

## **Review of Vietnam 1946: How the War Began**

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**Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began*. With a foreword by Philippe Devillers.**

**Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. xxiv, 361; ill., glossary, bib., index.**

“The war” in the title of this scholarly book is the one between Vietnamese and French armies lasting from December 1946 until its decisive battles at Điện Biên Phủ in March-May 1954. It is often referred to as the First Indochina War because two more followed. The Second, which stretched from the late 1950s to 1975, is the one that people in the United States typically call “the Vietnam War,” while people in Vietnam often label it the “war against the United States and to save the nation.” It spilled over into Laos and Cambodia. The Third lasted from 1979 to 1989 and pitted the Vietnamese army against Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge forces, which were supported by the bizarre combination of the Chinese, Thai, and American governments.

Partly because the First Indochina War seemingly begat “a series of man-made disasters,” to borrow author Stein Tønnesson’s words (p. 1), historians and others have frequently tried hard to understand why, how, and exactly when it began – much as analysts have intensely investigated those same questions regarding the First World War. Tønnesson’s summary answer to these three questions is this: “the proximate cause . . . was the breakdown of Franco-Vietnamese cooperation during November-December 1946 and the outbreak of armed struggle in the streets of Hanoi at 2003 hours on 19 December. The First Indochina War broke out that day, and this led to a sequence of wars with dreadful consequences, primarily for the Vietnamese themselves and their immediate neighbors, but also for France, the United States, and the world” (p. 4).

His conclusions, Tønnesson says, challenge “two established wisdoms” (p. 4) about the beginnings of war between France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which Hồ Chí Minh had proclaimed in September 1945 when declaring Vietnam’s independence from French colonial rule.

For one, considerable previous scholarship has argued that the rise of moderate, pragmatic authorities in France explains why in March 1946 the French government signed peace accords with the DRV. Tønnesson disagrees. He marshals strong evidence to suggest that the key reason for that agreement was the posture of China’s Nationalist government, led by Chiang Kai-shek. Chinese armed forces had not yet left Vietnam after entering the country in August 1945 as part of the Allied drive to oust Japanese troops from Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia. After Chinese authorities made clear that they would not side with France, French authorities had to suspend their planned military invasion to expel the DRV government. Chiang Kai-Shek’s government also pressured the DRV government led by President Hồ Chí Minh to sign the March 1946 accords. DRV authorities apparently did so

with less reluctance than their French counterparts because the agreement made significant concessions to them, including French recognition of the new Vietnamese republic, with its own government, parliament, and army, and France's promise of a referendum in which Vietnamese would answer the question of whether the country's three regions – Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina – constituted one country, as DRV authorities claimed, or separate entities, as the French government insisted.

The second “accepted wisdom” that Tønnesson challenges is that the shooting during the evening of 19 December 1946 was a premeditated Vietnamese surprise attack against the French. Tønnesson accepts that Vietnamese troops shot first that night, but he questions whether DRV leaders ordered the attack. Quite possibly, the Vietnamese soldiers acted on their own initiative and even in defiance of orders from their superiors. Until today, Tønnesson concludes, insufficient evidence prevents us from knowing exactly which Vietnamese started the shooting (p. 229). He also shows that the attack was no surprise to French authorities in Hanoi and Saigon. They had been steadily escalating pressure on the Vietnamese to do just what they did, and they had information that Vietnamese military leaders were preparing for military action.

The larger, overarching argument of the book is that the First Indochina War could have been avoided. The March 1946 agreement created an opportunity for leaders wanting to avoid war to settle disagreements between the two countries through negotiations. The book examines in considerable detail the numerous efforts between March and December 1946 to do just that. Hồ Chí Minh himself was particularly prominent in the negotiations. French leaders involved in this endeavor included Léon Blum, the President of the French Provisional Government, and Marius Moutet, the Minister for Overseas France.

