

Review Article

David Marr's Vietnamese Revolution

Edward Miller

Vietnam: State, war, and revolution (1945–1946)

By DAVID G. MARR

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During the fall of 1962, the American war correspondent Richard Tregaskis spent three months in South Vietnam. In *Vietnam diary*, published the following year, Tregaskis offered vivid descriptions of his experiences, which included joining South Vietnamese army troops on combat missions against ‘Viet Cong’ fighters, as well as observing an election inside one of the Saigon government’s newly built ‘strategic hamlets’. But the main purpose of *Vietnam diary* was to detail the author’s many encounters with Americans in South Vietnam — specifically the US soldiers, marines, and other military personnel serving as advisers to the South Vietnamese Army. Tregaskis greatly admired these Americans, whom he portrayed as indomitable Cold Warriors. He was particularly impressed with Lieutenant Dave Marr, a Marine intelligence officer he met at a US base in the city of Da Nang. Lt Marr, whom Tregaskis described as a ‘slim blond youth’ from California, spoke excellent Vietnamese, thanks to a year of intensive language training. He also displayed a marked ‘enthusiasm for things Vietnamese’. Tregaskis noted that Marr was rather less optimistic than many of his peers about the prospects for success against the communist enemy. ‘The best you can say is that we’re holding our own,’ the marine told the journalist.¹

In the half century since that conversation, David Marr has lost none of his enthusiasm for things Vietnamese. After resigning his commission in the Marines in 1964, Marr embarked on a career as a historian. He subsequently became one of the world’s pre-eminent scholars of modern Vietnamese history, even as he also became an outspoken critic of the escalating US intervention in Indochina. In scholarly articles, edited collections, and a series of four deeply researched monographs, Marr’s influence on Vietnamese studies — a field that scarcely existed when he began his graduate work — has been profound and far-reaching. The appearance of Marr’s latest book on the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

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1 Richard Tregaskis, *Vietnam diary* (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1963), pp. 65–6.

(DRV) presents an opportunity to reflect on the evolution of this impressive and impactful career, as well as the key historical questions that have defined it.

While most of Marr's scholarly writings have concentrated on Vietnam's colonial era, he readily acknowledges that his scholarship remains rooted in questions formed during the postcolonial context of the Vietnam War. As a marine in South Vietnam, Marr admired the ability of the communist-led National Liberation Front 'to conduct complex political and military operations among some of the most difficult conditions imaginable'.² This admiration led him eventually to conclude that the communists would win the war; at the same time, it deepened his fascination with the revolution that the communists claimed to lead. Marr's work can thus be read as an ongoing attempt to situate the Vietnam War within a broader narrative about Vietnam's revolutionary transformation since the late nineteenth century. Such a reading immediately evokes questions about origins, identity, and motives that have long preoccupied Vietnamese studies specialists. Where, when, and how did the Vietnamese Revolution begin? And who was a revolutionary?

Marr's first attempt to provide scholarly answers to these questions appeared in 1971, with the publication of *Vietnamese anticolonialism, 1885–1925*, a monograph derived from Marr's Ph.D. dissertation.³ Viewed in hindsight, *Vietnamese anticolonialism* was both a remarkable and remarkably ambitious book. In it, Marr offered a narrative history of Vietnamese elite challenges to the French colonial state, focusing mainly on the generation of 'scholar-gentry' activists who came of age around 1900 and became Vietnam's first revolutionaries. Since *Vietnamese anticolonialism* was one of the earliest works of Anglophone scholarship on Vietnam to be based on substantial work in Vietnamese language sources (with some Japanese and Chinese materials thrown in for good measure), Marr was obliged to introduce his readers to historical figures whom most had never heard of before. He achieved this through a combination of biographical sketches of his subjects and close analysis of their writings — an approach which would subsequently be adopted by other historians of modern Vietnam, including Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Huynh Kim Khanh, Christoph Giebel, and Peter Zinoman.

Marr later described *Vietnamese anticolonialism* as his 'most polemical book'. He acknowledged that he had overstated the differences between anticolonial activists and the defenders of colonialism as a way to critique the US intervention in the Vietnam War, which was at its peak when he was researching and writing the volume. Indeed, Marr had become deeply involved in antiwar activism by the late 1960s. After being expelled from South Vietnam for his participation in a peace demonstration in 1967, he returned to California and became a founding member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, which advocated US withdrawal from Vietnam and normalisation of ties with the People's Republic of China.⁴

2 David G. Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. vii.

3 David G. Marr, *Vietnamese anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

4 David Marr, 'A life with Vietnam', in *Historians and their discipline: The call of Southeast Asian history*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2007), pp. 99–108.

