located, the Party in the North, aided by COSVN, experienced fits and starts in terms of taking over complete control of the military strategy.³ Finally, I wonder what Hunt's study would reveal if he had addressed the post-Tet Offensive war. Even though the RAND interviews ceased in 1968, there were other sources that would have allowed Hunt to continue his excellent study. Perhaps the most extensive archive of the war, the Combined Document Exploitation Center (CDEC) materials (known also as the "captured documents,"), extends to 1973. It would have been interesting to see how Hunt would have used the CDEC materials that pertain to My Tho and what those materials would say about the revolution. Perhaps a second volume? We can only hope.

Beautifully written and filled with profound insights of a scholar who has spent a lifetime thinking about the conditions that arise during times of revolution and modernization, and of war and peace, Hunt is able to salvage from "obscurity the vicissitudes of everyday life" and thus allow the subjects in his study – many long dead or forgotten – to speak for themselves. The result is a study that should be mandatory reading for students and scholars not only of the Vietnam War but of all post-colonial conflicts.

² See David W. P. Elliott's magisterial work: *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, 2 vols. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

³ Truong Minh Hoach, ed., *Quan Khu 9: 30 Nam Khang Chien (1945-1975)* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1996), 471-473.

Response from David Hunt

I have been looking forward to this exchange and am happy to find that the reviewers have raised a number of questions worth exploring in detail.

A local study is always bounded in time and space, and as Philip Catton points out, Jeffrey Race and David Biggs in their studies of other areas in the Mekong Delta both echo and depart from conclusions I have drawn about My Tho. He is right to affirm that our picture of the war would appear still more complicated if circumstances in each of the “forty-odd other provinces that made up South Vietnam” were taken into consideration. The temporal aspect should be assigned the same specificity. The Viet Minh heritage weighed in the balance, but cannot fully explain what country people thought and did in 1959-60. There are plenty of cases in history where political engagements in one generation have been followed by shifts of allegiance or by a lapse into passivity in the next. I have tried to show how the social context of the 1950s stirred resentments and gave rise to a sense of possibility that fed into the concerted uprising. I take Lien-Hang T. Nguyen’s point about the years after the Tet Offensive and assume that the total war following escalation in 1965 must have created new understandings and priorities among rural dwellers, whose stories remain to be told.

The revolution temporarily established a point of reference for a population in flux and heightened peasant class consciousness. This awareness temporarily overrode contrasting work situations and material interests as well as sectarian and factional loyalties among villagers in My Tho. After a brief and unsuccessful attempt to make a living from rice cultivation, the Rand informant mentioned by Ann Marie Leshkovich (“the Ethnographer”) found jobs in the province capital and in Saigon as an ice cream vendor, silversmith, sheet music peddler, hat washer, glassware salesman, and traffic light installer. On returning to his home village, he joined the National Liberation Front, which classified him as a “middle peasant,” a designation commonly assigned to individuals who did not seem to fit anywhere else in the template devised by the Communist Party. While positioning himself in a peasant-based movement, he also noted that the My Tho of the 1960s was an “undecided society,” in which people oscillated between customary dress and urban fashions and, more generally, between attachment to received folkways and a fascination with “new and strange things.”¹

Given that context, “peasant” serves as a kind of shorthand. Leshkovich and I agree that, due to a “confusion of terms,” the “Scott-Popkin” debate was ill-conceived. But today I am less ready to heed her call for yet further comparative study of revolutions in different times and places. The literature on peasants in France, Russia, and elsewhere suggests new ways to think about Vietnam, but the key point is that collective aspirations are always conceived and articulated in culturally specific ways. Catton notes that some passages in my book conjure up the notion of a “traditional peasant millenarianism.” If I were rewriting

¹ For more on “the Ethnographer,” see Hunt, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution*, 23-24.

today I would not use a term such as “millenarian fervor,” which is borrowed from a literature based on the idea that there is such a thing as a “generic” peasant revolt.²

The utopianism of local militants in My Tho must therefore be seen as a singular phenomenon. It was an “eclectic” construct, to borrow Leshkovich’s phrase. Take for example the Rand informant who recalled that he was induced to join the Front by recruiters who promised that “I would have land to till, and would have a car to ride in (lên xe xuống ngựa).” “Land to till” is easy to grasp, and many observers have singled it out as a primary objective of the insurgents. But “a car to ride in” does not do justice to the Vietnamese phrase, which literally means “getting up into a conveyance, getting down from a horse” and for a native speaker conjures up images of effortless travel, a landlord reclining in a rickshaw pulled by others or, as we might say, a passenger in a chauffeur-driven limousine. This joining of the concrete (land to till) and the dreamlike (a liberation from grinding toil and free and easy movement to places seen and unseen) was a fragile amalgam that was not going to last indefinitely. But for a time it helped the movement attract support throughout rural society and lent a powerful impetus to the NLF.³

