

2010

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review

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

Volume XI, No. 19 (2010)

2 April 2010

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Stein Tønnesson. *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. ISBN: 9780520256026 (\$39.95, hardcover).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-19.pdf>

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

On the morning of 19 December 1946 Vo Nguyen Giap's Vietnamese forces attacked French civilians in Hanoi and soon faced a counter-attack from French forces. The spread of fighting from the south to North Vietnam brought eight years of fighting. Stein Tønnesson wants to restore a sense of contingency to the origins of the First Indochina War by very closely examining the perspectives of all of the participants right up until the shooting started. Without access to sources on what Vietnamese leaders like Giap and Ho Chi Minh were thinking on December 18, Tønnesson advances the hypothesis that Giap and Ho Chi Minh and their advisers decided to prepare for a surprise attack to head off a French attack or to wait, "avoid any incident during the day, contact the French to sound them out concerning their intentions, and if possible obtain guarantees allowing postponement of the surprise attack until [French premier, Léon] Blum's intentions were known." (p. 200)

Until the last twenty years, accounts of the origins of the First Indochina War in 1945-1946 have largely relied upon a few secondary accounts such as Bernard Fall's *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (1963); Philippe Devillers, *Historie du Viêt-Nam de 1940 à 1952* (1952); and Ellen J. Hammer's *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940-1955* (1954). Tønnesson and several of the reviewers have significantly advanced understanding of the origins of the conflict through their books and articles based on extensive multi-archival research in French, British, and American governmental records as well as some of the available published Vietnamese memoirs and primary documents. The end result is that historians have acquired a much more nuanced understanding of the policy calculations of the major participants in the origins of the conflict as well as a better grasp of the contingencies in 1945-1946 and the conflicting interests and perspectives that moved the French leaders and Ho Chi Minh down the path to war.¹

The reviewers note many important contributions in Tønnesson's study including his impressive research, his balanced, dispassionate perspective, and his careful attention to what the French leaders in Paris and Saigon and the Vietnamese in Hanoi knew and stated over a limited period from the 6 March 1946 agreement on the return of French forces to Hanoi to the 19 December outbreak of fighting in Hanoi. Martin Thomas is impressed with how well Tønnesson weaves together the local situations and actors with the decisions of policymakers from Paris to Saigon, from Peking to Hanoi. Thomas emphasizes how well *Vietnam 1946* captures the efforts of French and Hanoi officials with a reputation for advocating direct action to pull back from armed conflict. Eric Jennings endorses the

¹ Stein Tønnesson gives extensive credit to authors who have contributed to enhancing understanding of the origins of the war, most notably David Marr for his *1945: the Quest for Power* (1995) and forthcoming book with the working title of 'Vietnam 1945-1950: State, War and Revolution'; and Lin Hua, *Chiang Kai-shek, de Gaulle, contre Hô Chi Minh: Viêt-nam, 1945-1946* (Paris: L Harmattan, 1994). Mark Lawrence's *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (2005), which was featured in an H-Diplo Roundtable at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/> has also contributed to the reassessment.

author's focus on the "particular chain of events, on information and disinformation, intelligence, perceptions, misunderstandings and contingencies that shaped what was hardly a preordained 'road to war' in 1946." (2) Tuong Vu suggests that Tønnesson's study makes three major contributions: (1) developing the important role of Chinese officials during this period; (2) presenting a view of the Indochinese Communist Party as being forced "to accommodate other groups to hold on to power ... [and exercising] little control over government apparatuses at local levels and beyond the main urban centers"; and (3) avoiding an uncritical perspective on the Vietnamese communist leaders. (2-3)

The reviewers do raise some questions on Tønnesson's revisionist theses, most notably that the 6 March 1946 accord between the France and Hanoi over the return of French forces to Haiphong and Hanoi was imposed on them by China, and, secondly, that Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap fell into a French trap when they initiated the attack on French forces in Hanoi on 19 December 1946. Thomas and Jennings agree with Tønnesson's well-developed interpretations, noting the important role played by Chinese forces in stopping the French plans for a quick overthrow of Ho Chi Minh's regime through Operation Bentre which was stopped by Chinese artillery fire against the French fleet in Haiphong Harbor. (pp. 42-64) David Marr and Tuong Vu have reservations on both interpretations. Marr, for example, suggests that "expressed both publicly and in confidential documents, [Vietnamese] hopes for a peaceful settlement were highest in April-June, began to dissipate in July-August, and had almost disappeared by November." (1) Making use of published Vietnamese communist party documents, including accounts of high level party meetings, Vu depicts party leaders as considering the accord with France as desirable so that they could deal with the threat posed by rival Vietnamese parties and gain time to mobilize for a final struggle for independence. Furthermore, Vu suggests that party leaders considered the accord an important step forward from a previous French offer of Indochinese autonomy towards an independent Vietnam. (4-5) In his response, Tønnesson agrees with both Marr and Vu but emphasizes that both Paris and Hanoi "saw the March 6 accord as a stepping stone to further advance" their respective objectives, independence for Vietnam versus French control of Cochinchina in the south and recognition of French authority in the north. The ensuing negotiations at Dalat and at Fontainebleau "failed to yield any other result than a disappointing 'modus vivendi' agreement in September." Tønnesson also does not believe that ICP leaders worried as much about their Vietnamese opponents as they did about Chinese and French intentions. (1-2)

On Tønnesson's second thesis that the French set a trap in Hanoi to precipitate a Vietnamese attack that would free French forces to go after the Viet Minh without further negotiations and restraints imposed by Paris officials, Marr suggests that the attack resulted more from a failure of command and control: "Vietnamese officers were still learning how to formulate orders, communicate them unambiguously, and make sure they were executed faithfully. Most commands were delivered orally, by runner. Militia groups possessed enthusiasm and resourcefulness, but orders often needed to be explained and argued, even when time was of the essence." (1) Marr notes that Paris announced a new mission to Indochina but orders to postpone the attack failed to stop it.

Vu also used party documents to emphasize a consensus at the highest level of party leaders for preparation for war and a pervasive revolutionary fanaticism that called for resistance to imperialism and class enemies. (6-7) In response, Tønnesson agrees that a good deal of confusion and uncertainty persist about Vietnamese decision making, but that the “Vietnamese assault was exactly what the French High Commissioner needed,” a Vietnamese attack after a series of French “provocative actions in Hanoi in the run-up to December 19. “And this is why I claim that Giap walked into a French trap,” Tønnesson concludes. (3)

Vietnam 1946 concludes with an “If Only ...” final chapter in which the author critically explores the perception of an inevitable war in Vietnam by evaluating the perspectives of the major powers and French and Vietnamese officials on the eve of the conflict. Tønnesson makes a detailed assessment to demonstrate that the major powers wanted France to cooperate with Hanoi; that the new head of the French government, Leon Blum, and Ho Chi Minh, wanted negotiations rather than war; and that a series of fateful events and decisions precipitated the December violence. (pp. 234-236) All of the reviewers agree with the author that friction was inevitable and war likely if two conditions raised by Thomas were not met: advocates of peace in Paris and Hanoi would have to maintain an “upper hand, not only in general but in the detailed minutiae of day-to-day decision making,” and “both sides be genuinely prepared to give ground over the timing, nature, and extent of eventual Vietnamese self-rule within some sort of wider framework of privileged bilateral relations between France and its most precious Southeast Asian colony.” (1) In his response, Tønnesson admits that the second condition could not be met with war the most likely result in 1947 as escalating Cold War pressures would have pushed both sides to further conflict. (4) Marr is equally pessimistic, noting that no political party or leader in France was prepared to give up Cochinchina where the war had started in September 1945 and spread to south-central Annam, a conflict that Hanoi supported. The southern insurgency recovered from the French pacification campaign in 1945 and expanded its guerrilla campaign as British and Japanese troops used against the Viet Minh withdrew and France sent experienced troops to the North. (2 and pp. 72-77) Tønnesson also notes that a cease fire in the south called for in the October modus vivendi between French officials and Hanoi lasted about a week. (p. 96)

