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Introduction by Lien-Hang Nguyen

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Introduction by Lien-Hang Nguyen, University of Kentucky

There is no shortage of books on the Vietnam War, especially regarding the origins of that horrific conflict. As the United States commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the start of America's war in Vietnam, we are bound to see even more histories over the next dozen years. Despite the massive number of studies on the Vietnam War, Pierre Asselin's *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* manages to stand out. Amidst U.S.-centric histories that detail nearly every aspect of the American experience in Vietnam, *Hanoi's Road*, as one of the reviewers writes, is "the most detailed treatment" of the origins of North Vietnam's war and for these reasons constitutes a "landmark contribution."

In fact, over the past decade or so, Asselin has emerged as the leading expert on North Vietnamese decision-making. In addition to *Hanoi's Road*, Asselin's *A Bitter Peace: Hanoi, Washington, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* and his many research articles in top journals and important edited volumes have replaced a previous generation of scholarship that did not have the benefit of Vietnamese archives or Vietnamese-language documentation. Asselin's work suffers from no such dearth of archival access.¹ Using materials from the Vietnam National Archives Center³, published primary and secondary sources from publishing houses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as American, French, British, and Canadian government documents, *Hanoi's Road* ushers forth an exhaustive amount of materials to shed light on Vietnamese communist strategy deliberation and to place it within an international context. He reveals that there were political divisions with the Vietnam Workers' Party, loosely between a dominant 'militant' faction, headed by the powerful First Secretary Le Duan, and a 'moderate' group, including famous figures such as Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap, which intersected with the Sino-Soviet debates unfolding at the time. His well-written narrative takes the reader through the critical interwar years between the French Indochina War and American entry into the Vietnam War to reveal that Le Duan and his faction 'chose war' in a duplicitous fashion that was similar to that of leaders in Washington. In doing so, Asselin ascribes a degree of agency to North Vietnamese leaders that is taken to its most controversial levels: that Hanoi, not Washington, bore responsibility for starting the war. This argument, of course, has rankled scholars who see the origins, duration, and resolution of the Vietnam War in U.S. domestic politics and who correctly lay the blame for the war's tragedies squarely on America's doorstep. *Hanoi's Road* complicates that picture.

Thus, the reviewers find much to praise in *Hanoi's Road*. Path sees few shortcomings in Asselin's "meticulous (and convincing) narrative." Ang and Moise point out that some of the most intriguing new revelations appear in Asselin's chapter devoted to Hanoi's response to the 1962 neutralization of Laos. While Miller agrees that Asselin is at his

¹ *A Bitter Peace: Hanoi, Washington, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique" in *Cold War History* (2011); "Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era" in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2011); and "We Don't Want a Munich': Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy, 1965-1968" in *Diplomatic History* (2012).

strongest when he draws connections between internal North Vietnamese politics and international developments, he points out what is perhaps Asselin's greatest corrective to the literature: "*Contra* the arguments of Vietnam War historians who maintain that the nationalist legitimacy of the communist movement had become permanently 'fixed' in Vietnamese popular thinking by 1954, Asselin shows that the party's own leaders were deeply concerned about losing hearts and minds in both North and South Vietnam." It is a landmark contribution indeed.

While all the reviewers are generally positive, they do challenge some of Asselin's arguments. In particular, they question Asselin's characterization of Le Duan's leadership and Hanoi's decisions to go to war. Regarding Le Duan, Ang and Path object to Asselin's portrayal of Le Duan as a hard-line militant. While Ang argues that Le Duan – and his comrades in the Hanoi leadership – always held moderate aims in negotiations (i.e. to remove the Americans from Vietnam) in the pre- and post-1968 period, Path suggests that Le Duan was in fact a pragmatist. More analysis of Le Duan, then, is necessary. Path wishes that Asselin had probed deeper into Le Duan's psyche by delving into his personal experiences in the Mekong Delta. Miller pushes Asselin even further and suggests that he should have explored Le Duan's experiences under the French colonial period and during the war for decolonization. Arguing that Le Duan and his generation came of age in the 1930s and 1940s, Miller makes a persuasive case for the need to look beyond the Cold War to explain what drove Vietnamese communist leaders during this period.

Regarding Hanoi's decision-making process in the early 1960s, leading to the decision to 'go for broke' with the passage of Resolution 9 in late 1963, Moise and Miller are dubious that it was either as "rigid" or "monumental" as Asselin describes. Moise writes that Asselin is "oddly resistant to discuss [Hanoi's decision to go to war] as a gradual process" and argues that Asselin ignores American escalation during this period. Miller challenges Asselin's portrayal of Resolution 9 as Le Duan's "blank check" to go to war, especially since opposition to the militants' policies continued for another three years. Moreover, both Moise and Miller point out the first major deployments of North Vietnamese troops did not take place until well into 1964.

Regarding these specific criticisms, I am more persuaded by Asselin's arguments. Le Duan's dogged pursuit of war as a means to reunification and his construction of a police state points toward not a moderate or pragmatic leader but a hard-line militant. Meanwhile, negotiating policy under Le Duan's leadership pre- and post-1968 consistently subordinated the removal of the United States to the toppling of the Saigon regime until the summer of 1972. Finally, according to recent work by Merle Pribbenow, North Vietnamese decisions to send regulars south and initiate large unit warfare occurred in the summer of 1963.² That it took so long for those soldiers to arrive in the deep south was due more to logistical challenges than hesitation on the part of Le Duan's Politburo.

² Merle Pribbenow, "Laying the Military Foundation for the Communist Decision to Seek a Decisive Victory," in Edward Miller and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, eds., *Vietnam: 1963* (forthcoming).

Criticisms aside, all of the reviewers are in agreement that Asselin has written an important book that will stand the test of time. For these reasons and more, I am humbled and flattered by the comparisons between Asselin's *Hanoi's Road* and my own *Hanoi's War*. It is wonderful to be in the company of such a giant, both literally and figuratively.

Participants:

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* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (University of California Press, 2013). Other recent publications include "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique" in *Cold War History* (2011); "Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era" in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2011); and "We Don't Want a Munich': Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy, 1965-1968" in *Diplomatic History* (2012). He is currently developing a textbook surveying the Vietnamese communist experience during the Vietnam War.

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen received her Ph.D. from Yale University in 2008 and is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. She is the author of *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Currently, she is working on a comprehensive history of the Vietnam War as well as a project focused on gender and people's diplomacy during the Cold War.

Ang Cheng Guan is Head of Graduate Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He is the author of *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second IndoChina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1997; paper, 2012); *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010) and *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013). He is currently working on a new book project: *Southeast Asia and the Cold War 1945-1991: An International History*.

Edward Miller is Associate Professor of History at Dartmouth College. His research examines the Vietnam War from international and transnational history perspectives; he is particularly interested in the ways in which the war was shaped by global contests over development, modernization, and nation building. In addition to *Misalliance*, he is also the author of *The Vietnam War: A Documentary Reader*, to be published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2014. He is currently at work on a history of insurgency and counterinsurgency in Vietnam's Ben Tre province during the era of the Indochina Wars. Prof. Miller received his Ph.D. in History from Harvard University in 2004.

Edwin Moise is Professor of History at Clemson University. He earned his Ph.D. in History, concentrating on modern China and Vietnam, from the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, and is now working on a study of the Tet Offensive.

Kosal Path, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Brooklyn College, City University of New York. His current research focuses on “Economics of Alignment: Vietnam Between China and the Soviet Union, 1965-1978.”