In neither country, however, were all leaders of one mind. While several DRV and French authorities worked hard to abide by the terms of the March 1946 accords and to resolve problems between the two governments, others on each side obstructed and undermined those very efforts. Tønnesson lays much of the blame for preventing peace and provoking war on French civilian and military authorities in Saigon. They, Tønnesson concludes, were the “main warmongers” (p. 5). They steadily escalated pressure on DRV leaders to abandon dialogue and resort to violence. Among their numerous actions to provoke the Vietnamese and work at odds with their superiors' efforts was ordering French troops in late November 1946 to seize Hải Phòng, Vietnam's northern port city, and Lạng Sơn, a strategic inland town along a main railroad. The hope was that the violent takeover of those two prominent places in northern Vietnam would prompt Vietnamese authorities to attack French forces, an event which France could then depict as the Vietnamese initiating war. French authorities in Saigon also withheld and delayed messages and information so as to prevent President Hồ Chí Minh and President Léon Blum from being in direct contact with each other. Officials in Saigon knew that the two leaders were trying to avoid war. The behavior of those officials, Tønnesson writes, “is a textbook example of how a bureaucracy can obstruct the decision-making process of its political leaders” (p. 195).

*Vietnam 1946* is, in a sense, a sequel to Tønnesson's book *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (Oslo and London: PRIO and Sage Publications, 1991). There Tønnesson explained the causes of the August Revolution through which the Việt Minh, its Liberation Army, and the Indochinese Communist Party seized power and established the DRV. That event set the stage for the drama in 1946 between this new Vietnamese government, determined to retain power and national

independence, and the French government, resolved to regain authority over all parts of the country as well as Cambodia and Laos. *Vietnam 1946* can also be read as a companion to David G. Marr's prize-winning volume, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Marr's study stresses the year prior to the March 1946 French-Vietnamese accords.

A significant difference between Tønnesson's *Vietnam 1946* and the two books just mentioned is that the new work focuses on the actions of and interactions between top-level decision makers in the French and Vietnamese governments in Hanoi, Saigon, and Paris. Although top leaders are prominent in Marr's *Vietnam 1945* and Tønnesson's *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, too, those works also devote considerable attention to events and people outside national leadership circles, especially middle- and local-level members of Vietnamese anti-French organizations, thus adding a sub-national layer of analysis to the national one.

The absence of sub-national perspectives is something of a handicap for Tønnesson's analysis. I say this not to criticize Tønnesson's *Vietnam 1946* but to point to an aspect of the story about how war broke out that needs more research. Tønnesson contends that Vietnamese soldiers started the war. Not clear, he concludes with some frustration, is whether the soldiers were ordered to shoot or whether they initiated the shooting on their own. He – and we – cannot adequately answer that question without looking rigorously into the actions of the Vietnamese militia and how it was organized.

Another aspect that future researchers might pursue beyond what Tønnesson could do in *Vietnam 1946* is the matter of what Vietnamese were saying and doing between March and December 1946. Here I include both top Vietnamese officials and players as well as those lower down in the DRV government and military units, and ordinary Vietnamese. Because, Tønnesson explains, the archives of the Vietnamese Communist Party are off limits to scholars, he had considerably more difficulty locating evidence about the views and actions of Vietnamese leaders and their immediate subordinates than he did learning what French leaders, bureaucrats and others said and did. He tried to compensate by extensively using records in French archives, which house many documents from the Vietnamese side. He also interviewed some Vietnamese who participated in the events of 1946. But more needs to be done to give as much detail and analysis of Vietnamese participants as Tønnesson now provides about French participants.\* For example, Tønnesson treats readers to a rich discussion (pp. 170-180) of what French authorities at various levels thought the Vietnamese government was doing during October-December 1946. Missing is a similarly detailed synthesis of Vietnamese officials' understanding of the French government's actions and plans during that period.

Judging from the book's discussion of sources and its footnotes and bibliography, I gather that Tønnesson did not mine the Vietnamese National Archives, especially National Archive Number Three (Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia, số 3). Those archives are open to scholars. Researchers wanting to build on what Tønnesson has published could very likely find considerable relevant material in such record groups as those for the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Finance, the National Assembly, the Democratic Party of Vietnam, and several of the country's regional-military zones. Relevant materials might also be found in the Army Museum and the Revolutionary Museum, where scholars may also do research.

*Vietnam 1946* is a marvelous read. Tønnesson writes deftly and lucidly. His analysis sparkles with gems of detail and insight. Students of Vietnam and of the wars engulfing that country will benefit immensely from Tønnesson's scholarship.

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\*For a cinematic depiction of views and actions of some Vietnamese leaders, soldiers, as well as ordinary Hanoi residents in November-December 1946, see "Hà Nội Mùa Đông năm 46" [Hanoi winter 1946] made in 1997 by Vietnam's prominent director Đặng Nhật Minh.