

DAVID G. MARR

Response to Alec Holcombe's JVS review essay on *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution* (1945–1946)

This essay is a response by the author to the review essay on his book Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946) (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2013) by Alec Holcombe (Ohio University) which appeared in Volume 11, no. 3–4 of this journal.

For seven decades Vietnamese communists have insisted that they masterminded the August 1945 Revolution, begat the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and took the country to war in the name of socialist internationalism as well as national liberation. I challenged those claims in two books: *Vietnam 1945: the Quest for Power* and *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution (1945–1946)*.¹ Alec Holcombe rejects my evidence and interpretations. However, in a treatise extending over sixty-seven pages, Holcombe does not spell out his own diagnosis, other than to portray Hồ Chí Minh as the wily Comintern agent working together with Trường Chinh the master strategist to quash political alternatives and implement a Soviet-style dictatorship.

Reading Holcombe's essay, I could not help but recall my own coming of age in America in the 1950s, when sinister Soviets were hatching plots everywhere and we had to look out for Reds under the bed. I first encountered Vietnam in *Life* magazine photo spreads climaxing at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. Our Santa Barbara High School civics class then discussed the July 1954 Geneva Accords, with our teacher applauding Washington's refusal to

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 12, Issue 1, pps. 155–162. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
© by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press' Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2017.12.1.155>.

sign. Writers who questioned America's subsequent commitments to the Sài Gòn regime were labeled "pinkos" or "fellow travelers."

Seven years later as a Marine communications officer on Okinawa, I devoured high level traffic on the Laos crisis and President Kennedy's subsequent decision to draw the line in South Vietnam. Not coincidentally, Quantico invited me to enroll in the one year Vietnamese course at the Army Language School in Monterey. Almost all of our teachers had fled the north to escape communism, yet a number of them continued to respect Hồ Chí Minh and to credit the Việt Minh with driving out the French colonialists. Sent to Vietnam in 1962, I listened to ARVN veterans of the 1945–1954 conflict spell out their plans to borrow Việt Minh proselytizing and mobilizing techniques to engineer a revolutionary alternative to the Việt Cộng. I told them of a novel I had just read, *The Centurions*, by Jean Larteguy, which portrayed French Indochina veterans applying Việt Minh lessons successfully in Algeria. But my ARVN interlocutors insisted the French Army had nothing to teach them.

Perusing South Vietnam bookstores, I was puzzled not to find any study of the momentous political, social, and military events of 1945–1954. School textbooks halted in 1940. Even after the fall of Ngô Đình Diệm in November 1963, libraries kept certain books and serials of the period under lock and key. At the Huế University Library, the director, Mr. Bửu Kế, had to unlock a cabinet to allow me access to a lively 525-page history of the period by a prominent Vietnam Nationalist Party member.² Nothing was as straightforward as I first thought.

I arrived at the University of California, Berkeley, in September 1964, just as the Free Speech movement was getting underway. Then came the early 1965 Vietnam War teach-ins. I told several campus audiences that I didn't want people in South Vietnam to come under communist rule, but the commitment of US combat forces at this moment bothered me deeply. I had no confidence in American troops mastering counter-insurgency, so the consequences were likely to be repeated escalations, social chaos, and multiplying civilian as well as military casualties. Back in Vietnam in 1967 for PhD research, I saw my worst fears justified. As death and destruction proliferated, Vietnamese intellectuals, religious leaders and students who called for a cease-fire and negotiations continued to be labeled communists, harassed and jailed.

Returning now to Alec Holcombe's review essay and the events of 1945–1946, I see little or no place in his scheme of things for the vast majority of Vietnamese who were neither communist nor anti-communist. The DRV administration could not have gotten started and gained momentum without the participation of thousands of former colonial employees. Hundreds of former colonial soldiers joined nascent National Guard units. Tens of thousands of young men and women organized local meetings, marches, drills and rice collections of their own volition, not waiting for some ICP member to tell them what to do. They shared a grand idea: to struggle towards an independent, unified, modern Vietnam.