Just as when I was beginning to think that scholarly interest in the Vietnam War has shifted away from the North to focus on developments in South Vietnam, two new and equally well-written books on the North Vietnamese perspective appear to buck this trend. The first, published in 2012, is Lien-Hang T. Nguyen's award-winning, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*¹ which focuses more on the years after 1965 to the end of the war. The other is Pierre Asselin's *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam 1954-1965*, which, despite some overlap, can be considered as the prequel to Lien-Hang's account. Readers who have an interest in the international history of the Vietnam War will be familiar with Asselin, who, along with , is perhaps the best known scholar writing on the communist side of the Vietnam War in recent years, along with Nguyen. Asselin has written a very engaging book detailing how the North Vietnamese grappled to find a way to reunify the country initially through peaceful means but eventually being involved in another long war. It incorporates old and new published and unpublished Vietnamese sources, particularly from the holdings of Vietnam National Archives Center 3. Asselin also supplemented his re-construction of the decision-making with documents from the American, British, French and Canadian governmental archives. This book is thus based on multi-archival research.

Asselin appropriately chose to begin his account from just after the signing of the 1954 Geneva Conference. This was the time when the Vietnamese communist leadership, after a long and hard struggle against the French, began to focus their attention on the United States, which they saw as the potential power that could spoil their plan to reunify the country. As Asselin notes, they hoped their implementation of the July 1954 Geneva Accords would preclude American military intervention and deliver what an eight-year war against France could not (1). That was the best-case scenario which did not materialise. The South Vietnamese government, led by Ngo Dinh Diem and supported by the United States, reneged on the agreements in 1956. Hanoi's leadership thus spent the next decade deciding "whether to fulfil their core objective by resuming hostilities, and otherwise searching for ways to 'liberate' the South without provoking a military showdown with the United States or compromising other vital interests of Vietnam's revolutionary struggle" (1). According to Asselin, whether moderate or militant, the North Vietnamese leaders never wanted a military confrontation with the United States but they were equally determined to reunify the country (3). Thus, if they had to fight, they would. The next best-case scenario of avoiding a direct war with the United States also did not materialise. With the Americanization of the war in 1965, Hanoi, still not yet fully prepared for an all-out war with the Americans, announced that "the struggle for reunification had entered a new phase, that of 'limited war' and launched what it called the 'Anti-American Resistance for the National Salvation'" (207).

Asselin clearly and coherently describes and explains in much detail the twists and turns

¹ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012)

leading to each key decision between 1954 and 1965. I do not think that those who are familiar with the historiography of the communist side of the Vietnam War will find a substantially new interpretation of the developments in this period. Having said that, the number of scholars who know this period is probably not that large; the general public is also more familiar with or interested in the post-1965 phase of the Vietnam War. Furthermore, as Asselin notes in his introduction, many still accept the notion that the “DRVN leaders are relatively passive agents” (2) although I am not sure how true this statement is; perhaps it is the case in the United States. For all these reasons, this study (like Nguyen’s) will be invaluable to anyone interested in the communist side of the Vietnam War. It is without doubt the most up-to-date account of the progression of the Vietnamese communists’ struggle from one that was essentially political in nature to the cusp of a full-scale war.

I am generally in agreement with Asselin’s account. In 1956, Hanoi openly acknowledged that the prospect of a peaceful reunification was dim and that the struggle would be long and difficult (32). This led to a debate amongst the Vietnamese communist leadership on the best strategy forward which lasted for a few years. There already existed a group of people who were dissatisfied with the agreements reached at Geneva which included most of the communists in the South who felt misled, if not betrayed, the most prominent of whom was none other than Le Duan, who never believed that the terms of the Geneva Agreements would be abided. But in the meantime, “because the moderate consensus prevailed in the Politburo and the Central Committee, the communist revolutionary strategy remained unchanged” (32). In Chapter 2, Asselin describes how the “moderate consensus” (32) gradually had to accommodate the views of those who clamoured for a renewal of the military struggle culminating in the well-known *Resolution 15*. While *Resolution 15* represented an important revision of the party strategy, its importance, according to Asselin, has been overstated by historians, particularly those in Vietnam (66). Indeed, the military struggle was still subordinated to the political struggle.

The next key decision of the communist leadership was taken at the 9th plenary session of the Lao Dong Party three years later in late-1963, which Asselin covers in Chapter 6, titled “Choosing War” to which I shall turn shortly. The titles of Chapter 3 – “Treading Cautiously, 1960” and Chapter 4 – “Buying Time, 1961” which sum up the thrust of those chapters, are very well chosen. Despite passing *Resolution 15*, the Vietnamese communists, especially the Vietnamese People’s Army, were far from ready to handle an expansion or an escalation of the war. In a speech on 20 April 1960 marking Vladimir Lenin’s ninetieth birthday anniversary, Le Duan reiterated that it was not the appropriate time to fight a full-scale war in the South.²

I found Chapter 5 – “Exploring Neutralization, 1962” the most interesting chapter in the book. I do not recall reading a more detailed account of this ‘exploration’ although in the end we are not much clearer about the thinking of the Hanoi leadership and whether this

² Le Duan, “Leninism and Vietnam’s Revolution” in *On the Socialist Revolution in Vietnam, Volume 1* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965), pp. 9-56.

was ever a serious option. This has nothing to do with any omission on Asselin's part, but instead illustrates the difficulty of researching the Vietnamese communist perspective of the war, especially when the relevant Vietnamese archives remain virtually inaccessible. According to Asselin, the initial wave of optimism which accompanied the successful conclusion of the Geneva Conference on Laos in July 1962 raised the possibility that it could be repeated for South Vietnam. Asselin quotes extensively a letter by Le Duan to the Central Office for Southern Vietnam (COSVN) in July 1962 to illustrate how seriously Hanoi was considering neutrality; the objective "was not to settle the fate of South Vietnam once and for all" but rather "to bring about a gradual reduction and then complete withdrawal of American forces, and after that a diminishment of their assistance to the Saigon government" (134-137). Thus it was not genuine neutrality that Le Duan was pursuing. In fact, Hanoi never actually countenanced a truly neutral Laos because it would have meant the closing down of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as Edwin Moise has noted³ (142). My limited understanding of this issue was that many delegates at the Geneva Conference on Laos expected that a conference on Vietnam (mooted by Prince Sihanouk, endorsed by the North Vietnamese press, and backed by the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam) would follow a few weeks after the successful conclusion of the Laos conference. But soon after 23 July 1962, both Hanoi and Beijing (the Chinese leadership had also supported Sihanouk's proposal for an international conference on South Vietnam) changed their minds and we are still no wiser as to why although Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi did make a brief remark that a conference would become inevitable when the war had escalated to a certain point.⁴ In fact, by 20 August, Sihanouk appeared to have lost interest in a conference on Vietnam and began to appeal for an international conference on Cambodia instead. Asselin believes that after the failure of the 1962 Geneva Agreement on Laos, Le Duan, a committed militant, became even more convinced that the South could only be liberated through war and after 1965 he "would obdurately refuse to even entertain the possibility of using negotiations to bring about the end of hostilities (143). I do not share Asselin's reading of this impact on Le Duan. I believe the Vietnamese always understood that it was not possible to achieve at the diplomatic table what they could not obtain on the battlefield, thus the need to focus on the battlefield. All the secret talks or peace feelers between 1964 and 1968, most of which fall outside this study, should be seen in this context. As Mao told the North Vietnamese, they could certainly negotiate; however, it is another matter whether or not the negotiations would have succeeded.⁵ It is also worth noting that the communist objective for the so-called Peace Talks in Paris from 1968 onwards was essentially to remove the United States from the equation first and then focus on reunification at a later stage. This objective is the same as the aborted neutralization proposal.

³ Edwin E. Moise, "The Mirage of Negotiations" in Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (eds.), *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), p.81.

⁴ NCNA, 1 August 1962, SWB/FE/1012/C1/1.

⁵ Mao Zedong and Pham Van Dong, Hoang Van Hoan (Beijing, 5 October 1964) in New Evidence on the Vietnam/Indochina Wars, Cold War International History Project.

By the 9th plenary session in late-1963, which took place soon after deaths of Ngo Dinh Diem and President John F. Kennedy, “Le Duan and the party’s militant wing had carried the day, and the balance of the power within the VWP had shifted” (164). Immediately following the passing of *Resolution 9*, war preparations went into full swing in both the North and Southern parts of Vietnam. The hope was to be able to achieve a quick victory or at least a strategic advantage before the Americans took over the war. Of course no one then knew when the Americans would take over the war but clearly there was a sense of urgency.

