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Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)

DAVID G. MARR

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, xix+721p.

David Marr's scholarship, which has spanned almost half a century, has had a great influence upon the direction of Vietnamese studies. We are all in his debt for showing what can be done by careful archival research and for making his findings accessible to people interested in Vietnam. His books have become the foundation of scholarship on modern Vietnamese history in the English language and have had a great influence upon work published in all other languages as well, including Vietnamese. Whatever the criticisms that might be made of his work, including mine in this review, they take nothing away from his monumental achievement in bringing historical knowledge about the modern Vietnamese into readable books.

Marr's first monograph, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (1971) was written in wartime with an agenda of asserting a theme of heroic, albeit unsuccessful, Vietnamese resistance to French colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to explain why US policy was doomed, thus providing a scholarly blessing to the anti-war viewpoint of that time; it was suffused with an approbation of a certain kind of nationalism as a legitimizing historical force, which was a dominant academic perspective in the 1960s and 1970s. As Marr states in his Preface (p. xv), his "fundamental assumption . . . is that one cannot understand resistance efforts in Vietnam in more recent times without going back at least to 1885." The concept of "resistance" is important in all of Marr's books, which to him means resistance to the non-revolutionary mainstream of Vietnamese nationalism.

Marr's second book, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (1981), revealed the lively intellectual life of educated Vietnamese during the late French colonial period. It provided inspiration for a generation of young scholars of modern Vietnamese history that came of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it has proven to be the most influential of Marr's books.

In his last two books, Marr has focused on what he sees as the centerpiece of modern Vietnamese history, the August Revolution of 1945. In *Vietnam 1945* (1995) he takes readers through the events leading up to the August Revolution and the declaration of independence announced in

Hanoi on September 2, 1945. *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)*, according to Marr in his Preface (p. xv), “focuses on events of the next sixteen months, when Vietnam’s future course was largely determined.” This statement comes immediately after Marr notes the difference between the August Revolution in Hanoi and in Saigon: “one orderly, one anarchic, [which] showed how the popular upheavals of August could propel Vietnam in starkly different directions.” Here we find an implicit contradiction between north and south going in “starkly different directions” while there is but one “future course” that was “largely determined” for “Vietnam”; the implication is that the south had fallen out of the logic governing Vietnamese history.

The strength of this book is the depth of detail with which it describes how state and party structures were built from the enthusiasm of the August Revolution in northern Vietnam during 1945 and 1946. However, Marr presents this structure as the predetermined “future course” of “Vietnam.” He has no discernible interest in the many Vietnamese who did not agree with this future course and were prepared to resist it, for they, from Marr’s perspective, did not represent “Vietnam,” being dupes, wittingly or not, of foreign powers.

Marr’s hardening of focus from “Vietnamese” in his first two books to “Vietnam” in his last two books suggests a bias in legitimizing a particular scheme of state formation. I do not mean to imply that there is anything objectionable about this, but it cannot but be obvious that the general direction of this interpretive strategy is to scrape away a large number of Vietnamese from the bailiwick of “Vietnam,” or, at least, to render them into some kind of lesser category of membership in the thing called “Vietnam.”

Marr appears to address this issue on the last page of his Epilogue, where he wrote;

From the point of view of many Vietnamese, the pro-American Republic of Vietnam was the insurgent threat, not the DRV or the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. No CIA-initiated program, be it “civic action,” “census grievance,” “counterterror,” or “political action,” managed to overcome this liability. Washington then escalated to search-and-destroy operations, forced urbanization, and bombing the north, greatly increasing the human toll but not reversing the underlying political dynamics. (p. 578)

In this thumb-nail narrative of the 1960s, Marr’s “many Vietnamese” represent “the underlying political dynamics” that no amount of CIA and Washington policies could overcome, putting us back into the framework of Marr’s first book. Marr is not interested in the “many Vietnamese” who resisted the vision that the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam)/National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam had for the future of their country; he denies them any legitimate right to have a voice about how to organize the state. For Marr, any Vietnamese who oppose his “many Vietnamese” are simply an “insurgent threat” to his “Vietnam”; they are “pro-American” in a sense that Marr neglects to compare with the pro-Soviet or pro-PRC “many Vietnamese” of his “Vietnam.” He denies his “pro-American” non-many Vietnamese any agency, attributing his scare quoted phrases to foreign meddlers. At most, this is an exuberant view of “underlying political

dynamics” in a determinist version of history. At least, this is a one-sided, exclusionary view of the Vietnamese.