I sometimes feel uneasy about what has turned into a prolonged immersion in the Rand materials and therefore am not surprised that several of the reviewers raise questions about them. I have never seen a collection like this one, made up of many overlapping discussions with poor and previously anonymous peasants, all from the same region and living through and shaping events of momentous historical import, and so I decided long ago to stay with the interviews until their possibilities are played out. On first reading, I was often confused and could not decide who or what to believe. But it helps that we know quite a bit about the backgrounds and assumptions of the Rand interview team. This uncommon degree of transparency creates a framework, one that does not erase flaws in the source, but does allow for a more pointed analysis of its possible distortions.⁴

I first met Edwin Moise in 1986 when we were part of an educators’ delegation visiting Vietnam. One of the highlights of our trip was a meeting with General Tran Cong Man, a military man with a keen interest in history. In what I came to learn was characteristic of his alert scholarship, Moise asked why the Hanoi decision to launch armed struggle in the south was sometimes dated in January 1959 and sometimes in May of that year. It was a

² A tendency toward essentialism is found throughout the peasant-studies literature. In a representative passage, Lynne Viola writes with respect to the Soviet Union in 1929: “In form and in content as well as in common cause and interest, a great deal about the peasantry’s resistance to collectivization was ‘generic,’ demonstrating the durability and solidarity of the peasantry as a social and cultural category and its similarities to other peasants engaged in resistance in other times and in other places”: Lynn Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

³ See “Series DT: Activities of Viet Cong within Dinh Tuong Province” (AD741305), in the Rand Vietnam Interview Series (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), interview 29, page 5.

⁴ There is an extended discussion of these matters in the appendix of *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution*, 225-234. Invaluable here is Mai Elliott, *Rand in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2010), also cited by Lien-Hang Nguyen above and the subject of an H-Diplo Roundtable (December 1, 2010).

pointed and useful question, and General Man's response was not easy to parse. North Vietnamese policy makers thought something had to be done to block the Saigon regime from destroying the party apparatus in the south, but could not agree on the measure of violence required to achieve that outcome. In his sustained effort to sort out what happened, David Elliott suggests that the Central Committee Resolution 15 of January 1959 was revised as many as 22 times after being drafted for the first time in 1957, that there were perhaps three more rewrites between January and May when the resolution was "reaffirmed," and that the message may have been "fundamentally changed" as it made its way down the chain of command. The result was a muddle, an invitation to take up arms while remaining within "legal" parameters.⁵

Instead of limiting themselves to self-defense, local militants torched watchtowers, dismantled agrovilles, drove away landlords and officials and tore up their government-issue identification cards. In March 1960, party leaders responded by declaring that southerners "have gone as far as getting into rash adventures: dissolving [local] administrative machinery, guiding the people to tear up their ID cards, pushing a number to commit provocative actions, such as taking over posts, setting fire to village offices, cutting down trees, digging up roads, setting up obstacles, etc., -- generally speaking, thereby destroying the legal status of the people." In short, "they think that the time has come to launch the insurrection, and they therefore have become impatient and extremely adventurous." This statement and others that might be cited lead me to conclude that in 1959 and most of 1960 the party "did not want a revolution in the South."⁶

Hanoi shifted gears and called for the overthrow of the Saigon Regime in September 1960, and in December of that year sponsored formation of the National Liberation Front, which was intended to organize and steer the uprising. News of these policy decisions reached villages in My Tho in 1961, well after large areas of the province had fallen under the control of the insurgents. Participants in the concerted uprising had called themselves the "Liberation Front," and the NLF was to inherit their red and blue flag with a yellow star. So I take my distance from Ed Moise's view that the main danger lies in exaggerating "policy differences between Hanoi and the southern revolutionaries." More conspicuous in the literature is the neglect of the pre-history of the NLF and of the subterranean local history of the 1960s in Vietnam. If discussion is too much trapped in a master narrative dominated by states and parties, we will lose sight of the social movement whose conditional alliance with the Communist Party helped to determine the course of the Vietnam War.

⁵ David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 228ff.

⁶ "Letter from the Party Committee for South Viet-Nam to Party Chapters," March 28, 1960, in *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, ed. Gareth Porter (Stanfordville, NJ: Earl Coleman Enterprise, 1979), II, 61. Gabriel Kolko cites this letter, and perhaps I should have cited it as well; see Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 104 (and endnote 9, page 615).

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