Whether the militant-moderate strategic debate ended at the 9th plenary session (which Asselin argues) or only after the decision to launch the 1968 Tet offensive (173) is harder to determine conclusively with our current state of knowledge. Those who favoured the escalation of the military struggle certainly had a stronger case in 1963 than in 1959. According to the U.S. assessment, the combat capability of the southern communists had been improving, since they had scored a few military successes and the Saigon government had been unable to materially reduce the strength of the communists. But at the same time, the Hanoi leadership was acutely aware that the targets set in the Second Five-Year Military Plan for the VPA (1961-1965) had yet to be fully achieved.

Resolution 9 thus did not mean that the Vietnamese communists had thrown caution to the wind. While the objective was to try to win the reunification struggle before the Americans intervened directly in the war, Hanoi also did not want to create a pretext for the US to attack North Vietnam. The escalation of the military struggle thus needed to be calibrated very adroitly. My understanding is therefore that although the militants seem to have had the upper hand with *Resolution 9*, and despite Ho Chi Minh (already ill by this time and no longer in charge) coming out in support of *Resolution 9* (and thus, the militant group) in a specially convened Political Conference on 27-28 March 1964 appealing for unity⁶, the moderates at this point had not been completely silenced, suppressed or removed.

Much as Hanoi tried not to give the U.S. a pretext to intervene directly in the war, Washington did find one, or created one. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 (not unlike how the promulgation of Law 10/59 by Diem in May 1959 strengthened the militant camp and led to *Resolution 15*) inadvertently gave the pro-escalation or militant camp a booster. On 11 October, the Central Military Commission gave orders to make preparations for military offensives to be launched in the winter and spring of 1965. But as Pham Van Dong told Mao Zedong on 5 October 1964, Hanoi would try to confine the war within the sphere of a special war, and would try to defeat the enemy within that sphere. It would try not to let the Americans turn the war into a limited war or expand it into North Vietnam.

Finally, I am sure that *Asselin’s Hanoi Road to the Vietnam War*, like Lien-Hang Nguyen’s book, will be referred to and consulted for a long time. Unless there is an opening of the

⁶ *Hau Phong Chien Tranh Dan Viet Nam (1945-1975)*, (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1997), pp. 150-151.

Vietnamese archives (which I do not think is likely) or someone is able to lay hands on a critical pile of documents, I do not see another substantial account in the horizon.

Review by Edward Miller, Dartmouth College

Who was responsible for starting the Vietnam War? The debate over this question is now more than half a century old. When the war was at its height during the 1960s, the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments accused North Vietnam of ‘communist aggression’ in the south, and insisted that the war was the direct result of Hanoi’s sponsorship of the National Liberation Front (NLF). North Vietnamese leaders, in contrast, insisted that Washington was to blame both for creating the conditions that led to war and for the massive escalation of the conflict during the mid-1960s. The publication of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971 appeared to tilt the debate in favor of those who placed responsibility on the United States; by revealing previously secret details about U.S. decision-making, the *Papers* seemed to confirm that the most fateful choices on the path to war were the ones made in Washington. As a result, much of the English-language scholarship on the war produced between the 1970s and the 1990s took the notion of American responsibility for granted, and focused on explaining the motives that had propelled the U.S. to intervene in Vietnam in the first place. Recently, however, some Vietnam War historians have shifted attention back to Vietnamese actors and their decisions, including those made by the senior communist party leaders who ruled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). In the process, the old question of responsibility has returned to the forefront of scholarly discourse about the war.

The publication of *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War* is an important contribution to this long-running debate. In this well-researched volume, Pierre Asselin examines the evolution of DRVN strategy during the decade between the Geneva Conference of 1954 and the introduction of U.S. combat forces in 1965. Asselin’s main objective is to explain why Hanoi shifted from a strategy of peace to a strategy of war—that is, why the communists’ initial efforts to pursue the reunification of Vietnam through political struggle eventually gave way to violence and armed rebellion. Like other authors before him, Asselin finds that the DRVN leadership was sharply divided over strategy during the post-Geneva period. While some senior figures such as Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap were ‘moderates’ who feared that a return to armed struggle in South Vietnam would jeopardize the revolution’s gains in North Vietnam, other communist leaders were ‘militants’ who argued that violent resistance in the south was the only way to achieve the party’s long-term goal of reunifying Vietnam under Hanoi’s aegis. The pre-eminent militant was Le Duan, the head of the party’s southern branch and later its first secretary. While Le Duan’s status as the main architect of North Vietnamese policy and strategy after 1965 has been well-documented in the work of other historians, *Hanoi’s Road* is the most detailed treatment of his role during the 1954-1965 period.¹

¹ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Merle Pribbenow, “General Võ Nguyên Giáp and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tết Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3.2 (2008): 1–33; Sophie Quinn-Judge, “The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair,” *Cold War History* 5.4 (2005): 479–500; Martin Grossheim, “‘Revisionism’ in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” *Cold War History* 5.4 (2005): 451–477.

Although Vietnamese Communist Party archives and most internal DRVN records remain off-limits to researchers, Asselin has very assiduously mined the materials that are available. These include the ones that have appeared in recent years in official communist party publications such as *Party Documents (Van Kien Dang)*, as well as the collections held in Vietnam National Archives No. 3 in Hanoi. Asselin also draws heavily on the records produced by foreign diplomats stationed in Hanoi, especially those who worked at the British and French legations in the city. While Asselin's readings of these materials occasionally seems a bit too credulous—should we really accept at face value a 1960 French report claiming that 90 percent of the rural population of North Vietnam was “ready for an uprising if it had the means” (83)?—they nonetheless provide some useful glimpses of DRVN leaders and events. From these and other sources, Asselin is able to construct a year-by-year narrative that charts the evolution of North Vietnamese politics and policies. While many aspects of the Hanoi regime remain opaque, Asselin's account is by far the most penetrating study of its leaders' hopes and fears during the 1954-1965 time period.

Hanoi's Road is particularly effective in the connections it draws between internal North Vietnamese politics and international developments. While many other authors have noted the dilemma that the Sino-Soviet split posed for Vietnamese communist leaders, Asselin's account of the links between the emerging rivalry and actual policy moves in Hanoi is more detailed and nuanced than earlier treatments. He finds that the Vietnamese were remarkably skillful in steering a middle course between their Chinese and Soviet patrons. In 1960, they even “boldly offered to mediate the dispute”—a move that helped them to remain on good terms with both antagonists, even though it did not ameliorate the tensions between Moscow and Beijing (80). At the same time, DRVN leaders were frequently obliged to frame their policy choices in ways calculated to appeal to their superpower patrons. Moderates presented their go-slow strategy in South Vietnam as being consistent with the Kremlin's calls for ‘peaceful coexistence’ with the west; the militants, meanwhile, echoed Chinese complaints about the creeping Khrushchevian ‘revisionism.’

While the Sino-Soviet split loomed large in the minds of DRVN leaders, both moderates and militants were even more worried about the dangers that they perceived inside Vietnam. One of Asselin's more surprising findings has to do with the communists' anxieties about the legitimacy of their party and the revolution it purported to be leading. *Contra* the arguments of Vietnam War historians who maintain that the nationalist legitimacy of the communist movement had become permanently ‘fixed’ in Vietnamese popular thinking by 1954, Asselin shows that the party's own leaders were deeply concerned about losing hearts and minds in both North and South Vietnam.² In the North, the botched land reform program of 1953-1956, declining living standards, and periodic outbreaks of social unrest made it seem as if the party's grip on power might be slipping (38, 66-67, 98-99). In the

² For the view that the nationalist legitimacy of Ho Chi Minh and the communist movement had become “fixed for all time” by 1954, see Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), xxii.