Holcombe first devotes nineteen pages to my 1995 book, *Vietnam 1945*, mainly to argue that I systematically misinterpret key sources in favor of “revolution from below” as opposed to central ICP direction. Half of this section involves meticulous comparison of my chapter titled “Beyond Hanoi” against the two-volume study I cite most often: *Cách Mạng Tháng Tám: Tổng Khởi nghĩa ở Hà Nội và các địa phương* [The August Revolution: The General Insurrection in Hà Nội and Various Localities], edited by Trần Huy Liệu, et al.³ Trần Huy Liệu is a fascinating person, deserving of a scholarly biography. In 1965, the staunchly anti-communist head of the Republic of Vietnam's National Police, Col. Phạm Văn Liễu, gave me a stack of Hà Nội books written or edited by Trần Huy Liệu, which his men had recently confiscated. I used these books first in *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925*.⁴ The following year I wrote to Trần Huy Liệu in Hà Nội seeking to subscribe to *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử* [Historical Research Journal]. He replied in person, suggesting a left-wing bookstore in Hong Kong. Trần Huy Liệu died in 1969.

Party censorship had tightened from 1959–1960, and Trần Huy Liệu participated. (For the previous censorship situation, see the more eclectic journal *Văn Sử Địa* [Literature-History-Geography], published June 1954–January 1959.) Unfortunately, there was no article on August 1945 in the provinces. As editor of *Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử*, Trần Huy Liệu would open up debate about a specific historical issue or personality, which sometimes revealed significant differences of opinion. Then, at a certain point, he would declare the debate over and present the “consensus position.” Nonetheless, verbal debate often persisted among specialists and students, as I discovered when coming to Vietnam as a guest of the History Institute in 1978. Such

“back channel” discussions became more vigorous in the late 1980s. Some of my readings of *Cách Mạng Tháng Tám* which Holcombe challenges are colored by what I heard and recorded in my fieldwork diaries. To cite such conversations in my footnotes could have jeopardized my interlocutors. I stand by what I published.

Vietnam 1945 does suffer from a paucity of primary sources on Vietnamese actors. I tried very hard to secure interviews with participants in the August Revolution. At one point I gave to my academic sponsors a list of thirty-five persons. Several were no longer alive. For the others, relevant official units [*cơ quan*] were contacted, and perhaps friendly intermediaries, but in the end I was only able to interview nine individuals. When questioned, most did not feel the need to toe the current Party line chapter and verse. My most valuable interviews were with Trần Văn Giàu, in 1980, 1988, and 1990.

Fortunately, the Fonds du gouvernement de fait (GF), located at the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, names a lot of the people who sent, received and deliberated on documents therein. Beginning in April 1945, the GF files deal with the current terrible famine, Imperial Vietnam administration, political prisoners released by the Japanese, anti-colonial meetings, petitions complaining of excessive taxes or *corvée*, and much more. It was a treat to come to the Aix archives each morning, receive a trolley of file boxes, and take notes vigorously until kicked out at 5:00 p.m. For *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution*, the GF files become the most valuable source by far. Among the seventy-eight file boxes I saw the ICP mentioned only four times. It’s possible that following “self-dissolution” of the Party in November 1945 the government instructed all echelons to avoid using the term ICP. That would still not explain the absence of ICP references prior to November, however.

For some reason Holcombe does not mention my second most important source: *Việt Nam Dân Quốc Công Báo* [Vietnam National Gazette]. Beginning September 29, 1945, several thousand copies of each *Công Báo* issue were distributed down to district level. Perusing a total of 817 pages of the *Công Báo*, I did not see the ICP mentioned once. President Hồ Chí Minh signed several hundred decrees before he left for France at the end of May 1946, and resumed this responsibility on return in October. While I’m sure Hồ Chí Minh did not compose all those decrees, he would have read and

perhaps annotated most before signing. I took the decrees into account when characterizing Hồ Chí Minh's political priorities compared to Trường Chinh (see below). Overall the *Công Báo* demonstrates impressive attention to government detail, whether it be supervision of abattoirs or school curriculums, judicial regulations or currency controls. Clearly not all of this actually happened in the short term, but ambitions remained strong.