By the time the Vietnam War ended in 1975, Marr had joined the faculty of the Australian National University in Canberra, and embarked on a new research project. Entitled *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920–1945*, Marr's second monograph was conceived in part as a sequel to *Anticolonialism*; the two books were similar in their focus on print culture and on debates among Vietnamese elites about the means and meaning of revolution in the context of colonial rule. Yet the angle of vision in *Vietnamese tradition on trial* was much wider, insofar as Marr sought to depict 'fundamental changes in political and social consciousness among a significant segment of the Vietnamese populace'.⁵ According to Marr, this shift in consciousness — as revealed in elite writings about ethics, language, gender, history, learning, and knowledge production — was rooted in the social and economic transformation of Indochina during the 1920s and 1930s. While *Vietnamese tradition on trial* mostly downplayed the role of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and Marxism in these interwar debates, Marr suggested that the shift in consciousness he discerned was an essential precursor to the ICP's subsequent emergence as the pre-eminent nationalist movement in Vietnam during the August Revolution of 1945. In this regard, the book was written with later revolutionary events very much in mind.

The centrality of 1945 and the communist movement in Marr's understanding of the Vietnamese Revolution was made manifest in his third monograph, entitled *Vietnam 1945: The quest for power*. Unlike his earlier books, which examined trends over spans of decades, this volume concentrated on the six-month period leading up to the August Revolution, when Vietnam became 'the vortex of intense international and domestic competitions for power'.⁶ Marr conceived of this contest for power as a multisided affair involving Imperial Japan, Nationalist China, Great Britain, the United States, the Vichy French state, and DeGaulle's Free French movement. As a result, *Vietnam 1945* was as much international history as Vietnamese history, and combined work in Vietnamese sources with substantial research in American and European archival collections. Still, Marr's main focus was on events in Vietnam, and especially on explaining the involvement of the ICP and Hồ Chí Minh in the August Revolution and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

A key goal for Marr in *Vietnam 1945* was to revise the Communist Party's official narrative of its own rise to power. In that narrative, the August Revolution and the DRV were the products of shrewd judgement and timely decisions on the part of Hồ and other ICP leaders. By placing the August Revolution in the context of international developments, Marr aimed for a less triumphalist and more contingent interpretation — one that emphasised events such as the devastating famine of 1944–45 in Vietnam's northern and central regions.

Nevertheless, *Vietnam 1945* still assigned primacy of place to the ICP and its leaders' ability to steer events as they wished them to go. According to Marr, the ICP's non-communist rivals failed to understand the 'strategic dynamics' that were at play in Vietnam in 1945, while the ICP 'grasped the essentials, at least intuitively'.⁷ These dynamics included what Marr described as the 'psychological aspect' of the August

5 Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial*, p. 2.

6 David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The quest for power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. xxiv.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Revolution: a shared sense of belonging which united all of the otherwise disparate groups who rallied to the banner of revolution during those crucial weeks.⁸ According to Marr, this psychological unity enabled Hồ and his colleagues to seize the initiative and proclaim the founding of the DRV state on 2 September 1945 — a move which Marr portrayed as pivotal to both the Vietnamese Revolution and the subsequent course of Vietnam's modern history. Following Hồ's declaration of Vietnam's independence, Marr argued, the contest for power in Vietnam 'had already been narrowed down to two rivals: France and the DRV'.⁹ Although decades of bloody warfare still lay ahead, Marr seemed to suggest that the political and historical trends had now shifted decisively in favour of the Communist Party and Hồ's newly established state.

Few Vietnamologists would dispute Marr's claim that the August Revolution was a moment of enormous consequence in both the history of the Communist Party and the history of the Vietnamese Revolution. But was 1945 also a moment at which the ICP crowded all other rivals off the revolutionary stage, and effectively turned Vietnamese popular sentiments decisively and permanently to its own side? In other words, was Marr drawing too straight a line between the party's success in 1945 and the outcomes of the later wars against France and the United States? The appearance of Marr's latest monograph, entitled *Vietnam: State, war and revolution (1945–1946)*, provides a new vantage point from which to consider these questions, as well as some perspective on how Marr is continuing to refine and revise his understanding of the history of the Vietnamese Revolution writ large.