Participants:

Stein Tønnesson holds a Dr. philos and is Research Professor at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) and is A Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., 2010-11. He is the author of *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (London: Sage, 1991) and a number of books and articles on national identity, decolonization and nation building in Southeast Asia, the dispute in the South China Sea, and Norwegian sports (see www.cliostein.com). He is now undertaking a project to explain why East Asia has been so relatively peaceful since 1980 as compared with 1946-79, as well as with other world regions after 1979.

Eric T. Jennings is Professor of History at Victoria College at the University of Toronto. A specialist of French colonial history, he is the author of several books. *Vichy in the Tropics*

(Stanford UP 2001, translated in French with Grasset in 2004) examined the Vichy regime's colonial policies. A collective volume, co-edited with Jacques Cantier (*l'Empire colonial sous Vichy*, Odile Jacob, 2004), further explored Philippe Pétain's colonial empire. *Curing the Colonizers* (Duke University Press, 2006) considered the role of spas in the French colonial system. *City in the Clouds: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*, forthcoming with the University of California Press, chronicles the history of the Vietnamese resort-city of Dalat from its inception in the late nineteenth century to the present. His current work delves into the Free French empire in Africa, focusing in particular on the "Brazzaville moment."

David G. Marr is emeritus professor at the Australian National University, and author of three histories: *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1920* (1971); *Vietnam Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (1981); and *Vietnam 1945: the Quest for Power* (1995). He is currently completing a book with the working title of 'Vietnam 1945-1950: State, War and Revolution'.

Martin Thomas is Professor of Colonial History and Director of the Centre for the Study of War, State, and Society at the University of Exeter. He has written extensively on French international policy and colonial politics. His most recent book is *Empires of Intelligence: Security Services and Colonial Control after 1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). He is currently working on a comparative study of political policing in the European colonial empires between the Wars to be published with Cambridge University Press.

Tuong Vu is an Assistant Professor of comparative politics in the Department of Political Science at the University of Oregon. He authored *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (Cambridge, 2010), and co-edited (with Erik Kuhonta and Dan Slater) *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford, 2008) and (with Wasana Wongsurawat) *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (Palgrave, 2009). His articles have appeared in numerous scholarly journals, including *World Politics*, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, and *Theory and Society*, and he is co-editor in chief of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

Stein Tønnesson's *Vietnam, 1946: How the War Began* succeeds in startling the reader by doing something one expects fine historians to do: by situating the events of that year in proper context. The stars were aligned, Tønnesson contends, for a peace agreement to be reached between France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) that year. Indeed, at different points in 1946, Socialists like Marius Moutet and Léon Blum held key positions in the drama; moreover, the French Communist party made major inroads that year, and occupied positions in government. On the Vietnamese side, too, a coalition held power. It was ostensibly eager to reach a series of compromises to at once end the Chinese occupation of Northern Indochina, and ensure that any French involvement be cooperative rather than outright colonial. Compromise and coalitions, in other words, were the order of the day. As Tønnesson reminds us, "it is easily forgotten that France, for a brief interval in 1946, was seen as a model of decolonization in Asia." This book, then, asks a simple question: what went wrong and how?

Vietnam 1946 has an interesting history of its own. An earlier version of the book came out in French in 1987. The author has added considerable elements to it, including some material published separately, and has brought it up to date. One of the actors in the story-- who first doubted the official French line on the events of December 1946-- agreed to write a preface to it. While Tønnesson is right to point out that the origins of the Second Indochina War continue to garner more attention than those of the First, he nonetheless succeeds in bringing the book up to date historiographically. One of the most fruitful ways of reading this book is to consider it together with David Marr's *Vietnam 1945*. Methodologically, both authors are keen to consider a wide range of actors: Japanese, Chinese, French, Vietnamese, British, and American, as well as the broader Southeast Asian context. Both even share a stylistic trait of hinting ahead, before sinking their teeth into a particular micro-history. Most importantly, in tandem the two works provide by far the most detailed and convincing readings of the complex international imbroglios set in Indochina in the immediate wake of World War II.

Tønnesson sets about debunking two foundational myths: the first that the March 6, 1946 agreements between France and Vietnam were the result of the brief triumph of French moderates, the second that the onset of war on December 19, 1946, was the result of a calculated attack by the DRV on the French. It becomes clear by the end of the book that the March 6 agreements were instead brokered by Chiang Kaishek's China, and that the violence in Hanoi in December 1946 was carefully staged in Saigon.

The book's originality resides in part in its revision of a basic cliché, or rather of a fascination: the historiographical obsession with moderates and extremists in both camps. Said fascination has long held sway on both sides of the equation. Indeed, the binary narrative finds its roots in the contemporaneous relating of events on the French side: Marshal Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque's 1947 death consecrated the theory that he had been a dove to Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu's hawk. Highly visible clashes between authorities in Saigon and Paris-- nothing new if one thinks of the colonial *longue durée*--

have also led historians to overemphasize the importance of this divide. As for the French fascination with discerning moderates in the DRV camp (note that many a French observer considered Ho Chi Minh a moderate at the time), it too finds its roots in the way that events were related in 1946, and especially in the manner that French officials perceived their soon-to-be adversaries. Yet, on many occasions, Tønnesson suggests that the moderates vs. extremists model constitutes a simplified and unhelpful way of viewing the events of 1946. What Tønnesson writes of Léon Blum would seem to apply to a great many of the actors of this tragedy: well-intentioned people are sometimes forced into decisions or positions at the very antithesis of their personal convictions.

This is not to suggest that Marius Moutet and Thierry d'Argenlieu did not clash; they undeniably did. And Tønnesson is even able to shed fascinating new light on the ways in which French actors checked their own backs, rightly worried in some cases, of the ways in which d'Argenlieu read, or failed to read, public and government opinion in Paris. But Tønnesson's chief focus lies elsewhere: in the particular chain of events, on information and disinformation, intelligence, perceptions, misunderstandings and contingencies that shaped what was hardly a preordained "road to war" in 1946.

The March 1946 accords, Tønnesson concludes, were desired by neither Paris nor Saigon, but were rather the product of the Chinese occupation of Northern Indochina, an occupation that could well have continued were it not for this agreement. The author demonstrates at once how Chinese forces fired on approaching French vessels, and advised Ho Chi Minh and his entourage, in a full-court press strategy. In other words, Tønnesson argues, one should not read ebbs and flows of moderation into the French position, nor necessarily inconsistencies within it: rather, one needs to consider the geostrategic reality on the ground: whereas Leclerc's forces had been able to cooperate with British and even Japanese elements to re-conquer Southern Vietnam in 1945, a diplomatic solution was required to retake the North.