Holcombe chides me twice for not utilizing Center No. 3 of the Vietnam National Archives. I spent a fair amount of time there, quickly noting the paucity of materials on 1945–1946 and moving on to 1947–1954, which I hope to publish on soon. I checked again recently and was told that nothing had changed. Center staff still complain that province committees hold on to stacks of moldy dossiers rather than forwarding them to Hà Nội.

Holcombe finds “two main ideas” in *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution*. Firstly, he says, I continue from my previous book to argue that Vietnamese communists habitually exaggerate the Party's role in formation of local Việt Minh groups and early state formation. Yes, that's my opinion, based on reading hundreds of non-Party versus Party controlled materials over time, but it's hardly a “main idea.” A political scientist could investigate how Party leaders at different junctures have used 1945–1946 events to legitimize their behavior. Along the way the researcher would learn that so-called “Complete Works” are nothing of the kind, and specific passages have been deleted or reworded.

My second “main idea,” according to Holcombe, holds that the DRV state began to change during the summer of 1946, from a “relatively moderate, inclusive, and tolerant polity that took democracy seriously,” to the “Party dictatorship it remains today.” This is a minefield of misinterpretation. Throughout 1945–1946 a diversity of political models were invoked and debated, right up to and including the Second National Assembly session in late October. But all along there were also extrajudicial killings, deportation camps, targeting of opposition parties, and a de facto preference for executive fiat over legislative formulation and oversight. What changed during the summer was the peace/war equation, beginning with French occupation of the Governor General's palace in Hà Nội in late June, to the Bắc Ninh ambush of a French convoy in August, and then public shock at the meagre September 15 Modus Vivendi. If there was to be war, special executive powers would be needed. Some ICP leaders perhaps looked forward to war for that reason.

Holcombe suggests that Hồ Chí Minh shared the view of many younger ICP members that negotiations with the French were a mere tactical expedient to gain time to improve fighting capabilities. I disagree. Hồ Chí Minh had been in Europe during World War I, and in China under Japanese attack. He understood how traumatic war with France would be. Most of his lieutenants, by contrast, had witnessed nothing more than a company-size French colonial sweep. Hồ Chí Minh kept trying to avoid war until the morning of December 19. His diplomatic efforts had not been entirely in vain: they meant a lot domestically; and courting the French public and international press brought rewards later.

Holcombe insists that the November 1946 DRV Constitution was inspired by Stalin's Constitution of 1936, not assorted French precedents as I suggest. He focuses on the original drafting committee filled with ranking ICP members. So far as I can ascertain, however, that committee never met. For both the first and second constitution drafts the government relied mostly on professional lawyers who were not Party members. The constitution rejected by French voters in May 1946 had been drafted with French Communist Party participation. That text was surely available to the drafting committee and may account for some Soviet elements in the DRV Constitution.

Holcombe assumes a monolithic ICP, ignoring what I say about former prison mates, nascent patron-client ties, regional differences, and continuing lack of contact with many local ICP cells. One might add here former students in the USSR during 1928–1934, some of whom continued to put class struggle ahead of building a broad national coalition.

On the question of relations between Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh, Holcombe devotes ten pages to assaulting what he calls my “rift theory.” He accuses me of positing Trường Chinh's “conspiratorial designs against Hồ Chí Minh,” even of Trường Chinh pushing aside Hồ Chí Minh. Neither of these are accurate. The two men did possess very different life experiences, personalities and job responsibilities. They also had different strategic outlooks and priorities in my opinion. But that did not prevent them from working together. When stating that Trường Chinh “became a separate pole of power from Hồ Chí Minh,” I was explicitly referring to the future, not 1946.