South, meanwhile, non-communist groups seemed poised to “hijack the anti-Diem resistance that the [party] aspired to lead” (58). The latter concerns seem to have been particularly important in the crafting of Resolution 15, a key party directive issued in January 1959 which sanctioned the expansion of armed resistance against the government. By linking these anxieties to specific communist policy and strategy decisions, Asselin demonstrates that legitimacy in Vietnam during the late 1950s and early 1960s was far more contested and fluid than some historians have realized.

For Asselin, the most consequential steps toward war were taken during 1962 and 1963. The collapse of an international neutralization agreement in Laos in mid-1962—a deal that North Vietnamese leaders had hoped would be a model that could be used to weaken U.S. influence in South Vietnam—marked the demise of what Asselin calls “the last good chance for peace in Vietnam” (118). For the militants, the failure of the neutralization option was proof that victory in the south could only be achieved through violence and war. In late 1963, the overthrow and assassination of South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem provided Le Duan and his allies with the political opening they needed. During the pivotal Ninth Plenum of the communist party’s central committee in December, the militants secured approval of ‘Resolution 9,’ a document that called for a broad expansion of the communist war effort in the south. Among other things, the resolution envisioned the waging of “large-scale warfare” against South Vietnamese forces in a bid to win a “decisive victory...before Washington introduced its own combat forces” into the conflict (166). According to Asselin, this document amounted to “a declaration of war on the Saigon regime, and the United States by extension” (164-168). He also argues that the document was the result of a “silent coup” which effectively sidelined Le Duan’s moderate rivals and ensured that his authority over the party would henceforth be “essentially absolute” (169, 173). In the months after the plenum, Asselin demonstrates, North Vietnam was placed on a war footing and communist forces in the south launched “a new period of combat” (175). For Asselin, the timing of these shifts is crucial. Since Resolution 9 predated the U.S. Congress’s Tonkin Gulf Resolution of August 1964 by more than half a year, Asselin sees President Lyndon Johnson’s decision to ‘Americanize’ the Vietnam War as a response to escalatory moves by Hanoi, rather than the other way around.

While the main arguments presented in *Hanoi’s Road* are broadly convincing, some of Asselin’s specific claims appear to be at odds with the facts. For example, he suggests that Diem sought the ‘abolition’ of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC), the body charged with overseeing the Geneva Accords (102). In reality, Diem made a point of facilitating and participating in most of the ICSC’s supervisory activities, in the hopes that he could use it to expose communist violations of the accords. Asselin also mistakenly dates the launch of the Diem government’s Strategic Hamlet Program to mid-1961; in fact, it was not rolled out on a country-wide basis until early 1962.³ The October 1961 communist party report which Asselin portrays as a response to the hamlet program (110-111) does not actually mention Strategic Hamlets at all. And while Asselin is correct that the hamlet program temporarily “threw the revolution off balance” in the south, the

³ Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 91-97.

success of the program was rather more fleeting than he implies (110).

Some of the descriptive language that Asselin employs in *Hanoi's War* is also problematic. In his introduction, Asselin admits that his labelling of communist leaders as either “moderates” or “militants” is an oversimplification, yet he insists that such terms are more useful than the “North-firster”/“South-firster” dichotomy favored by other historians (213 n3). But since he then proceeds to use the term “North-first” throughout the text to refer to the policies favored by the moderates, this appears to be a distinction without a difference. A more substantive problem has to do with Asselin’s characterization of the moderates as “risk-averse” and the militants as “risk-acceptant” (2-3). In fact, the two groups seem to have differed less in their *tolerance* for risk than in their respective *assessments* of the multiple risks they faced. For Le Duan and his fellow militants, the greatest danger to the revolution lay in the prospect that the communist movement in the south might be utterly and irrevocably destroyed; the moderates, in contrast, believed that the more profound threat lay in the possibility of an American attack on the north. As events demonstrated, both of these perceived dangers were all too real. The ensuing clashes over policy and strategy within the party were rooted not in a debate over whether to take risks, but in disagreements about which of these very grave risks should take priority in the party’s planning.

In a few places in *Hanoi's Road*, Asselin presents his otherwise valid and persuasive points in overstated ways. This is perhaps most apparent in his discussion of the climactic Ninth Plenum of late 1963. While Resolution 9 marked a major turning point in Hanoi’s strategic outlook, it is not clear that its adoption constituted a “silent coup” in which the militants actually deposed the moderates from power (169). Given that moderate leaders such as Giap continued to play prominent roles in North Vietnamese debates over policy in the south until at least 1967, Asselin’s assertion that Le Duan’s power in Hanoi had become “absolute” by late 1964 seems exaggerated. Nor is it apparent that Resolution 9 actually constituted a “blank check” for Le Duan (167). Unlike the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, in which the U.S. Congress explicitly granted Lyndon Johnson the power to take ‘all necessary steps’ to defend South Vietnam, Resolution 9 does not appear to have furnished the same kind of *carte blanche* authority—at least, not right away. Although Asselin insists that the militants pressed ahead with plans to deploy North Vietnamese Army forces to the south immediately after the Ninth Plenum, the evidence shows that these plans were not actually implemented until after the first U.S. airstrikes on North Vietnam in August 1964 (198-201). This delay strongly suggests that Le Duan was obliged to wait until American forces had actually attacked North Vietnam before implementing the most aggressive aspects of the strategy he wanted to pursue.

As indicated above, one of the great strengths of *Hanoi's Road* lies in Asselin’s ability to connect the evolution of North Vietnamese policies to larger developments in the global Cold War during the post-1954 period. But while this way of framing the subject yields many interpretive insights, it also seems to crowd out other key historical questions. Some of the most important of these neglected questions have to do with the deeper *motives* that inspired Le Duan and his fellow militants. Why and how did the militants come to embrace the particular cult of revolutionary violence that they espoused? More specifically, how

could they have convinced themselves that a strategy which called for rapid escalation to conventional warfare would lead to victory within a relatively short period of time? Although Asselin believes that the answers to these questions can be found by focusing exclusively on the 1954-1964 decade—he declares that the experiences of Le Duan and his clique during these years were “truly determinative” of their actions thereafter (209)—such an approach seems to discount the influence of pre-1954 events and memories on the thinking of Vietnamese communist leaders.

As a revolutionary who was born in 1907, Le Duan came of age not in an era of superpower confrontation, but during the long decades of struggle against French colonial rule. In this respect, his ‘worldview’ was defined at least as much by empire and decolonization as by the Cold War or the Sino-Soviet split. But Asselin seems strangely uninterested in the former elements of Le Duan’s thought and experience. While he acknowledges that Le Duan’s years spent in French prisons were “formative,” he does not explain the actual impact that these years had on him or his thinking (16). Nor does he consider how Le Duan’s experiences during the August Revolution of 1945 or his subsequent participation in the First Indochina War may have shaped his post-1954 thinking about revolution, violence, and military strategy. *Hanoi’s Road* contains remarkably little discussion of Le Duan’s notion of a ‘General Offensive, General Uprising,’ the concept that became the cornerstone of his strategic thinking, and that already featured prominently in his writings and speeches by the early 1960s. Closer attention to this key idea might have obliged Asselin to revise his representation of Le Duan as an exponent of “an essentially Maoist interpretation of Marxism-Leninism and world revolution” (164-165). In fact, Le Duan mostly eschewed Mao’s emphasis on protracted warfare in favor of a quest for ‘decisive victories’ and mass uprisings—a preference that may have derived at least in part from lessons that Le Duan and his colleagues took from the August Revolution or the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

In raising these points, I do not mean to suggest that *Hanoi’s Road* is fatally flawed, or that Asselin should have written a different book. On the contrary, this volume is a landmark contribution to the ongoing efforts to revise and improve our understanding of the Vietnamese Communist movement during a crucial stage of the history of the Vietnam War. Even if some of his claims are overstated, Asselin’s depiction of how and why North Vietnam abandoned its bid for peaceful conquest in favor of war contains a wealth of new materials and insights. This book will not be the last word in the ongoing debate about strategic decisions and moral responsibility during the Vietnam War, but it is required reading for anyone interested in that debate.