The degree to which this book is based on archival materials is remarkable and praiseworthy, which for some may also be a limitation in the sense that it tends to read like a transcription of research notes. Aside from scattered comments, there is little analytical development, nor is there a chronological narrative enabling a sense of the actual flow and logic of events as they happened; what we have is a topical organization of archival debris that has survived from events, along with an implication that this allows us to see how a structure of state authority was built in the wake of a revolution.

Many passages are a survey of archival materials on a particular topic. For example, the section entitled “Importing Marxism-Leninism” (pp. 490–492) provides no explanation of the significance of the topic and ends abruptly with a non sequitur. This is typical of many sections in the book. Other passages are a miscellaneous accumulation of bits and pieces of information gleaned from the archives. It is a pleasure for people like myself to savor these details, but for students or general readers who lack a mental context for appreciating the author’s prowess as an archivist it may come across as a jumble.

A strength of this format, as others have noted, is that it suggests a contingency of events beyond the guidance or control of the communist leadership, which goes against the grain of a previous widespread assumption, nurtured by ICP (Indochinese Communist Party) historians, that the August Revolution and its sequel was the result of an almost omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent group of men led by Ho Chi Minh. Yet, one aspect of the book is the degree to which Marr appears to buy into Ho Chi Minh’s cult of “Uncle Ho.”

On page 265, Marr says “Ho’s subsequent actions” following his return from France in October 1946 “suggest that he retained a multilateral view of the world until 1949.” Earlier in the same paragraph Marr says that any retention of a multilateral view of the world was purely tactical. The “subsequent actions” are not cited or explained. Mention of the year 1949 implies that once the Chinese communists arrived on the Vietnamese border it was they who set the agenda of the Vietnamese revolution and forced Ho Chi Minh out of his “multilateral view.”

Similarly, on page 453, Marr mentions “certain operational advantages” in dissolving the ICP, then follows this up with: “Beyond that, I doubt that Ho wanted an ICP dictatorship anytime soon.” Marr’s doubt about what Ho may or may not have wanted “any time soon” is obscure if not naïve.

This solicitous care for nurturing a benevolent image for Uncle Ho is extended to the ICP leadership more generally on page 497, describing a time in late 1946: “The most senior members of the ICP did not believe in proletarian dictatorship for Vietnam any time soon.” The twice-repeated “any time soon” formula lacks clarity.

On the next page (p. 498), Marr goes even further to say “Before 1945, the ICP might be compared with the very early Christian church, constantly under threat, necessarily clandestine.”

This remarkable “might be” comparison reveals a neglect of the ICP’s international connections and both actual and potential sources of external support, something unavailable to “the very early Christian church.” Where Marr is going with his comparison, his suggestion, his doubt, his any-time-soon becomes apparent at the end of the paragraph: “Along the way, Truong Chinh became a separate pole of power from President Ho Chi Minh” (p. 498). What this actually means is vague, but it strongly implies that Truong Chinh was as much or more in the driver’s seat of the state as was Ho Chi Minh and thus shared or even bore most responsibility for unsavory aspects of the Vietnamese revolutionary path. The idea of Truong Chinh being the scapegoat taking away any possible sins that might accrue to Uncle Ho is not new, but it has yet to be proven and Marr provides no evidence for it, being content to simply say that it is something that happened “along the way.” Without evidence it can be no more than an effort to keep a clean slate for Uncle Ho.

On page 533, Marr makes an important and revealing statement in reference to DRV calculations of literacy instruction in 1946: “This sort of pseudo-scientific precision with big numbers became common in the DRV, sometimes making it impossible for decision makers to distinguish wish from reality.” Here, the archivist’s suspicion of big precise numbers opens a small ray of light upon dissonance between the wishes of his many Vietnamese and the reality they inhabited. Yet, the vague plural expression “decision makers,” given the context of the book, allows Marr to spread responsibility for the unrealistic policies, the murders, and the acts of injustice committed by revolutionaries, to all levels of decision-making, down to the local self-appointed operatives who were out of the ICP’s control. Marr does not shy away from the bloody-mindedness of many who followed the revolution, but he implies that it still represented a more legitimate “Vietnam” than any other that he can imagine.

Nevertheless, this is a good book, full of information to delight specialists of modern Vietnamese history. Marr’s work during the past half-century has transformed the study of Vietnamese history, showing that the Vietnamese have participated in the modern world with the full force of their aspirations for betterment. His years spent in the archives have not been in vain. His books are a great benefit for other scholars, and this book brings us into the details of government activity in the DRV during 1945 and 1946 as no other scholar has been able to do.

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