Another fascinating facet of this book involves the simultaneous and protean constitution-building that was taking place on both sides. The "national bloc" agreements that were reached on the Vietnamese side emerge as "a kind of multifactional politics" that found an equivalent in French coalition and constitution-building in the wake of de Gaulle's resignation. What is more, Tønnesson considers the many regional variables in play, including the putative place of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the nascent "French Union."

One would not do justice to *Vietnam 1946* if one did not cite the incredible and painstaking detective work that the former director of the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, invested in this study. Such intellectual fine-motor skills are on display, for instance, in the author's close reading of Ho Chi Minh's December 20 (or was it 21?) 1946 radio appeal (pp. 221-223).

Like any good international history, this one contains its share of revelations. It sheds new light on the preparation of operation Bentré in March 1946, and outlines the mad idea of rearming French troops trapped in Hanoi's central citadel since the Japanese occupation. It

exposes the key role of Léon Pignon, described as a kind of French Machiavelli, in elaborating the famous “Bao Dai solution.” It scrutinizes shifting power relations. By October 1946, the Viet-Minh controlled vast parts of Cochinchina-- less than a year after it had been conquered by the French expeditionary force. It does a magisterial job of analyzing French efforts to pin the blame for December 1946 on the Vietnamese. Particularly striking for this reader are some of the ways in which memories were marshaled: the memory of the Japanese *coup de force* of March 9, 1945 was harnessed for different ends, and on many occasions, on the French side (take pp. 130, 201, 203). And, for all his critique of various French positions, Tønnesson displays no particular naïveté towards the DRV either. Witness his brilliant description of an October 28, 1946 DRV circular ordering the concoction of lists of prisoners killed while trying to escape or imprisoned for collaborating with Japan. The scheme collapsed when one of the executed surfaced alive and well.

Roundtable reviews seem of little use if they contain no criticism whatsoever. Mine are quibbles, really. Like any author, Tønnesson has had to make choices. He elected to focus on the North more than the South, on the chain of events leading to a deal in Hanoi in March, then to clashes in Haiphong in November, and in Hanoi in December, rather than on the conferences in Fontainebleau and Dalat. And while the difficulty of consulting Vietnamese archival sources relating to 1946 seems indisputable, perhaps Chinese sources might have proven easier to tap. Tønnesson also elects not to relate the details of the Haiphong bombings, focusing squarely on causes and outcomes. Of course, redressing this would have led to a book two to three times longer.

In terms of historiography, I was a little surprised not to see the bombing of Haiphong situated in the longer course of colonial massacres in 1945 to 1947-- from the massacre at Sétif in Algeria in 1945, to the suppression of rebellion in Madagascar in 1947. This tale has been told, perhaps in too linear a manner, by Yves Benot in his *Massacres coloniaux*. Tønnesson’s bumpy descent into war could also have been usefully contrasted with Martin Shipway’s less multilateral “breakdown in policy-making,”¹ and could perhaps have explored some of the parties in control in Paris in 1946 (here James Lewis’ work seems pertinent).²

Lastly, aside from the memory of the Japanese coup de force of March 9, 1945, I wondered how the legacy of World War II colored the French and Vietnamese positions respectively. This does come up, especially in the book’s early chapters. Yet, my sense is that the events of 1946 were consistently read in both Paris and Hanoi through the prism and language of World War II.

¹ Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), p. 274.

² James Lewis, “The MRP and the Genesis of the French Union, 1944-1948” *French History*, 12:3 (1998): 276-314.

In the final analysis, this rewarding and intelligent piece of international history succeeds in debunking myths that are as alive and well today as they were when an earlier version of this book appeared in 1987. The result is a finely layered and textured book at the intersections of international, French and Vietnamese history.

The sudden end to the Pacific War in mid-August 1945 sparked a political upheaval in Vietnam, culminating in Ho Chi Minh's declaration of an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). During the next 15 months a DRV state began to function, a national army was created, the Japanese, British, Americans and Chinese faded from the Indochina power equation, and France and the DRV competed to gain the upper hand.

Stein Tønnesson's carefully researched, clearly written book focuses on November-December 1946, when a "breakdown of Franco-Vietnamese cooperation" caused the First Indochina War (p. 4). He dismisses the 6 March 1946 Franco-Vietnamese accords as a "fragile peace imposed by China" (p. 5), which both parties hoped to be able to retract at a later stage. However, if we look at Vietnamese attitudes at the time, expressed both publicly and in confidential documents, hopes for a peaceful settlement were highest in April-June, began to dissipate in July-August, and had almost disappeared by November. The 14 September Modus Vivendi, signed by Marius Moutet and Ho Chi Minh in Paris, received a very negative reception in Vietnam. By the time Ho debarked at Haiphong on 20 October, suspicion of French intentions was rampant.

According to the dust jacket blurb for *Vietnam 1946*, this is a story of "how a few men set off a war that was catastrophic for millions". Such a 'big men' approach to history doesn't fit here. Vietnam was undergoing a revolution that no one controlled. Many young Vietnamese wanted to kill Frenchmen, not parlay, much less allow them back into the economy and education system. At various junctures in 1946, Vietnamese army units and especially militia groups acted of their own volition. Radio communications were unreliable and subject to French decryption. The French Army believed it could ratchet up psychological pressure on Vietnamese forces to the point of collapse or defections. This did not happen when the French attacked at Haiphong and Langson in late November, or when they stepped up the heat in Hanoi in early December. Nonetheless, the chances of spontaneous violence and quick escalation were high.

On 19 December, as Tønnesson describes magnificently, a rapid series of intelligence reports, consultations, orders and counter-orders on both sides ended with Vietnamese power plant workers sabotaging the Hanoi lights as a signal understood by some but not all Vietnamese units to attack French positions. For Tønnesson, the French laid a trap for the DRV commander, Vo Nguyen Giap, and he fell in. I think it was more likely a failure of command and control. Vietnamese officers were still learning how to formulate orders, communicate them unambiguously, and make sure they were executed faithfully. Most commands were delivered orally, by runner. Militia groups possessed enthusiasm and resourcefulness, but orders often needed to be explained and argued, even when time was of the essence. Around 15:00, Ho received word that the French cabinet of Léon Blum had decided to dispatch Moutet urgently to Indochina. New orders went out to postpone the attack scheduled for 20:00, but they failed to have the desired effect.

From March 1946 onward, French studies of the DRV political system often divided its leadership into ‘moderates’ led by Ho Chi Minh and ‘extremists’ perhaps led by Vo Nguyen Giap. The French objective then became to create a situation whereby moderates had no choice but to break with the extremists and accept French terms. The moderate/extremist model tells us more about French ambitions than Vietnamese political realities at the time. As suggested above, negotiating a peaceful compromise had more Vietnamese takers earlier in 1946 than later.

During early December on the French side, we see General Morlière arguing that the Vietnamese cabinet must be reshuffled to exclude extremists or disappear due to military defeat. Jean Sainteny tells his superiors that “Viet Minh’s edifice is still young, and as with all totalitarian regimes, it may be expected to come tumbling down at the first serious defeat” (p. 166). As Tønnesson points out, this was an amazing statement for someone who had watched Stalin’s Soviet Union overcome the German onslaught.