Hanoi's *Road to the Vietnam War* is part of the wave of recent scholarship that is greatly improving our understanding of what Americans call the Vietnam War by focusing serious attention on the role of the Vietnamese in that war. In this work, Pierre Asselin, using a wide variety of Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese sources, traces in greater detail the events that were covered more briefly in the opening chapters of Lien-Hang Nguyen's recent study *Hanoi's War*.¹

In 1954, the leaders of the Lao Dong Party (the Communist Party of Vietnam) accepted the Geneva Accords, which ended the First Indochina War. Under the terms of the Accords, they were to pull their armed forces out of what became South Vietnam, but they were to have the opportunity to win control there through free elections in 1956. When the elections scheduled for 1956 did not take place, Communist leaders disagreed over the proper response. For the next few years, a moderate group centering on President Ho Chi Minh and Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap dominated the policy. They did not want a renewed war, for which they felt North Vietnam was grossly unprepared. So they clung to the idea that Communism could come to power in South Vietnam through essentially peaceful political struggle. But a more militant group of leaders, centering on Lao Dong Party acting General Secretary Le Duan and his very powerful ally Le Duc Tho, argued that peaceful political struggle was not going to work. The Communist organizations in South Vietnam, which were not permitted to use even enough armed force for effective self-defense, were being destroyed by the police and army of the American-supported President Ngo Dinh Diem.

In 1959, Le Duan's group was able to push through a decision permitting the southern Communists to begin something that could reasonably be called a guerrilla war (though Asselin is very reluctant to call it that; see below). But the scale of combat operations was to be kept small; political struggle was supposed to remain their primary focus. Over the next few years, according to this study, the moderates remained largely in control of policy toward South Vietnam. It was not until the end of 1963 that Le Duan and Le Duc Tho won a decisive victory, at the Lao Dong Party's Ninth Plenum. They rammed through a decision that the struggle in the South should go to full-scale war, in which the Communist forces in the South (formally the People's Liberation Armed Forces or PLAF) would form larger units and conduct more aggressive operations.

In the process of taking control of the Lao Dong Party's policy toward South Vietnam, Le Duan and Le Duc Tho also, at the Ninth Plenum, also took control of the Party, and thus of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, North Vietnam). Not satisfied with having defeated the moderate faction, the militants promptly launched a brutal purge of military officers and party members who did not support their militant line, calling them

¹ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), Chapters 1 and 2.

'Revisionists.'

There was one line, however, that the militants were not yet ready to cross. The Ninth Plenum decided that regular units of the DRVN's army would be sent south to join the struggle if necessary, but held off from deciding that this had in fact become necessary. It was almost a year later, in the last quarter of 1964, that North Vietnamese regiments actually began heading down the Ho Chi Minh Trail toward South Vietnam. At the same time, the PLAF launched the sort of large-scale offensive campaign that the Ninth Plenum's decisions had envisaged. The United States soon greatly expanded its own forces in South Vietnam, and North Vietnamese regiments were in direct combat against American troops before the end of 1965.

Asselin discusses the very optimistic way Le Duan and his allies spoke, as they moved toward a larger war. This reviewer wishes Asselin had discussed the possibility that this optimism was a sham. The plan, as presented to the Lao Dong Party, was that the war in the South would be won without the Americans ever throwing a really large force into the struggle, and thus without huge casualties to PLAF and North Vietnamese forces. But the intensity of Le Duan's purge of the moderates suggests that he may have realized things were not likely to go as well as he was saying. If he understood that there was a serious danger that his policies would lead to huge casualties among his forces and devastation of North Vietnam by American bombing, which the moderate faction might exploit to turn the Party against the militants and regain power, he might have wanted to ensure that the moderates would be too crippled to attempt such a maneuver.

One of the most interesting and surprising parts of the book, new to this reviewer, is a deviation from the main story line. The author argues that in 1962, the leaders in Hanoi, including even Le Duan, flirted with the idea of a negotiated settlement that would neutralize South Vietnam. They were relatively happy about the Geneva Accords of 1962, under which Laos was to be neutralized, and they wondered whether it might be possible to negotiate an equally satisfactory agreement for South Vietnam. The neutralization of Laos quickly collapsed, however, and they then abandoned the hope that a similar arrangement would work in Vietnam.

This opens up interesting implications and questions. Actual neutralization of Laos under the terms of the 1962 Geneva Accords would have meant closing the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the infiltration route from North to South Vietnam through southeastern Laos. The Hanoi leaders could not even consider doing this. For them to have thought that neutralizing Laos would be a satisfactory arrangement, they would have to have expected that the new government under Souvanna Phouma, while nominally neutral, would in fact lean to their side, permitting them to violate the letter and spirit of the Accords by continuing to operate the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It is plausible that they might have expected Souvanna Phouma to behave in this fashion; he had been friendly to them for the past several years. What do the Hanoi sources say about their expectations for Souvanna Phouma?

We now know that, to Hanoi's dismay, Souvanna Phouma leaned strongly toward the United States soon after the Accords were signed. Had the Americans known something

that Hanoi had not, leading them to anticipate such a result (or at least to expect that Souvanna Phouma would not lean toward Hanoi) at the time the United States signed the Accords?

The key to the neutralization of Laos was Souvanna Phouma, a widely respected figure, whose claim to be neutral was credible enough that both sides could accept him as head of the Laotian government. Without such a figure, neutralization in South Vietnam could not remotely resemble the Laotian model. Did the leaders in Hanoi have such a person in mind for South Vietnam, or were they so loose in their analogies that the apparent success of one neutral solution in Laos made them optimistic that a totally different neutral solution might work in South Vietnam? If the latter, did they seem to have any clear idea what that alternate solution might be?

Asselin has brought to light a wealth of valuable new information about the process, spread over many years, by which militant leaders strengthened their influence in Hanoi, and increased the level of armed conflict in South Vietnam and the degree of North Vietnamese involvement in that conflict. But he is oddly reluctant to discuss it as a gradual process. Instead he puts great emphasis on a brief period, lasting about a year, from the Ninth Plenum at the end of 1963 up to the end of 1964, when he sees Hanoi as having crossed a single line, from not-war to war. The chapter in which he discusses the Ninth Plenum, at the end of 1963, is titled “Choosing War.” The sub-chapter in which he discusses the PLAF’s offensive campaign of late 1964, and the arrival of the first North Vietnamese regiments in South Vietnam at the same time, is titled “The Vietnam War Begins.”

In his discussion of the years up to 1963, Asselin seems more concerned with what Hanoi was not yet doing—commencing a full scale war—than with what Hanoi *was* doing: authorizing the southern Communists to begin a guerrilla war, and helping them to wage that guerrilla war. He tends to underestimate the extent to which the guerrillas were winning control of large parts of South Vietnam in the early 1960s. He exaggerates the extent to which the moderates retained control of policy in Hanoi. He calls the decision of the Ninth Plenum, at the end of 1963, “the first major revision of the party’s strategy vis-à-vis the South since...1959” (167-168). This reviewer did not notice any reference to the vital decision in 1962 to begin substantial weapons shipments from North to South Vietnam, allowing the PLAF to create larger and better armed military units able to fight open battles against government forces.

Having understated what Hanoi had been doing before the Ninth Plenum, Asselin argues that the plenum “called for unrestricted military struggle in the South and comprehensive commitment of the North to that struggle” (p. 3), and that the decision to begin sending northern units southward in late 1964 made the North’s commitment to the South “virtually total” (201). The language seems a bit exaggerated. The plenum did not make a firm decision to put substantial North Vietnamese combat units into the South, and when Hanoi did begin sending such units, months later, it did not at first send many of them. According to the best available retrospective estimates from U.S. military intelligence, there were about 17,000 North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam in July 1965, and about 34,000 in December. Even at the beginning of 1967, Hanoi was still relying

heavily on southerners in its conduct of the war in the South; no more than a quarter of the Communist forces there were North Vietnamese.² North Vietnam would have been capable of contributing more, but was not yet choosing to do so. The Ninth Plenum had been just one step in a process that would take years to reach a really massive commitment of North Vietnamese resources to the war in the South.

