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Book Review: Pierre Asselin, Vietnam's American War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

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This book examines the Vietnam War from the standpoint of Hanoi—"this is the story of how the Vietnamese David defeated the American Goliath." In the acknowledgements, Asselin states that he first became interested in the Vietnam War after watching the movie *Rambo: First Blood Part II* as a child. The author apparently does not remember that Rambo's chief antagonists in the movie were not the Vietnamese but two Soviet soldiers who were aiding the Vietnamese. His book consistently minimizes and mischaracterizes the Soviet role in the Vietnam War. In his view, the Americans were the aggressors in Vietnam, while the Chinese were Hanoi's chief supporters, and the Soviets were primarily concerned with preserving their reputation as a reliable ally and with sustaining détente with the United States. This is precisely the same false interpretation of Soviet motives that a Russian

author advanced in his books on the USSR and Vietnam.[1] Asselin unsurprisingly describes these books as "outstanding works . . . on the role of Hanoi's allies during the war." But a struggle between the Soviet Goliath and the American Goliath, using the North Vietnamese as cannon fodder, is a much less heroic tale than the "Vietnamese David versus the American Goliath" version of events.

The introduction reflects the approach of the entire book. The author argues that Vietnam was a global war with global consequences. It affected not just Southeast Asia but aroused "independence movements across the Afro-Asian world," and inspired insurgent and terrorist groups in Africa, Central America, the Middle East, and Europe. Framing Vietnam as a global war should logically lead to consideration of the role in the war of other major powers, particularly the Soviet Union and China, but the author ignores them. From this introduction, one would not even know that the Soviet Union and China supported Hanoi, or that the Soviet Union supported the worldwide insurgencies and terrorist groups that were "galvanized" by Vietnam. Apparently, these groups were more Davids independently taking on Goliath. The author's discussion of the effect of the war on the United States focuses on popular music, domestic unrest, civil rights, and other social issues. He does not even mention the impact of Vietnam the US-Soviet

[1] Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) and *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy Toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954 – 1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For a review of the former, see Richard C. Thornton, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 102, Issue 4, October 1997, pp. 1194–1195, and James Perry, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 10, Issue 1, 1997, pp. 241-243.

strategic balance, or of American calculations of the US-Soviet strategic balance on the war in Vietnam.

Asselin argues that Ho Chi Minh was a "moderate" or "pragmatic" Communist rather than a hardline Stalinist, and in 1945, Ho was "a friend of the United States." This is redolent of the argument summarized in *The Pentagon Papers* that the US missed an opportunity to recognize Ho as an "Asian Tito" who would be independent of Moscow and Peking. Asselin makes this dubious claim even after noting Ho's background, of which the US government was well aware at the time. In 1945, Ho had a twenty-five-year history as a dedicated and twice-imprisoned Communist revolutionary, founder of the Indochinese Communist Party, graduate of Soviet revolutionary schools, and Comintern agent. Far from being a moderate, Ho consistently followed Moscow's line. There was no missed opportunity to convert him to neutrality or into an American ally. His overtures to the United States in 1945 are best understood as an effort to convince America to stand aside in the coming struggle with France.

The author considers that Khrushchev's announcement of "peaceful coexistence" in 1956 was regarded in Hanoi as a betrayal because it "disavowed violence" and took armed struggle off the table. He further contends that Khrushchev opposed the resumption of hostilities in Vietnam from 1956 until his ouster in 1965, because doing so could cause a confrontation between the USSR and the United States. Many authors share this interpretation of "peaceful coexistence," but it is false. Under Khrushchev, the Soviets supplied arms to insurgent groups in Algeria, Congo, and Laos, and shipped arms to Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, India, Indonesia, Cuba, and North Vietnam. This was hardly consistent with a disavowal of violence. Moreover, far

from being opposed to the resumption of hostilities in Vietnam, Khrushchev supported it in order to precipitate American intervention. Khrushchev believed that American intervention in Vietnam would drain American power, buy time for him to develop and deploy a second-generation ICBM force, and pressure the Chinese into restoring a close Sino-Soviet relationship. Asselin shows no awareness of the debate within the Chinese leadership over relations with the USSR and the USA, or of the impact of Vietnam on that debate. He incorrectly considers that the Chinese were a unified group of revolutionary militants who encouraged Hanoi to act aggressively, in contrast to the cautious Soviets. He asserts that in 1964, Hanoi decided to escalate hostilities in the South partly because Khrushchev, who "staunchly opposed escalation in Vietnam," had been ousted and his successors would permit escalation. This is incorrect. Khrushchev always supported North Vietnamese escalation. However, by 1964 he was an obstacle to the improved Sino-Soviet relations needed to supply Hanoi with weapons, and he was accordingly removed.[2]

The author contends that after America intervened in 1965, the Chinese provided "the bulk of the small arms and ammunition" that North Vietnamese forces used. He emphasizes the importance of Chinese fighter jets, artillery, and anti-aircraft guns to Hanoi's war effort. In contrast, he provides few specifics about Soviet military aid. His attitude is that China provided aid enthusiastically, to demonstrate its revolutionary superiority, while the Soviets did so reluctantly, and only in order to avoid criticism from within the Communist camp. Overall, the Chinese were the radicals and the Soviets were the moderates. In fact,

[2] F. Charles Parker, *Vietnam: Strategy for a Stalemate* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 46-50.