French analysts believed that any rational Vietnamese leadership would accept that France held all the economic cards. For starters, how could the north survive without southern rice? The DRV’s avoidance of another terrible famine like that of early 1945, and the achievement of two respectable rice harvests in May and November 1946, seems not to have registered with the French. Or perhaps it helps to explain why they decided to seize Haiphong, referred to as ‘Tonkin’s lung’. Léon Pignon even believed that a French assault on newly introduced DRV paper money would cause the whole system to fail. Ironically, it had been Governor General Decoux during the Pacific War who introduced the economic controls that DRV leaders decided to retain for their own purposes. The DRV had the makings of a wartime command economy before December 1946, although out of necessity the province resistance-administrative committee would become the focal point for feeding the army and civil government.

Could war have been avoided? The official Vietnamese government view has long been that war was inevitable; negotiations between March and early December were simply designed to gain time to prepare. I don’t believe that was Ho Chi Minh’s opinion, yet we lack confidential archival evidence to demonstrate this. Ho had witnessed World War I in Europe and the Sino-Japanese War from the late 1930s onward, whereas many of his young lieutenants had barely heard a shot fired in anger.

One major impediment to peace in Vietnam was that war had already begun in Cochinchina on 23 September 1945, and extended to south-central Annam in subsequent months. The media north of the 16th parallel took up the southern resistance as their own. Liberation of the South (Nam Bo) became a litmus test of Vietnamese patriotism. No political party in France, the Communist Party included, was willing to relinquish French predominance in Cochinchina, however.

Tønnesson might have given us a Conclusion, that widened the canvass to the entire Vietnam War (or two wars), and drew upon his extensive experience at the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo to reflect on some ideas broached amidst the narrative of *Vietnam 1946*. For example, in the Introduction’s opening quote from Herbert Butterfield,

does conflict between two sides that were half-right mean that both sides were half-wrong? Later, Tønnesson wisely reminds us that “in real life, most advance warnings concern events that never happen” (p. 217), whereas historians often blame decision-makers for failing to heed a specific warning.

As a fellow student of 1946, I was most impressed by Tønnesson’s forensic care with evidence combined with subtleness of exposition. As an historian rather than a lawyer, Tønnesson can present both sides of the case. He judges both sides guilty, but in the nature of a Greek tragedy, a commentary on human nature, not the decision of an international tribunal.

This is a book that must change the way we think about the first Vietnam War. Put simply, Stein Tønnesson explains how and why France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) came to blows, lifting the curtain on the opening act of Vietnam's thirty years' war. He does so by taking us from the antechambers of high policy in Paris to the docksides of Haiphong, the broken defences of Langson, and the streets of Hanoi, where the decisive initial engagements between French and Vietminh forces occurred.

Focused on the conflict's immediate origins as they unfolded through attempted re-occupation by the French, Franco-Vietnamese negotiation, abortive agreement in March 1946, and violent confrontation nine months later, *Vietnam 1946* takes nothing for granted. Friction between the center-left coalitions of postwar France and the DRV inaugurated by Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi on 2 September 1945 may have been inevitable, but war was not. It was, however, always a likely outcome unless two pre-conditions were met. First was that the advocates of peace in Paris and Hanoi should retain the upper hand, not only in general but in the detailed minutiae of day-to-day decision-making. Second was that both sides be genuinely prepared to give ground over the timing, nature, and extent of eventual Vietnamese self-rule within some sort of wider framework of privileged bilateral relations between France and its most precious Southeast Asian colony. To some, this might appear ridiculous: hopelessly unrealistic, at odds with the irresistible tide of decolonization, and at variance with the Marxist-Leninist resolve of the Communist-inspired Viet Minh, the real power within the DRV regime. The bitter irony, however, is that it was the first and not the second pre-condition that proved the more important trigger for the war's outbreak. Tønnesson's great achievement is to show exactly how and why this took place. He does so at the structural level of bureaucracies, ministerial committees and policy-making chains and, with the same forensic clarity, at the local level of the frontline and the thousands of civilians caught in the crossfire. Thus, alongside the more familiar 'high policy' aspects of the war's origins, the sequences of telegrams sent between Paris and Saigon, of intelligence exaggerated or misread, of commanders' instructions to begin firing or to cease it at particular times and in particular places, become just as central to the story of violent escalation.

Professor Tønnesson's story is one of nuance, not absolutes. Talks between the two sides, intermittently pursued in France and Vietnam over long months in 1946, were neither futile nor were they reducible to a circle that could never be squared, which pitted French claims for imperial suzerainty against Vietnamese demands for independence. As Tønnesson makes clear, the discussions were more flexible, more prone to external influence, than such a characterization allows. Leading actors on both sides might have entered the discussions with seemingly irreconcilable 'bottom lines', but they also recognized how much there was at stake and shied away from armed conflict. Certainly, there were those determined to pursue national goals at all costs, even if that meant war. But, under the pressure of events, even their supposed refusal to compromise was less absolute than often assumed. Customary villains of the piece, the hard-line Saigon triumvirate of High Commissioner Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, his chief political

sidekick, Léon Pignon, and Army commander Jean Etienne Valluy, fall into this category as does French Foreign Minister, then premier, Georges Bidault. So, too, does the DRV military supremo, Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander who would issue the decisive order for Vietminh cadres to begin shooting that, formally at least, began the war on the evening of 19 December 1946.

The Vietminh's most venerated soldier, whom Tønnesson has met on several occasions, clearly fascinates the author. But he doesn't beguile him. Tønnesson brings exceptional clarity to the chaotic local circumstances of urban warfare in which questions of who fired the first shot and why have become obscured by the self-justificatory accounts produced by those involved, more especially, although not exclusively, on the French side. If the memoir accounts, valedictory speeches and *post-hoc* justifications of some of the key French and Vietnamese players flatter to deceive, they are more easily exposed than the 'might-have-beens', the possible alternatives that went unfulfilled for a host of reasons. Tønnesson explores the 'if only' side of things in a rigorous final chapter. Here he examines key states and key individuals in turn, identifying their presumptions and then explaining their choices. Constraints, rather than choices is perhaps the more appropriate term. Some were institutional and political (the machinations of the all-important Inter-Ministerial Committee on Indochina – or Cominindo, and the changing complexion of French government coalitions in 1946 for instance); others were attitudinal or ideological (among others, the presumption that speed was of the essence in overthrowing the Hanoi regime militarily or that the DRV as a Communist-front organization was necessarily unrepresentative); but most were the result of unforeseen circumstances – of things not quite going to plan. To paraphrase Harold Macmillan, it was the events dear boy, the events...

Thanks to Professor Tønnesson's exhaustive approach, it becomes clear that the war was as much the product of missed opportunities, miscommunications, and misapprehensions as it was of premeditation and a clash of ideologies. He goes further than anyone else thus far in identifying precisely who or what precipitated each of the landmark decisions that made war increasingly probable. And he is the first to unravel the intricate connections between signpost events in Vietnam's major cities, in the corridors of power in Paris, and in the major capitals of other interested nations, the United States, Britain, Nationalist China and Soviet Russia above all. What the earlier work of David Marr and Tønnesson himself previously did for the Vietnamese revolution of 1945, he has now done for the build-up to war in the succeeding year.¹ Much like Mark Lawrence and Lin Hua, each of them meticulous scholars of the international paths to war in Vietnam, Tønnesson reveals how outside powers and other extraneous factors inevitably complicated the postwar diplomatic picture and the strategic calculations being made throughout the Indochinese

¹ David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and de Gaulle in a World at War* (Oslo: International Peace Research Institute/Sage, 1991).