Asselin gives the impression that the United States turned to war in Vietnam only after Hanoi had done so, and because Hanoi had done so. He describes the movement of North Vietnamese combat units southward in late 1964 as “effectively instigating the Vietnam War” (7), and occurring months before “the onset of American military intervention in Vietnam in March 1965” (1). He almost completely ignores the way American military personnel had begun taking direct combat roles, not functioning only as advisors, as early as 1962.

The United States was pushing South Vietnamese government forces by 1962 to undertake large-scale military offensives against the PLAF. Aside from arming the government forces, advising them, and urging them on, the Americans also participated directly in those offensives, especially as pilots of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Hanoi finally decided late in 1964 to authorize the PLAF to launch a counteroffensive, and also sent into South Vietnam a number of North Vietnamese troops smaller than the number of Americans who were already there. These troops did not quickly jump into the actual fighting; there was probably less direct participation in combat by North Vietnamese troops in December 1964 than there had been by Americans in late 1962 and early 1963. The United States responded to the increase in Communist military activity by sending a hugely larger number of American troops.

Asselin suggests that in the light of Hanoi’s 1964 escalation of the war, “it is not unreasonable to consider the deployment of American combat forces to South Vietnam in massive numbers the following year [1965] as a response to—and not the source of—the onset of ‘big war’ on the Indochinese peninsula” (3). If one chooses a definition of “big war” under which the actions of Hanoi and the PLAF in late 1964 qualify, the United States and the South Vietnamese government had been waging “big war” in Vietnam since 1962.

² Order of Battle Summary, September 1972, vol. II, I-35, I-36, I-42, *Classified Studies from the Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam, 1965-1973* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), reel 18. Using the highest possible interpretation of the U.S. figures for the number of North Vietnamese serving in Viet Cong units, and counting as Communist forces only main and local forces, guerrillas, and support troops (not the Viet Cong village militia or political infrastructure), there were 70,025 North Vietnamese out of a total force of 288,428 in January 1967.

Pierre Asselin's *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, unveils the contentious politics of Hanoi's decision-making behind its public display of unity and collective leadership, and the rise of militant thinking within the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP). In this book, Asselin provides a meticulous narrative of the ideological struggle of top Hanoi leaders over what they believed constituted "objective realities" (147) and the most appropriate policies to advance national interests at their time. The tension along the ideological fault line between the risk-averse moderate wing of the party led by Ho Chi Minh and the risk-taking militant wing led by Le Duan, as this book reveals, was considerably higher and more divisive than the existing literature suggested. It was through this process of contentious ideological deliberations that competing policies to pursue Vietnam's national interests were articulated, contested, and promoted. While the moderates preferred the policy of 'North-first' and 'political struggle' in the South, the militants advanced their policy of "violent armed struggle" to liberate the South. Each set of policy prescription was constituted by a different set of distinctive worldviews or belief systems.

Relying on primary sources from multiple archives, especially Vietnamese documents, Asselin provides a convincing narrative of the gradual and steady shift of power from the moderates to the militants, and of how internal and external circumstances constructed and constrained the popularity of their respective ideas and policies. He argues that gradual ascendancy of the militant faction to top positions in the VWP between 1954 and 1964 accounted for the parallel shift from the policy of "North-first" toward a more assertive, yet cautious policy in the South in the January 1959 Resolution 15, and eventually toward the policy of violent armed struggle in the South in the November 1963 Resolution 9. The militants' preference for "expeditious violent liberation of the South" (173) was constituted in their militant worldviews about the revolution and their lifetimes of sacrifice for the revolution in the South.

The contentious ideological struggle between the moderate and militant factions of the VWP, Asselin suggests, began as early as September 1954 when the "Politburo Resolution: On the New Situation, New Tasks, and New Policy of the Party" was adopted to prioritize the "North-first" policy line until 1959 (16). Asselin writes that "in its tone and substance, the document reflected the moderate tendencies of the Politburo and Central Committee majority, and quickly became an object of scorn among party militants" (18). The militants then began to engineer their gradual rise to dominate the party decision-making process in late 1956. As the land reform modeled after China's unleashed disastrous consequences in North Vietnam, its main supporters, namely Truong Chinh, Le Van Luong, Hoang Quoc Viet and Ho Viet Thang, were purged at the Tenth Plenum in September and October 1956 (39). The purges created a window of opportunity for militants to fill key positions in the party. Notably, Le Doc Tho, Le Duan's former deputy in the South and most trusted ally in the party, was promoted to the Politburo and chairman of the Party Organization Committee. Asselin emphasizes that "as Organization Committee head, he [Tho] would become instrumental in facilitating the appointment of like-minded individuals to the Central

Committee and the Politburo, setting the stage for the hijacking of party decision-making by militants in 1963-1964” (40).

The Third Party Congress in September 1960 placed more militant leaders in the driver’s seat in Hanoi. It also escalated the divide between the moderates and the militants as the Congress decided that the two revolutions—‘North-first’ and insurgency in the South—must be pursued separately. Asselin attributes the sanction to the “work of the moderates” within the VWP to remind the militants that “their control over decision-making remained, for the time being at least, almost absolute” (86). However, the Congress also elected Le Duan First Secretary General of the party, and thus head of the Politburo. Asselin concludes that “in retrospect, this was arguably the congress’s most consequential act, for Le Duan’s imprint on party policy, especially on the conduct of the struggle in the South, would become increasingly evident in the coming months and years” (86). Why did the moderates allow this to happen? According to Asselin, Le Duan was selected as First Secretary General over Vo Nguyen Giap, a leading moderate and the victorious general at Dien Bien Phu, mainly because of his ties to the South. In addition, the moderates intended to use Le Duan to pacify southern communists’ opposition to the five-year “North-first” policy adopted by the Congress (87). Other militant southerners, Le Doc Tho, Pham Hung, and Nguyen Chi Thanh also rose to top positions, and thus they could wield power beyond their membership in the new thirteen-member Politburo (87).

In 1961, after its deliberations, the new Politburo came to a conclusion that “resort to war would likely be necessary in the future to achieve the liberation of the South, [and] that political struggle and self-defense would probably prove insufficient” (93). The Politburo’s January 1961 directive also reinstated the powerful military role of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam (COSVN), which affirmed the Politburo’s commitment to military preparations in the South (95). As Asselin emphasizes, the heads of COSVN were all loyal disciples of Le Duan in the South. In response to the success of the strategic hamlet program implemented in mid-1961, COSVN called for the escalation of political *and* armed struggle with emphasis on the latter (111), because in its leaders’ view, the global balance of forces between revolutionaries and imperialists had shifted in favor of the former (112). That was also consistent with Beijing’s denunciation of the policy of peaceful coexistence. Thus the COSVN now challenged the moderate line, its “North-first” policy, and its apparent neutrality in the Sino-Soviet dispute.

For Asselin, 1963 was the turning point as the militants’ idea of “violent armed struggle” to liberate the South finally prevailed over the moderates’ idea of “political struggle” after a vigorous deliberation about how to respond to the coup against Diem (151-53). Their idea became dominant because that year the militant faction successfully dominated the decision-making body and processes, and was therefore able to wield unprecedented power in the party (146). The militants’ belief in the in “violent armed struggle” also prevailed thanks to circumstances inside and outside Vietnam that contributed to the growing popularity of their views within the party during the first half of 1963 (151). Domestically, the Southern revolutionary victory in the *Ap Bac* battle in January 1963 was the watershed turning point, and markedly vindicated the militants’ belief in and desire for a quick military victory over South Vietnam (152). Internationally, the radicalization of

Chinese domestic and foreign policy was a second *major* factor behind the stifling resolve of the militant faction, and to some extent, even convinced some moderates of the appropriateness of war in the South (152). Chinese President Liu Shaoqi's visit to Hanoi in May 1963 reinforced the predominant position of the pro-Chinese militant faction in the VWP.