Holcombe seems disinterested in what happened at village level in 1945–1946. At Aix I enjoyed reading some of the thousands of petitions composed

by individuals or local groups and dispatched by mail to “Elder Hồ” or a government bureau. A specific grievance or dispute could generate a thick dossier of messages back and forth. Pencil notations by office staff added spice. In serious cases a special commissioner might be sent to investigate and hopefully resolve on the spot. Perennial, subtle dynamics between center and locality [*trung ương/địa phương*] come through repeatedly. The GF files await further scrutiny by a young historian.

In 2007–2011 the Vietnam Historical Association sponsored in-depth interviews with 277 elderly men and women who as youths had taken part in the August Revolution and beyond.⁵ Except for those who left to join the army, young women and men mostly remained in their home village during 1945–1946, initiating Việt Minh groups, collecting rice, standing guard, calling meetings, participating in literacy classes, and promoting public hygiene. There was informal interaction with adjacent villages, and formal contact with district level, but not beyond. Communication was on foot, only rarely by bicycle or horse cart. Teenage girls joined eagerly, which often brought them into conflict with their elders, who expected them to marry and produce children. The first step in female emancipation [*thoát ly*] was to eat and sleep amidst fellow female activists, not at home. Later these organized local women would prove vital to the Resistance, carrying rice to district warehouses, feeding and sheltering army units passing through, helping families whose menfolk were gone, and looking out for enemy activity. Most interviewees were admitted to the ICP in 1948–1949.

Because Holcombe focuses solely on the role of the ICP, and I’m expected to respond to what he says, that inevitably leaves the bulk of my book neglected. That particularly includes: formation of the civil administration and army; early military defeats; a range of economic woes (threatening famine, precarious finances, inflation, nil investment); grappling with Chinese and French occupations; attempting to evade diplomatic isolation; and domestic challenges to DRV authority. Amidst all this I try to evoke the 1945–1946 era as lived by citizens, full of hopes, fears, commitments and uncertainties. No one had any idea that thirty years of bloodshed and devastation lay ahead. Holcombe begins from the conviction that communism was responsible for this tragedy and wants to trace it all back to August 1945.

Venturing into the realm of counterfactuals for a moment, what would have happened if the Pacific War had continued for another six months, as the Allies expected until the successful a-bomb test at Alamogordo in July? What if Gen. Lu Han had shoved Hồ Chí Minh aside in late September 1945? Or in March 1946 the Chinese had decided to continue their occupation above the sixteenth parallel? What if Hồ Chí Minh had decided to remain in Vietnam at the end of May rather than go to France? What if in mid-December Hồ Chí Minh had managed to make radio contact with the new French Socialist Premier, León Blum? I suspect Alec Holcombe is something of a determinist, especially when it comes to communists, but I might be wrong.

Holcombe encourages future research on internal Party documents. Good luck. As long as the Vietnam Communist Party remains in power it will protect its foundation myth and deny access by independent scholars to sensitive records. It might eventually open some holdings after sequestering delicate materials, a practice not unknown in western archives. A more promising source may be the scores (hundreds?) of typescript memoirs that remain guarded by descendants.

Notes

1. David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: the Quest for Power*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution (1945–1946)*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
2. Nghiêm Kế Tổ, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa* [Vietnam, Blood and Fire] (Sài Gòn: Mai Lĩnh, 1954).
3. Trần Huy Liệu et al., eds., *Cách Mạng Tháng Tám: Tổng Khởi nghĩa ở Hà nội và các địa phương* [The August Revolution: The General Insurrection in Hà Nội and Various Localities] (Hà Nội: Sử Học, 1961.)
4. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).
5. Funding for these interviews was provided by the Australian Research Council and the Canadian Research Council. I composed a list of ambit questions. Dr. Đào Thế Đức and Ms. Nguyễn Thị Hồng Hạnh led the team of interviewers. Interviewees and their families were promised confidentiality for five years. Most interviews lasted three or four hours, some longer. All transcripts will soon be deposited electronically at the ANU Library.