Peninsula.² Its component territories of Vietnam (itself shaped and sub-divided by very different French models of colonial administration), as well as Laos and Cambodia emerged from World War II facing differing forms of foreign occupation. Many of the erstwhile Japanese occupiers were still *in situ* waiting to be disarmed. With this in view, the British (reluctantly) took on the role of temporary administrator in the South; Chinese Nationalist forces arrived in much greater strength and with acquisitive plans of their own in the North. And it is Chiang Kai Chek's Chinese that emerge as decisive, first in compelling the DRV and the French to sign up to an agreement in March 1946 (the better to hasten a Chinese departure from Tonkin), and, second, in ensuring that this Chinese-imposed peace held, more or less, until September. The dangerous implication of this external pressure became apparent as soon as it was no longer applied. Once Chinese forces withdrew, the DRV government and its French counterpart refused to honor a deal in which neither side believed.

Providing local backdrop to the March 1946 Accords, chapter two's account of the abortive French Operation *Bentré*, the ill-conceived plan to insert a military force into Tonkin in March 1946, amplifies the critical importance of the Chinese Nationalist occupying forces at the time still widely deployed in northern Vietnam. In doing so, it shatters the still widely held misapprehension (at least by those who haven't read Lin Hua's work) that the French and Vietminh shied away from conflict in March 1946 of their own volition. Professor Tønnesson's treatment of what he labels 'the Chinese trap' is built upon his trademark style: dissection and re-assembly of often conflicting multi-source accounts about day-to-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, decision making. There is not much room for structuralism here. Personalities emerge strongly and the agency of individuals in precipitating events of huge significance is made clear. Indeed, it forms the heart of the book's conclusion.

If the focus remains primarily on the governmental actors involved rather than on the impersonal forces and transnational connections that, for example, sustained the DRV economy and shaped the cultural outlook of its leaders, in other ways *Vietnam 1946* goes far beyond a conventional diplomatic history. In its multi-faceted approach and its profound understanding of the connections between the local and the national, between seemingly isolated flashpoints and major inter-governmental conferences, it is above all a supreme piece of detective work. By examining French archival evidence, available Vietnamese sources, memoir accounts, and, perhaps most importantly, captured and translated Vietminh documents Tønnesson manages to reconcile seemingly contradictory information regarding political plans, military deployments and personal responsibilities. Perhaps more impressive, he takes us with him without letting the reader get bogged down in detail. Put less effusively, we are convincingly told what happened, why it happened, and how a series of events resulted first in mass violence, then in full-blown Franco-Vietnamese war. Poignant, tragic, and acutely relevant, *Vietnam 1946* offers tremendous rewards to anyone who reads it.

² Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Lin Hua, *Chiang Kai-shek, de Gaulle contre Hồ Chí Minh: Việt-nam, 1945-1946* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).

Review by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon

Stein Tønnesson's *Vietnam 1946* makes major contributions to the study of modern Vietnamese history by focusing on a pivotal year when Vietnam had just emerged from colonial rule. The book closely traces the course of compromise and conflict between France and Vietnam through two events: the agreement on 6 March 1946 and the outbreak of war on 19 December 1946. Tønnesson makes two key findings. First, the March 6 agreement was the result of Chinese efforts to mediate between France and the Viet Minh government. While Paris wanted to limit French interests to Cochinchina, top French officials in Indochina planned to seize control of North Vietnam when they ordered troops to go there to replace Chinese forces. Without Chinese heavy-handed pressure on both the Vietnamese and the French to come to an agreement, war would have started in March 1946. Tønnesson's second finding has to do with who was to blame for the start of the Franco-Vietnamese conflict in December of that year. Again, top French officials in Indochina acted contrary to the wishes of the French government to provoke the Viet Minh into starting a war. The Vietnamese government was able to refrain from retaliating against French provocation for some time but eventually fell into the French trap just a few days after a socialist government took power in Paris and opened up a great opportunity for peace. Tønnesson also criticizes Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander of Vietnamese forces, for either authorizing the attack or failing to rein in his troops on the night of 19 December 1946. This blame is serious because war in Indochina would continue almost non-stop from that point on for four decades, resulting in millions of deaths.

Tønnesson brings to the story rich sources primarily from Western archives. He lucidly and convincingly shows how Paris for many reasons neglected events in Indochina, how Paris and Saigon (where the French High Commissioner for Indochina was based) communicated or miscommunicated, and how decisions were made in Saigon that led to the critical events above. With limited Vietnamese sources, he is able to piece together a by-the-hour account of events that occurred on that critical day of 19 December; the story is much more complex than the conventional wisdom that the war was a premeditated surprise attack by Vietnam. Although Giap had a plan for his troops to launch such an attack, Tønnesson demonstrates that the Vietnamese decision to attack, if in fact made, was made only a few hours in advance, and that the possibility that Giap's troops acted without order from above cannot be excluded.

Beyond the particular events of 1946, Tønnesson makes three broader contributions to the historiography of Vietnam. The first contribution concerns the role of the Chinese in the course of events in Vietnam. Existing scholarship has tended to underestimate how critical the Chinese were for the survival of the Ho Chi Minh government. If the Chinese had acted like the Americans in Seoul (which rejected a leftist government trying to claim power), or the British in Jakarta and in Saigon (which honored Dutch and French claims of colony), the chance of Ho Chi Minh and his party surviving in power was slim. The Chinese also forced anti-communist groups, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP) and the Vietnamese Revolutionary League (VRL), to join the Viet Minh government and to sign the agreement. While the ICP never yielded any real power to its rivals, their temporary acceptance of

positions in the Viet Minh government allowed this government to claim to represent all Vietnamese regardless of classes and political views. Instead of thanking Chiang and his generals, Vietnamese official historiography has portrayed Chinese occupation in extremely negative terms: the Chinese are considered an external enemy which was worse than the French. For its part, Western scholarship (except King Chen) loves to note the rapacity and indiscipline of Yunnanese forces and glosses over their role in fundamentally shaping the outcome of modern Vietnamese history.

Vietnam 1946's second contribution is to join a growing number of works that challenge the Vietnamese official claim about the ability of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) during and after the "August Revolution" to maintain centralized and effective leadership over the movement.¹ The emerging picture is a feeble ICP that had to accommodate other groups to hold on to power even though it was the best organized party among all. The Party had little control over government apparatuses at local levels and beyond the main urban centers. The public dissolution of the ICP in late 1945 exacerbated the problems. As Tønnesson speculates based on French intelligence, "Party work was probably neglected in 1946-47, if not by Truong Chinh, then by many of those who dedicated their time to official state functions."² The possibility of Giap's failure to rein in his troops on the evening of 19 December 1946 certainly corroborates that picture.