Most importantly, Asselin argues, the adoption of Resolution 9 amounted to “a coup of a different kind” (169) against the moderates within the party. Days after the plenum, Le Duc Tho, Le Duan's second-in-command, justified the denunciations of party members by accusing them of being “antiparty” (169). Truong Chinh, a close collaborator of Le Duan's, attacked the ideological stance of key moderate leaders around Ho Chi Minh; as Asselin argues: “the most famous victim of [Le Doc] Tho and the militants was none other than Ho Chi Minh” (171). Le Duan and the militants went further to neutralize Ho's influence by propagating the “theory of two mistakes”— i.e. agreeing in 1946 to let French troops return to Vietnam unopposed and consenting to a cease-fire and to the country's partition in 1954 (171). Resolution 9's adoption, Asselin contends, clearly indicated that militant thinking prevailed in the Politburo and the Central Committee by 1963 (173). As the militants secured their domination of the party that year, the road to war was set on an irreversible course.

In my view, Asselin makes a constructivist foreign policy argument without saying it; the conflicting constructions of ‘objective realities’ between the militants and the moderates, he maintains, shaped two different sets of policy prescriptions in Hanoi. Asselin writes: “Militant constructions were largely informed by revolutionary orthodoxies, as well as admiration for the Chinese revolutionary model. Moderate positions derived from what adherents considered the pragmatic needs of the struggle against the United States” (147). The ideological dispute became public, and the deliberations became increasingly heated. As evidence, Asselin cites issues of *Hoc tap* and other party publications where prominent members of the militant faction openly attacked the moderates for their possession of private property, rank-ism, authoritarianism, and Khrushchev-style revisionism (147-148). In short, the militants proactively and effectively engaged in painting the image of the moderates as non-revolutionary, none-proletarian, and unpatriotic northerners who were indifferent to the fate of southern compatriots.

It is not easy to find major shortcomings in this book. That said, to play the devil's advocate, I would raise two points. First, Asselin may overstate the extent of ideological dispute between the militants and the moderates. This book raises these questions: Did the militants' ideas forcefully and decisively prevail over those of the moderates as Asselin emphasizes, or did the two sets of ideas mutually influence each other with the outcome looking more like a decisive victory for the militants? As Asselin's evidence indicates, their ideas are not mutually exclusive. The worldviews of Le Duan and other militants about China, the Soviet Union, and international relations were not that significantly different from those of the moderates.

At one point, Asselin writes that “[...]. Militants considered China's recent historical experience more relevant than the Soviet Union's to Vietnam's present circumstances and

their own purposes. They felt an ‘automatic identification’ with China because it remained engaged in some of the same tasks confronting the Vietnamese, including completion of national liberation and reunification” (50). However, elsewhere Asselin writes that “despite his sympathies for Chinese revolutionary theses, he [Le Duan] respected Soviet successes in transforming the national economy, and in fact considered the Soviet Union a model for Vietnam. [...]. In fact, Le Duan may have consciously sought to emulate the Soviet leaders’ approach in his own effort to build socialism in the DRVN while combating American ‘fascists’ in the South.” (195). This clearly indicates that militants like Le Duan also embraced moderation and pragmatism at different times. For instance, the militants accepted the idea of exploring the neutrality of the South in 1962, and sought a balanced position in the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1964. Hence, as with Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan was more of a pragmatic leader than a hard-line militant, an image Asselin tends to emphasize in this book.

Second, and most importantly, Asselin underscores the importance of understanding the militant leaders’ revolutionary nature and worldviews, but did not go deep enough into how their personal experiences formatively shaped their distinctive worldviews in the first place. Asselin contends that the militants’ worldviews were “deeply rooted in battle-hardened experiences and lifetimes of sacrifice for the revolution, in the south specifically”; he also adds that “these personal experiences steeled their thinking and sense of revolutionary purpose, and made any diplomatic arrangement that fell short of their terms unimaginable” in 1964 (194). In my view, the distinctive and indigenous southern origin of militant thinking deserves a more concrete narrative. How exactly such personal experiences molded militant worldviews is an important omission in this book.

In conclusion, this book provides a new perspective on the central role of North Vietnam in great power rivalry and the construction of Vietnam War. The external circumstances such as the Sino-Soviet dispute meant different things to the moderates and the militants within the VWP. Those external forces had the effects they did and were significant insofar as they are constituted with particular meanings for the main actors—i.e. the militant and the moderate in the VWP. As Asselin argues, North Vietnam was far from being a puppet of external patrons, China and the Soviet Union, and in fact Hanoi’s militant leaders played a central role in causing the Vietnam War. This book will be a valuable resource for courses on the Vietnam War, and scholars interested in the role of small powers in international politics.

Author's Response by Pierre Asselin, Hawai'i Pacific University

I worked on this book project for over a decade. I carefully researched the various aspects pertinent to the story I relate, not without challenges. Especially daunting was obtaining party and government documentation from Vietnam to corroborate my core arguments. As the reviewers remind us and as I point out in the book, Vietnamese authorities still closely guard their archives. To compensate for the dearth of primary materials from Vietnam, I drew extensively from the governmental archives of Canada, the United Kingdom, and France. These countries maintained a diplomatic presence in Hanoi after 1954, and their diplomats produced some insightful reports on conditions in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) generally and in policymaking circles specifically. Given the constraints I faced in putting this work together, I am genuinely elated by the kind words the reviewers use to describe it.

A central theme of the book is that Hanoi meaningfully contributed to creating the circumstances that eventuated in the Vietnam War. Actually, I go as far as to argue that 'big war' in Vietnam started not in 1965, with the arrival of the first American combat troops, but in 1964, that is, shortly after adoption of 'Resolution 9' calling for the dramatic expansion of combat operations in the South by the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP). Considering the extent to which the study of the Vietnam War has become politicized, I feared that my contentions might not be taken seriously or otherwise dismissed as polemical, and that I would be branded an apologist for American intervention in Indochina. To my relief, the reviewers find the contentions credible. Only Edwin Moise takes exception to my reasoning, noting that the United States and the South Vietnamese government had in fact "been waging 'big war' in Vietnam since 1962." According to this rationale, Hanoi reacted to events; it did not precipitate them. Admittedly, South Vietnamese forces supported by U.S. advisory and other personnel engaged in large-scale combat operations before 1964, but those operations did not constitute 'big war' in the sense that most historians of the Vietnam War have understood the term. The facts do not support the argument that the war started in 1962. As I demonstrate in the book on the basis of ample documentary evidence, it was not until 1964 that the complexion of the armed conflict below the seventeenth parallel changed dramatically, to the point where it could be considered a major war.

The crucial role assumed by Le Duan in the period leading to the war is another main theme of the book. Edward Miller comments that "Asselin's assertion that Le Duan's power in Hanoi had become 'absolute' by late 1964 seems exaggerated." He believes, as Lien-Hang Nguyen maintains in *Hanoi's War*, that moderates, including Vo Nguyen Giap, remained influential within the party at least until 1967.¹ That

¹ See Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

contention, too, flies in the face of the evidence. Admittedly, Le Duan's power was not absolute in 1964, a fact I acknowledge when I write that his "command and influence" over the party became "*essentially* absolute" after 1963 (175, emphasis added). But the bold and provocative initiatives undertaken by Hanoi starting in that year were significantly more consistent with hardline than moderate thinking. Ang Cheng Guan has a point: moderates after 1963-64 "had not been completely silenced, or removed." But if they, and Giap in particular, retained any kind of leverage in Hanoi thereafter, as Miller suggests, they did not capitalize on it.