Like all of Marr's books, *State, war and revolution* is based on years of careful spadework in library and archival sources. It resembles *Vietnamese tradition on trial* in its extensive and close readings of 1940s Vietnamese newspapers and serials. It is also similar to *Vietnam 1945* in its use of archival collections outside of Vietnam, especially those held at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in France. Marr has drawn especially heavily on the 'gouvernement de fait' (GF) collection, which contains thousands of pages of DRV official documents seized by the French Army in Hanoi in late 1946. These materials allow Marr to peer directly into some of the day-to-day elements of DRV state-building processes, and to reconstruct particular meetings, conferences, and conversations — especially those involving DRV officials working at the regional and local levels.

In detailing these early DRV state-building activities, Marr emphasises their ad hoc and contingent qualities, and the many ways in which decisions based on expedience during 1945–46 often had long-lasting and unanticipated consequences. DRV leaders, despite a 'strong preference for centralised government', ended up preserving and even expanding the role of provincial administrations as a key locus of government power.¹⁰ The new government was surprisingly effective in its management of Vietnam's postal and telegraphic networks, even as its efforts to overhaul educational and judicial systems faltered.¹¹ Among the most intriguing parts of *State,*

8 Ibid., p. 472.

9 Ibid., p. xxiv.

10 David G. Marr, *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 5–6, 35–41.

11 Ibid., pp. 76–93.

war, and revolution are those detailing the activities and politics of the DRV's first National Assembly, which was elected in early 1946 and which included representatives from many anticommunist parties and groups. Nguyễn Văn Tố, a non-communist intellectual who chaired the assembly's Standing Committee for most of 1946, is portrayed by Marr as a tragic figure — a leader who dared to hope that the DRV might live up to its democratic and pluralistic aspirations, but who soon found himself marginalised by infighting and ICP intrigue.¹²

Beyond the nuts and bolts of state building, Marr also has a great deal to say about war. He is particularly interested in the profound ways in which the DRV was influenced by the emerging military conflict with the French colonial state. Here, Marr draws and expands upon the recent work of his former student, Christopher Goscha.¹³ But where Goscha emphasises the all-out military mobilisation of the DRV during the middle and later years of the First Indochina War, Marr's contribution is to explore how the new state initially found itself in a liminal position between war and peace. Although southern Vietnam was engulfed in combat involving DRV and French colonial troops beginning in the fall of 1945, the northern half of Indochina — including the DRV capital of Hanoi — remained tenuously at peace until the outbreak of general hostilities in late 1946. For over a year, therefore, the DRV waged war against French and other forces in the south even as its leaders sought desperately to avoid war in the north.

Marr challenges the conventional view of the genesis of DRV military strategy, arguing that commanders initially tried to fight a conventional war in the south, and only switched to a protracted war strategy and guerrilla tactics after a series of battlefield setbacks. At the same time, the war in the south greatly facilitated the DRV's mass mobilisation efforts in the north. The effects of the war were evident not only in the recruitment of men and women to serve in the DRV's nascent armed forces, but also in the emergence of a new ethos of voluntarism and sacrifice on behalf of the nation. This ethos would endure in various forms throughout the subsequent three decades of war and indeed still persists today — albeit mainly in the realm of official state discourse.

Although *State, war, and revolution* highlights the north–south gradient of war in Vietnam during 1946, the book focuses disproportionately on events in the DRV's northern region (Bắc Bộ). In part, this northern focus is dictated by the contents of the sources used by Marr. Since the GF materials were the records of the Bắc Bộ regional office, they provide only fleeting glimpses of what was happening elsewhere in Vietnam. To be sure, Marr does not ignore events in the country's central and southern regions; his accounts of the large-scale battles between DRV and French forces at Nha Trang and the Central Highlands in early 1946 are especially good. But he says rather less about the war in the Mekong Delta, which was also a major theatre of combat. For example, he has only a few references to Nguyễn Bình, the aggressive and controversial Việt Minh commander who alienated many of the DRV's allies with his use of terrorism and scorched-earth tactics. The northern focus of the book is understandable, if only because the war in the south was a

12 Ibid., pp. 65–8, 93–9.

13 Christopher E. Goscha, *Vietnam: un Etat né de la guerre, 1945–1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011).

complex, multisided affair that is worthy of book-length treatment in its own right. Still, if the DRV was an ‘archipelago state’ (as Goscha aptly describes it),¹⁴ some readers may feel that Marr could have done more to suggest how DRV state-building activities varied across its scattered ‘islands’ of territory.