Third and finally, Tønnesson departs from a dominant trend in the historiography since the 1960s that has avoided taking any critical view of Vietnamese communist leaders where such criticisms are due.³ These leaders are typically portrayed as motivated only by a pure and legitimate desire for national independence but forced into wars of self-defense against foreign invaders. They never seemed to have made any mistakes, and, if they have, would be honest about them. This trend perhaps results from many historians' overreliance on memoirs of communist leaders such as Tran Huy Lieu and Vo Nguyen Giap who naturally glorified the role of their Party in history and who were silent about any possible mistakes. *Vietnam 1946* begins by somberly recounting the number of battle-related deaths during Vietnam's several wars in the Twentieth century, which amounted to millions of Indochinese and foreigners. Yet, as Tønnesson argues, all these wars could have been avoided if Vietnamese leaders had been able to show more restraint on that fateful day in December 1946. While Ho Chi Minh is absolved of any responsibility for that tragic event, Vo Nguyen Giap is made to share the blame with Georges D'Argenlieu, Leon Pignon and Jean-Etienne Valluy for what happened (the French bore the principal blame though). Even worse, Giap is shown to be a man stubborn in his self-serving conviction despite

¹ For example, see Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991); David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 5.

² Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 24.

³ See Tuong Vu, "Vietnamese Political Studies and Debates on Vietnamese Nationalism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2: 2 (August 2007), 175-230.

considerable historical evidence against him, “For Giap, who bore so much responsibility, not only for the decision to start the fighting, but for all the death and suffering during all of Indochina’s wars, it must have seemed almost unbearable to consider the possibility that this tragedy might have begun with a misunderstanding.”⁴

An important shortcoming of the book is its limited use of Vietnamese sources. The archive of the Vietnamese Communist Party remains closed even to Vietnamese researchers, but the book would benefit from available Vietnamese collections of documents, especially the new collection that has been published since 1999.⁵ The documents assembled in volume 8 of this collection for 1945-1947—including minutes and reports of many top-level Party meetings—easily proves that a Standing Bureau of the ICP’s central leadership (Thuong vu Trung Uong Dang) existed.⁶ The mysterious figure whose name French intelligence thought to be “Nhan Nhan” could be Truong Chinh, who sometimes signed his name as “Nhan” in Party documents.⁷

A casual read of Vietnamese documents in those volumes adds four important points about the Vietnamese side to complement Tønnesson’s account from the French side. First, Ho Chi Minh’s government appeared to feel more threatened by its Vietnamese rivals, the VNP and the VRL, than by the French. In a policy document dated 3 March 1946, the Standing Bureau explained why the Party decided to reach an agreement with the French. Fighting the French, the document said, only benefited the VNP and VRL at the expense of their Party. The Party leadership acknowledged the risks that their Vietnamese enemies would charge them as selling out the country and that the agreement would allow the French to expand their control over northern Vietnam and perhaps one day to challenge the Viet Minh government. However, Party leaders saw two great benefits from the agreement that made it worth signing: one was to eliminate the threats from the “white Chinese” and the “traitors” (read: the VNP and VRL), and the other was to gain some time to prepare for a new struggle for complete independence.⁸ One of the first steps Party leaders planned to take after signing the agreement was “to take advantage of the peace with France to eliminate the internal counterrevolutionaries—the lackeys of the white Chinese...”

⁴ Tønnesson (2009, 257).

⁵ Dang Cong San Viet Nam (Communist Party of Vietnam, hereafter ĐCSVN), *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* (Collections of Party documents), 46 volumes (Hanoi: Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 1999-2006).

⁶ Tønnesson (2009, 24) questions the existence of such a Standing Bureau and, based on a captured Viet Minh document in French archive, concludes that it did exist. The documents in the recently released collection were certainly edited and incomplete but their fabrication is unlikely.

⁷ Tønnesson (2009, 171) speculates that the figure could not be Truong Chinh because he did not wear glasses as did the person spotted by French informants, but the name and other descriptions suggest him more than others.

⁸ “Tinh hình va chu trương” (The current situation and our policy). ĐCSVN, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* 8 (2000), 45.

Vietnamese sources thus indicate that the dynamics among Vietnamese actors shaped the outcome as much as those between them and foreigners. Ho Chi Minh's greater fear of fellow Vietnamese rivals than his concern about French colonialists suggests that the events of 1946 were not just about Vietnamese independence but also about which group of Vietnamese would be the new rulers.

Second, Vietnamese documents indicate that ICP leaders had high expectations for the March 6 agreement, contrary to Tønnesson's claim that they signed but hoped to retract it at a later date.⁹ ICP leaders viewed the agreement as marking important progress compared to De Gaulle's announcement for Indochinese autonomy on 24 March 1945. While Vietnam was not yet independent, an internal document stated that "France [had] abandoned her previous ambition to colonize Vietnam and accepted our principles of freedom and unity. Our direct enemy now [was] French counterrevolutionaries (La Réaction Francais) ..." ¹⁰ At least for a few months following March, Party leaders wanted to build on the agreement, not to retract it, even while they remained concerned about French violations and continued to prepare for an armed struggle if required. This optimism about Paris's sincerity in giving up its colonial desire was perhaps why ICP leaders feared France less than their Vietnamese enemies.

Third, Tønnesson focuses mostly on Giap as the Vietnamese leader to be held responsible for the attack. He does mention briefly that Party General Secretary Truong Chinh was a supporter of war, but Vietnamese documents indicate that the top Party leadership was firmly behind Giap. After the massacre in Hai Phong, the Association for the Study of Marxism (the ICP) issued a statement praising the soldiers who fought French forces in Hai Phong and Lang Son, and calling for high alert and preparation for war. This statement declared that the September 14 modus vivendi should be the last concession Vietnam was willing to make.¹¹ At about the same time, Truong Chinh wrote an article whose strong language conveyed an unambiguous zeal for war and bloodshed: "the entire people are now ready to rise up; fingers placed on the triggers, eyes fixed on the invaders, muscles stretched out; million people only waiting for an order to charge ahead and hack [the enemy] into pieces." Chinh directed his threat not only against the French but also against those Vietnamese who might not support war: "[We must] brush aside the advice that we surrender from our enemy and from people who claim to be our "friends." [We must] put an end to the idea of retreat and the wavering attitude of the coward among our people. [We must] punish without mercy those who serve the enemy, regardless of the social classes they belong to.... Before we rise up to fight the enemy, [we must] remove anything

⁹ Tønnesson (2009, 5).

¹⁰ "Chi thi cua Ban T.V.T.W." (Instruction of the Standing Bureau), 9 March 1946. DCSVN, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* 8 (2000), 50. French in original.

¹¹ "Loi keu goi quoc dan" (A Message to the people), first published in *Su That* no. 64, 29 November 1946. Reprinted in DCSVN, *Van Kien Dang* (Party Documents) 1, 1945-1946 (Hanoi: Ban Nghien Cuu Lich Su Dang Trung Uong, 1978), 277.

that may block our path.”¹² Even if Giap was alone when he launched the order to fight that evening, he might be simply acting on the consensus among top Party leaders at the time. This is further corroborated by events in 1947. After war broke out, the Party convened a central cadre conference to analyze the world situation and conditions on the ground, and to make plans on various fronts. The 33-page resolution of the conference mentioned diplomacy in only one paragraph as follows:¹³

On diplomacy: Vietnam has just been brought up for a noisy debate at the French National Assembly. The French Communist Party [and] the French General Federation of Workers expressed their clear support for peace with Vietnam. De Gaulle’s supporters are now plotting with the world reactionaries to overthrow the French republic regime. Under these circumstances, our [Party] must follow French politics closely. Even if France accepts Vietnam’s independence and unity, [we] must explain to our people that, if we haven’t fought to the third stage of the resistance [the stage of general counterattack in Maoist theory of guerrilla war], that French acceptance through diplomatic means cannot solve the conflict. Diplomacy merely gives us more time...”