Interestingly, while Miller suggests that I underestimate the persistence of moderate tendencies in Hanoi during the first half of the 1960s, Moise claims the exact opposite, namely, that I "exaggerat[e] the extent to which the moderates retained control of policy in Hanoi" at the time. For Moise, the "vital decision of 1962 to begin substantial weapons shipments from North to South Vietnam" demonstrates that militants had for all intents and purposes already ousted moderates from power by then. That proposition is untenable. Increased weapons shipments from the North in 1962 did not portend a shift in strategy, but represented instead a palliative action intended to appease militant southerners calling for big war and greater northern involvement below the seventeenth parallel. In this sense, southerners may have been better armed after 1962, but Hanoi's overall strategy in the South remained the same as before. Relative to the strategy it began espousing in 1963-64, Hanoi actually followed a cautious course in the South before then. And it did so because moderates were still at the helm and they remained concerned about the prospect of American military intervention.

Moise writes that the language I use to describe the Central Committee's Ninth Plenum is also "exaggerated." The plenum, he asserts, "did not make a firm decision to put substantial North Vietnamese combat units into the South." But that is exactly what I contend. The Central Committee did not then order units of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN, the DRVN's standing army) to move south at once. What it did was give Le Duan and the rest of the VWP Politburo sanction to issue that order when circumstances dictated. The Politburo did just that, in September 1964, shortly after the so-called Tonkin Gulf incident. Similarly – and strangely, Miller objects to my insistence that the militants "pressed ahead with plans to deploy North Vietnamese Army forces to the south immediately after the Ninth Plenum." "The evidence shows," he continues, "that these plans were not actually implemented until after the first U.S. airstrikes on North Vietnam in August 1964." Perhaps this argument is not based on a thorough reading of this section of the book. The final resolution adopted at the Ninth Plenum (Resolution 9), I write, "effectively gave DRVN decision-makers a blank check to wage war in the South" (167). Immediately, Hanoi set to bring its own armed forces to "wartime strength" (168), and increased considerably the flow of weapons to the South. It did not, however, commit PAVN units to the war in the South just yet because, firstly, it thought that better-equipped southern revolutionary forces might achieve victory on their own, and, secondly, it wanted to give Washington no pretext to commit its own combat forces. "The most obvious sign of Hanoi's continued prudence" after

December 1963, I write, “was the delay in deploying PAVN units to the South” (179). It was not until late September 1964, a few weeks after the Tonkin Gulf incident, as noted above, that the VWP Politburo “made the fateful choice of ordering PAVN main-line units to the South” (199). The first units began leaving for the South on 20 November, though one document I found suggested that some outfits may have begun moving south as early as October (200).

There are other points raised by Moise and Miller to which I must take exception. Moise misreads my statement to the effect that by 1964 the North’s commitment to the South was “virtually total” (207). “The Ninth Plenum,” he writes, “had been just one step in a process that would take years to reach a really massive commitment of North Vietnamese resources to the war in the South.” My claim is that by 1964 the North was fully committed – that is, determined – to bring about southern liberation by whatever means necessary. Obviously, the commitment of northern *resources*, material and human, was not total at the time, steadily increasing as it did in subsequent years. I also do not understand how Moise could write that I am “oddly reluctant” to discuss North Vietnamese involvement in the conflict in the South as a “gradual process.” There were, to be sure, occasional and sudden policy shifts ordered by Hanoi between 1954 and 1965. Ultimately, however, the onset of war in 1964-65 was the result of a long process of gradual escalation and expansion of military activity in the South reflecting the slowly shifting balance of power from moderates to militants in Hanoi. As Kosal Path points out, my book provides “a convincing narrative of the gradual and steady shift of power from the moderates to the militants.”

Miller, for his part, points out that I mistakenly date the launch of the Strategic Hamlet program to mid-1961, and that in fact it was not “rolled out on a country-wide basis” until early 1962. Miller is correct: the program was not *officially* launched until January 1962. But as Philip Catton shows, the first strategic hamlets were established in the South starting in mid-1961, and more than five hundred of them existed by the end of that year.² Miller claims that the success of the Strategic Hamlet program “was more fleeting than [Asselin] implies.” I thought I made that clear when I wrote that the program caused problems for insurgents “for a period” (110). Miller also writes that my use of the term “moderates” instead of “North-firsters” to refer to the Ho Chi Minh faction “appears to be a distinction without a difference” since I use the term “North-first” throughout the book to refer to the policies favored by the moderates. As it turns out, I use the term “North-first” in reference to *one* policy adopted by moderate leaders, namely, rehabilitation (eventually, socialist transformation) of the northern economy after 1954. Different policies applied in the South and governed DRVN relations with allies and the rest of the world, and those cannot be explained by the “North-first” label. Conversely, Miller’s statement that “the two groups [moderates and militants] seem to have

² Philip E. Catton, *Diems’ Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 20002), 90-97.

differed less on their tolerance for risk than in their respective assessments of the multiple risks they faced” is a distinction without a difference. Last, it is true that my book contains “remarkably little discussion of Le Duan’s notion of a ‘General Offensive, General Uprising,’” but that is only because that notion applies to the period after 1965, which is beyond the scope of my study.

I was pleasantly surprised that Ang Cheng Guan and Edwin Moise thought my chapter covering the year 1962 was “the most interesting chapter in the book” (Ang) and “one of the most interesting and surprising parts of the book” (Moise). This chapter was arguably the most challenging one to piece together, addressing as it does Hanoi’s position on and response to the 1962 Geneva accords on Laos. I had never thought much of the importance of those accords for the DRVN until I had a conversation with a former high-ranking Vietnamese diplomat who indicated that Hanoi had actually considered the talks on the neutralization of Laos “an experiment,” a means of gaging the prospect for a similar solution to the crisis in South Vietnam.³ On the basis of that conversation, I decided to explore the issue further. Luckily, I found in the Vietnamese archives a decent number of documents on Laos generally and on the 1962 Geneva talks on its neutralization specifically. As Moise and Ang intimate, few scholars have paid close attention to these issues from Hanoi’s perspective. Ang, however, disagrees with my conclusion that the unraveling of the accords on Laotian neutralization was a seminal development in the history of the Vietnam War as it may well have marked the last chance for peace in Vietnam and caused militants – Le Duan in particular – to lose what little faith they still had in diplomatic negotiations. “I believe,” Ang writes, “the Vietnamese always understood that it was not possible to achieve at the diplomatic table what they could not obtain on the battlefield, thus the need to focus on the battlefield.” But if “the Vietnamese” *always* understood this, then why did they enter into the 1954 Geneva accords and, most important, why did they choose to respect those accords for a period thereafter? I believe there was a specific point when some in Hanoi, militants for the most part, lost all hope in a diplomatic settlement, even a temporary one, and that point was in late 1962.

In guise of a conclusion, I want to extend my most sincere thanks to my esteemed colleagues for taking time from their busy schedules to read my work and offer

³ I cited that conversation in the book, but withheld the name of the source because I was told this and other information in confidence. Since the source has since passed away (unfortunately), I can now write that it was Nguyen Dinh Phuong. While the name may not be familiar to most students of the Vietnam War, his face surely is: Phuong is the balding Vietnamese man in glasses who appears in most photos of Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger talking informally during the secret/private Paris peace talks. He was Le Duc Tho’s interpreter who eventually gained Kissinger’s confidence and became the sole interpreter – and only other person – present during many of their one-on-one conversations. I first made contact with Phuong in the 1990s, for an interview. We instantly became friends – in my eyes at least, and for that reason I never made use of most of the information about DRVN diplomacy he shared with me. Doing so, I felt, would betray the trust I thought he had in me. Phuong was a remarkable man who lived a remarkable life, to say the least.

thoughtful comments on it. I never cease to be amazed by the magnanimity of the people in our profession. After all, who else spends so much of their precious time partaking in professional endeavors for which they receive no financial compensation? Our programs may be dying, but we remain an exceptional bunch.