One of Marr’s key contributions in *State, war, and revolution* is to disaggregate three historical actors which have traditionally been conflated with each other: the DRV state, the Việt Minh movement, and the ICP. Since Hồ Chí Minh was the founder of all three of these, many historians have assumed that the first and second were always under the control of the third. But Marr argues that the situation was not so clear-cut, especially during the tumultuous months after the August Revolution. Since the ICP only had a total membership of around 5,000 members in 1945, it initially had ‘no hope’ of wielding effective control over all components of the DRV state.¹⁵ Nor did the party command the myriad ‘self-styled’ Việt Minh partisans who waved DRV flags but who acted according to their own (usually local) interests and agendas. Still, Marr demonstrates that the ICP *aspired* to dominate the DRV from the outset. These aspirations are reflected in Party leaders’ initial focus on the capture and control of the state’s internal security apparatus. Unlike those authors who have described the DRV as a ‘police state’ without explaining how DRV security organisations actually worked, Marr details the party’s calculated efforts to use police forces as a ‘dictatorial instrument’.¹⁶ He thus suggests that the ICP was already preparing the way for one-party rule during 1945–46, even if the realisation of that goal was still a few years away.

Marr’s discussion of the ICP’s dictatorial ambitions should give pause to anyone who might suppose that *State, war, and revolution* is sympathetic to the Communist Party. On the contrary, the book is harshly critical of the ICP and many of its leaders. The chief villain of the book is Trường Chinh, the ICP’s second-ranking leader and its top ideologue. According to Marr, Trường Chinh’s main objective from 1945 onward was ‘to extend ICP power over all Việt Minh groups, the nascent DRV state, and “the people” (*nhân dân*) at large’.¹⁷ Although none of these objectives had been fulfilled by the end of 1946, Marr concludes that Trường Chinh made considerable progress on all of them. He did so in part by forging alliances with like-minded ICP members such as Lê Duẩn, Lê Đức Thọ, and Trần Quốc Hoàn, all of whom would go on to join the ranks of the Party’s most powerful — and most feared — leaders in the ensuing decades. In addition, Trường Chinh is shown to be an early and earnest advocate of a pro-Soviet line in the emerging Cold War, as well as the architect of efforts to impose party discipline and to bring the fractious Việt Minh groups across the country into line. Although Marr suggests that the ICP ‘takeover’ of the DRV was not completed until 1949, he concludes that Trường Chinh had begun to establish himself as ‘a separate pole of power’ well before that date.¹⁸

As much as Marr deplores the dictatorial designs of Trường Chinh and his ICP allies, there is one senior communist leader whom he paints in very different colors: Hồ Chí Minh. From the book’s opening pages, Hồ is portrayed not only as the

14 Ibid., pp. 63–6.

15 Marr, *State, war and revolution*, p. 12.

16 Ibid., p. 387.

17 Ibid., p. 444.

18 Ibid., p. 498.

pre-eminent champion of Vietnam's independence from France, but also as a proponent of a humane and inclusive vision of political economy — a vision which Marr implies was more akin to social democracy than to orthodox Marxism. While he readily acknowledges that Hồ was a committed Leninist and communist, Marr insists that Hồ's 'immediate objectives were to widen popular support for the fledgling government and to project himself as a national leader above party, class or personal interest'. Thus, contrary to Trường Chinh's view, Hồ felt that the ICP should 'not necessarily expect to exercise national power for some time to come'.¹⁹ According to Marr, Hồ's November 1945 proclamation of the ICP's self-dissolution was not merely a cosmetic move designed to reassure anticommunists; it also reflected his genuine desire to avoid transforming the DRV into a one-party state, at least for the time being.²⁰ Similarly, Marr contrasts Hồ's 'multilateral' view of world affairs and his willingness to parley with the United States and other anticommunist powers with the 'bipolar' approach advocated by pro-Soviet ICP ideologists.²¹ For Marr, Hồ's overriding priority during this period was to try to head off the looming conflict with France — a goal he pursued to the end of 1946, despite the opposition of Trường Chinh and other ICP leaders who had already resolved that war was both inevitable and desirable.