Party leaders seemed not to trust the new French socialist government, nor to regret that the war had broken out as such. Even while Ho Chi Minh was suing for peace and shuffled the government to give a few ministerial portfolios to noncommunists in early 1947, Truong Chinh and Le Duc Tho issued stern warnings that people should not put too much hope into diplomacy.¹⁴

Fourth and finally, Tønnesson argues that “the most basic obligation of any government” is to preserve peace,¹⁵ but Vietnamese sources indicate that many Vietnamese leaders would perhaps disagree. Vietnamese view of war and peace must be placed in their worldview which contained strong elements of revolutionary fanaticism.¹⁶ In this view, the future of the world was predicted in the apocalyptic terms of inevitable conflict between capitalism and socialism. Peace with imperialists could never last because the nature of imperialism was believed to involve making and benefiting from wars. Furthermore, international

¹² “Danh va san sang danh” (Fight and ready to fight), first published in *Su That* no. 65, 4 December 1946. Reprinted in DCSVN, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* 8 (2000), 452-453.

¹³ “Nghị quyết Hội nghị cán bộ trung ương” (Resolution of the Central Cadre Conference), 3-6 April 1947. DCSVN, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* 8 (2000), 186.

¹⁴ Tuong Vu, “It’s Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colors: The Radical Turn in Vietnamese Politics in 1948.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 3 (October 2009), 528.

¹⁵ Tønnesson (2009, 10).

¹⁶ See Tuong Vu, “From Cheering to Volunteering: Vietnamese Communists and the Arrival of the Cold War 1940-1951,” in Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds. *Connecting Histories: The Cold War and Decolonization in Asia (1945-1962)* (Stanford University Press, 2009); and “Dreams of Paradise: The Making of a Soviet Outpost in Vietnam,” *Ab Imperio* (August 2008), 255-285.

politics was inseparable from domestic politics, in which class solidarity (*doan ket giai cap*) could be temporarily accepted for the sake of national unity, but fundamental class interests must never be compromised (*thoa hiep giai cap*).¹⁷ Peace with imperialism or with class enemies by itself carried a low value in the minds of Vietnamese revolutionaries, and the outbreak of war in 1946 had its domestic equivalent in the land reform of 1953-1956 which was essentially a brutal class struggle. Viewed in the broader context of Vietnamese revolutionaries' worldview, Vo Nguyen Giap's decision to attack the French on 19 December 1946 was not only a strategic blunder but also a natural outcome of fanatic minds that glorified sacrifices for "noble" causes, not only for national independence but also for the ultimate triumph of world revolution.

To conclude, despite the limited use of Vietnamese sources, *Vietnam 1946* represents a tremendously valuable account of Vietnam's modern history. Tønnesson deserves much praise for his contributions not only to our understanding of the events of 1946 but also to the historiography of Vietnam.

¹⁷ Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia*, 196.

Author's Response by Stein Tønnesson, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo

Let me thank all four reviewers for their praise as well as criticism. I accept many of the critical comments, notably concerning my limited use of Vietnamese and Chinese sources. I should have made better use of published Vietnamese Communist Party documents, although I'm reluctant to rely too much on officially sanitized publications of this kind, when the originals are not made available to historians. Let us hope that essential historical sources have survived war, transport and storage in the Party archives so one day we shall be able to get a full account of difficult decision-making also on the Vietnamese side.

Eric Jennings' review is the easiest to respond to, since he has almost only nice things to say, and in addition says them with such eloquence. I take it all to heart, including his critical quibbles at the end. I should have situated the November 1946 Haiphong massacre in a context of colonial massacres, commented on how my account relates to Martin Shipway's excellent study, and reflected on the legacies of World War II. Here I could have been inspired by David Chandler's chapter "Legacies of World War II in Indochina" in David Koh Wee Hock, ed. *Legacies of World War II in South and East Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2007).

All four reviewers comment on my two main revisionist theses: The accord of March 6, 1946 was imposed on France and Vietnam by China, and the Vietnamese leaders went into a French trap when launching their assault in Hanoi on December 19, 1946.

Concerning the March 6, 1946 Franco-Vietnamese accord, Tuong Vu and David Marr disagree with my claim that neither of the two sides meant the agreement seriously, but were forced to underwrite concessions they were hoping to retract at a later stage. Vu and Marr offer as a counter-argument that the Vietnamese government genuinely hoped for a peaceful settlement with France after having signed the accord. They are right, and the same was the case for the left-leaning government in Paris, which clearly hoped for a peaceful settlement. Marius Moutet, the socialist minister of Overseas France, spoke repeatedly of a "policy of accord" as a preferable alternative to a "policy of force" or a "policy of abandon." However, I don't think this refutes my point that both parties had been forced to accept the March 6 deal, and were not ready to yield any further. Although France had only accepted Vietnam as a "free state," the Vietnamese aimed for full independence, they sought to minimize the authority of French-controlled federal institutions, and they supported rebel forces in the south while waiting for a date to be set for the promised referendum on national unity. As for the French, they did not intend to make good of their promise to limit the presence of their armed forces in the north to a period of five years, and insisted on a high degree of federal controls. They were unwilling to give up what they saw as "strategic bases", and resisted demands to set a date for the promised referendum on national unity since they realized that its outcome would undermine French control of Cochinchina. Both sides saw the March 6 accord as a stepping stone to further advance, and this is the main reason why the negotiations at Dalat and at Fontainebleau failed to yield any other result than a disappointing "modus vivendi" agreement in September. Its main clause was a cease-fire in the south, which was used by Vietnam to demonstrate its

authority over General Nguyen Binh's guerrilla fighters. This in turn led to a political crisis in the French-supported Republic of Cochinchina, and to the French High Commissioner's decision to challenge the Viet Minh in the north. In turn this could not but lead to an all-out military confrontation, unless the French government prevented its High Commissioner from following through with his plans. When Marr says that Vietnamese "hopes for a peaceful settlement were highest in April-June, began to dissipate in July-August, and had almost disappeared by November," this reflects French developments and fits nicely with my account.

I'm most grateful to Tuong Vu for his thoughtful and balanced review, but find it difficult to agree with him that the Vietnamese communist leaders were more afraid of their internal rivals than of the French. The communists were much better organized, had stronger military forces, and a much broader national following than any of the non-communist parties. One of the strongest indications of this is that the non-communist Chinese occupation authorities chose to tolerate a communist-dominated government rather than install the pro-Chinese VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi in power. At the March 3, 1946 juncture, referred to in Tuong Vu's review, the DRV was threatened by a French invasion and the possibility of being deceived by the Chinese. The Viet Minh leaders therefore had to increase the role of the pro-Chinese parties in a new government of national union, and were also pushed to do so by the Chinese. Later, when the Chinese forces left, the DRV did not find it difficult to repress the anti-communist opposition. By November, the main communist leaders were therefore in full control of the central levers of power, and the French were already regretting that they had not tried to protect the non-communist nationalists, in spite of their anti-French views and actions.