Soviet military aid to Hanoi dwarfed Chinese aid, and included the most advanced military systems.[3] Asselin also states that while providing aid, the Soviets "urged Hanoi to pursue a negotiated settlement." Massive Soviet aid was clearly inconsistent with any desire for moderation or to promote a negotiated settlement. He unconvincingly claims that Soviet military aid did not provide Moscow with political influence; "Hanoi was a truly independent actor" that maintained its autonomy during the war. He also makes the ridiculous argument that the Soviets had no visibility into Hanoi's plans. For example, the Tet Offensive surprised and dismayed Moscow. In the chapter on 1965 to 1968, he shows no awareness of Mao's efforts to improve relations with the United States, or of the implications of the shifting US-Soviet strategic balance for the war in Vietnam.

Asselin's misunderstanding of US, Soviet, and Chinese strategy continues in the chapter on the Nixon era. He contends that after Tet the Soviets desired "de-escalation" and "kept urging Hanoi to end the war diplomatically." He does not even attempt to reconcile this supposed Soviet interest in a diplomatic solution with the dramatic and sustained increase in Soviet military aid, which he only briefly acknowledges in passing. The author attributes the reduction in Chinese aid to Hanoi in 1969-70 to Chinese anger over Hanoi's peace talks with Washington. Other authors have shown that the start of these peace talks, as well as increasing Soviet belligerence on China's northern border, prompted China to seek rapprochement with Washington. This emerging rapprochement, not anger at Hanoi, was what

[3] Central Intelligence Agency, "International Communist Aid to North Vietnam," March 2, 1968. Online at International Communist Aid to North Vietnam (intel.gov)

prompted China to reduce her own military aid to North Vietnam as well as the volume of Soviet aid to North Vietnam delivered across China.[4] (Asselin wrongly believes China did not seek to improve relations with the USA until April 1971.) The author contends that the Soviets "had no idea" about the "extent and timing" of the Easter Offensive of 1972, and would not have approved of such a large-scale attack because it could have derailed détente and the Nixon-Brezhnev summit. This is preposterous given the large scale of Soviet aid, the training of North Vietnamese tank crews in the USSR, and joint high-level Soviet-North Vietnamese planning for the attack.[5] Asselin does not notice the cleavage between Nixon and Kissinger on the terms of the Paris Peace accords, and does not perceive these accords as what they were—a tremendous victory for Soviet strategy and a blow to improved Sino-American relations.

The title of the concluding chapter "Civil War, 1973–1975" further demonstrates the author's determination to downplay Soviet involvement in the war. North Vietnam with enormous Soviet support versus South Vietnam with no external support was not a civil war at all, but a Soviet proxy war against South Vietnam, which the South was guaranteed to lose. He contends that Moscow urged Hanoi to "embrace peace" and cut aid in 1973 in order to "deny Hanoi the ability to resume armed struggle." This peace policy did not last long. But who was to blame? The author reproaches Saigon for the unraveling of the peace after 1973. He bemoans the "aggressiveness" of South Vietnamese efforts to defend its own territory—namely, to destroy North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam and to retake

[4] Richard C. Thornton, *The Nixon-Kissinger Years*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2001), 10-26.
[5] Ibid., 126-129, 131.

areas of South Vietnam under North Vietnamese control. He also criticizes Washington for undermining peace by refusing to pay Hanoi reparations. In contrast, he attributes the resumption of Soviet aid to Hanoi in 1974 to "Moscow's continuing dispute with Beijing" and to Moscow's "desperation to win over Hanoi." If the Soviets wanted peace in Vietnam, they could certainly have promoted it by not aiding Hanoi, but from 1973 to 1975 they did the opposite. The author also blames China for North Vietnam's decision to resume hostilities. In his view, China alienated and frightened Hanoi by seizing the Paracel Islands and building a relationship with the Khmer Rouge. Overall, the author ties himself in knots inventing excuses for Moscow rather than acknowledging that North Vietnamese aggression served Soviet interests with respect to the Chinese and the Americans. Moscow simply was not interested in peace in Indochina from 1957 to 1975.

Asselin's concluding remarks again frame the war as a struggle between North Vietnam and America. The North Vietnamese were determined to unify the country, their soldiers were brave, their army well-organized, and they skillfully manipulated world opinion and American domestic opinion. Meanwhile, the Americans did not understand the North Vietnamese or how resolute and ruthless they were. All this is true, but the North Vietnamese David would still not have beaten the American Goliath without massive military aid from the Soviet Union and China.

Overall, this work is certainly stronger in its discussion of North Vietnam itself than in its fundamentally incorrect view of the American, Soviet, or Chinese role in the Vietnam War. There is nothing wrong with trying to tell the story of the Vietnam War from Hanoi's point of view. In doing so, however, the author

downplays Soviet military aid, misrepresents the Soviets as frustrated peacemakers, and misrepresents China as unified in its revolutionary zeal to support Hanoi's conquest of the South. The author's consistent failure to avoid these errors renders the book essentially useless except as another example of a Western academic who has, wittingly or unwittingly, decided to follow Moscow's line on the Vietnam War.