Some readers of *State, war, and revolution* will be sceptical of Marr's representation of Hồ as an incipient social democrat. But the question of Hồ's ultimate objectives may be less consequential than Marr's interpretation of Vietnamese popular attitudes. Although the book examines the rivalries among Vietnamese elite leaders and groups in exquisite and exhaustive detail, its treatment of the attitudes and sentiments of ordinary Vietnamese seems less nuanced. From his opening lines, Marr links the establishment of the DRV to what he describes as 'the birth of the Vietnamese nation'.²² For Marr, Vietnamese nationalism as a mass phenomenon emerged from 'a spontaneous welling up of social revolutionary sentiments and behavior' during August 1945.²³ This nationalism, moreover, was quickly translated into overwhelming popular support for the DRV state. For Marr, the strength of the links between Vietnamese national identity and the new state was evident in the proliferation of red-and-yellow DRV flags, which he asserts, 'came to symbolize the nation for all but a small minority'.²⁴ To be sure, Marr acknowledges that the initial surge of popular enthusiasm for the DRV did not last, and that state leaders soon discovered that their mass mobilisation efforts would not succeed on voluntarism alone. But he also claims that most ordinary Vietnamese continued to see the DRV state as the institutional embodiment of the nation, even as their revolutionary ardour cooled. Marr believes that this association between the DRV state and the Vietnamese nation persists even today. In his closing pages, he predicts that if the Communist Party should 'fragment or fade away' in the future, Vietnamese will still choose to keep the state that Hồ bequeathed to them — and indeed would 'most likely' revert to calling it the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.²⁵

19 Ibid., p. 444.

20 Ibid., p. 453.

21 Ibid., p. 264.

22 Ibid., p. 1.

23 Ibid., p. 3.

24 Ibid., p. 523.

25 Ibid., p. 578.

This representation of the DRV as the fixed embodiment of Vietnamese national identity seems open to challenge on at least two fronts. First, it seems to underplay the actual and potential opposition to the DRV among certain Vietnamese political and social groups during 1945–46. While Marr duly describes ICP and DRV efforts to suppress northern anticommunist organisations such as the Vietnam Nationalist Party and the *Đại Việt* movement, he suggests that those groups were all but eliminated as political actors in Vietnam by late 1946. Marr also notes the growing tensions between Vietnamese Catholics and the DRV during late 1946, but does not consider the implications of this for the subsequent relations between the state and the church's 1.6 million Vietnamese adherents. Remarkably, Marr makes almost no mention of the savage warfare waged by DRV forces against adherents of the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious movements in the Mekong Delta, nor does he discuss the comparatively circumscribed nature of DRV territorial control in the south. Thus, while Marr is clearly correct to suggest that the DRV enjoyed broad and wide support in many parts of Vietnam during 1945–46, its monopoly on Vietnamese popular sentiments may have been less extensive than he implies.

Second, Marr's one-to-one equation of the DRV with Vietnamese nationalist sentiment appears to leave very little room for the post-1946 history of anticommunist alternatives to the DRV. In retrospect, it is evident that both the Associated State of Vietnam (ASVN, 1949–55) and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, 1955–75) were plagued by cronyism and corruption, and that these problems figured mightily in the latter's eventual collapse in 1975. But to acknowledge such facts does not prove that the DRV had cornered the market on nationalist legitimacy, or that most Vietnamese necessarily agreed with the DRV view that the anticommunist Saigon regime was the true 'insurgent threat' facing the nation.²⁶ Indeed, Marr's depiction of a unitary Vietnamese national identity seems to discount recent scholarship on the ASVN and the RVN, most of which has emphasised the fragmented and multi-valent qualities of Vietnamese nationalism after 1945, especially in South Vietnam. In this regard, Marr's claim that 'Vietnam's future course was largely determined' during 1945–1946 seems rather overstated.²⁷

These reservations are only minor complaints about what is clearly a book of major significance by one of the leading scholars of modern Vietnam. In the more than fifty years since he first became fascinated with 'things Vietnamese', David Marr has been both an enormously productive and an enormously influential scholar. His four monographs are all remarkable achievements, both as displays of narrative skill and as examples of Marr's ability to gather, sift, analyse, and integrate enormous volumes of primary source material. While historians and other scholars will continue to debate his main claims about the origins and course of the Vietnamese Revolution, the endurance of those debates is the surest sign of the value of his contributions to the field. *Vietnam: State, war, and revolution* is required reading for specialists in modern Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and for anyone seeking to understand Vietnam's place in the larger history of revolution in the twentieth century.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. xv.