The degree to which the central Vietnamese leaders were in control of their army and militia plays a major role in David Marr's comments. In his *Vietnam 1945* (California University Press, 1995), Marr showed how the so-called August Revolution in 1945 was carried out by local leaders, with different dynamics from one place to another, and was not under the kind of central direction that Vietnamese communist historiography has tried to make us believe. I made the same point – albeit with less documentary evidence – in *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (SAGE, 1991), pointing out that the main communist leaders were assembled at far away Tan Trao in August 1945, with no means of communicating with local cadre, while the revolution was happening. Now Marr is in the process of completing an extensive study of Vietnam 1945-50, and finds that the pattern of independent local action, without much central control, persisted. He thus tends to explain Franco-Vietnamese incidents with local impatience and lack of discipline rather than central orders. Hence he also hypothesizes that when the Vietnamese attacked the French in Hanoi in the evening of December 19, this was not – as I think – because commander-in-chief Vo Nguyen Giap fell into a French trap, but “was more likely a failure of command and control.” The Vietnamese leaders tried to postpone their scheduled attack when learning that the new French premier, Léon Blum, had decided to send Marius Moutet on a peace mission, but the postponement orders did “not have the desired effect.”

When I worked on my French book *1946: Déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987), I also found disobedience to be a plausible explanation for the half-

baked and badly co-ordinated nature of the December 19 assault. Since then, however, Giap has insisted both in a conversation with me, in interviews, and in his recent memoirs, that the leadership was in control, and that it did not waver in its decision to launch the attack. He may not speak the truth. He has an obvious interest in having us believe he was in control. However, the published memoirs of Ho Chi Minh's secretary Vu Ky (the original has not been made available to researchers) also indicates that the decision to attack was upheld by the Standing Bureau of the Central Committee of the Party, meeting in the afternoon of December 19. This has, I think, weakened the hypothesis of disobedience or local initiative. However, the jury is still out on what exactly happened that fateful evening. My book mentions the possibility that Giap first ordered, then cancelled the attack, and then re-ordered it once learning that the French troops were being recalled to their barracks. He possibly feared that the French were trying to outfox him and launch their own attack. On the other hand, I'm intrigued by the fact that the Vietnamese director of the power plant in Hanoi was an anti-communist who was in contact with the French security police. When his plant was sabotaged at 8 pm and lights went out, this became the signal to attack. Did he allow his plant to be sabotaged? Did he work for both sides? At any rate the Vietnamese assault was exactly what the French High Commissioner needed. He was not allowed by his government to take the military initiative, but depended on the other side to get his war. This is why the French launched a number of provocative actions in Hanoi in the run-up to December 19. And this is why I claim that Giap walked into a French trap. I think this holds even if he realized his mistake and tried to back off.

Did Giap act alone? I must concede to Tuong Vu that I've perhaps exaggerated Giap's personal role and said too little about the behind-the-scene decision-makers. Admittedly I rely too much on French sources. The French knew Giap, but not Truong Chinh or Le Duc Tho. A Vietnamese reviewer of my book, Ha Hoang Hop, claims that Ha Ba Cang (alias Hoang Quoc Viet) and Le Van Luong (alias Nguyen Cong Mieu) also carried weight in communist decision-making at the time. However, I do not say, as Tuong Vu says I do, that Giap alone took the fatal decision. First, at least according to Giap's memoirs, a collective decision was made on December 18 to prepare for an assault the next evening. Ho Chi Minh sat up at night drafting his Call for national resistance. The coded orders went out in the morning. Then, as mentioned, the decision to attack was upheld in a meeting among the top communist leaders outside Hanoi in the afternoon of December 19. But after the meeting was over, Giap held a meeting with his top commanders before entering into Hanoi to check that his troops were ready. Meanwhile news arrived putting the wisdom of the attack into question. The Vietnamese leaders had learned a few hours earlier that the local French commander had decided to give his troops leave on town that evening, a clear indication that he was not expecting or planning any immediate fight. Now news also arrived that Blum had decided to send Moutet on a peace mission. At this point, perhaps during the meeting he held with his commanders, I venture that Giap, possibly in consultation with others over telephone, vacillated. An attempt seems to have been made to call off the action, at least parts of it. However, either because Giap later learned that the French troops would not be given leave after all, or because Hanoi's power plant was sabotaged at 8 pm in spite of the high command's attempt to backtrack, substantial parts of the assault plan were executed all the same. It is in these final hours that I think the commander-in-chief acted alone when giving his orders, without much chance to consult.

How fateful was the Vietnamese decision to attack? Tuong Vu says I say that all of Vietnam's wars in the 20th century "could have been avoided if Vietnamese leaders had been able to show more restraint on that fateful day in December 1946." I admit that I've often wanted to say just that, since it would increase my book's importance and also underscore a peace researcher's conviction that outbreaks of war are rarely inevitable. I should also concede that sometimes my book comes close to saying what Tuong Vu says it says. However, it is Martin Thomas, in his concise, perceptive and extremely kind review, who has best understood what I wanted to say: "Friction ... may have been inevitable, but war was not." Still war was always likely since peace depended on two factors: First, the advocates of peace had to retain the upper hand both in Paris and Hanoi. Second, both sides had to give ground over the timing, nature, and extent of eventual Vietnamese self-rule. As Thomas says, it was the first condition that failed on December 19.

Let me now add something I did not write in the book. Under inspiration from a number of stimulating works in counter-factual history, I've tried to think through what might have happened if war had not broken out that day. Regretfully I've arrived at the conclusion that in that case it would most likely have broken out in 1947. If the Vietnamese had not attacked on December 19, then France and Vietnam would probably have avoided major incidents for some time, with Vietnam trying to draw international attention to the Haiphong massacre, with a series of unsuccessful talks, and with both sides continuing to prepare for war. Prime Minister Paul Ramadier, Foreign Minister Georges Bidault and Minister of Overseas France Moutet would most probably, with gentle encouragement from the US ambassador, would have agreed to replace the High Commissioner in Saigon with a new, more moderate one, and this would have contributed to a temporary *détente*. But Martin Thomas' second condition would still not have been met. The French coalition government was neither willing nor able to give much ground. We see this from the governmental instructions that were first written in November-December, later confirmed by Ramadier's government, and signed even by vice-premier Maurice Thorez, the leader of the French Communist Party. And once the French communists had been ousted from the government in May, the cold war took hold in Europe, and the standing of the aging Moutet was weakened to the extent that he had to give up his portfolio to the more bellicose centrist politician Paul Coste-Floret in October, the advocates of peace would no longer hold the upper hand. The French government would then probably have decided to resort to force. It was at this juncture that it launched Operation Lea in an attempt to capture Ho Chi Minh and his government. As Christopher Goscha has shown (*Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1(1-2) 2006), this was just after the 3rd secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Andrei Zhdanov had pronounced his two-camp doctrine. The Vietnamese communists now sought to convince Moscow that they were not right-wing nationalist deviationists, but loyal members of the anti-imperialist camp. They would have sought to do so even if they had not yet been at war with France. Tito was in control of Yugoslavia so he could afford to go his own way. Ho Chi Minh could not have done the same since that would have made him dependent on an increasingly anti-communist France.

Again I'm not saying that the war between France and the Viet Minh was inevitable. But given what we know about developments in France and the world in the years 1947-49,

it seems hard to imagine that a Vietnamese government, without any internationally recognized status, and dominated by communist nationalists who were strongly committed to national unity and independence, could have avoided a violent confrontation with France. I know this reduces the historical importance of my topic, perhaps even of my book, but I have to be honest.

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