JESSICA M. CHAPMAN, *CAULDRON OF RESISTANCE. NGO DINH DIEM, THE UNITED STATES, AND 1950S SOUTHERN RESISTANCE*, CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, ITHACA–LONDON 2013, PP. XIII + 276

Despite the passage of time, the Vietnam War remains a hot issue in the United States, and in the context of the not very successful US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, is experiencing a kind of Renaissance of importance. While anxiously glancing at the screens of their television sets, the Americans once again look into the past, trying to find in the first television war a prescription for the contemporary problems.

With the normalization of relations with Vietnam in the 90s, historians writing about the Vietnam War from their own experience or exclusively American sources, were joined by their younger colleagues, who benefited from the access to the communist archives. Also, more attention began to be devoted to the period before the direct US intervention in the 1965. However, the old conflict between the American orthodox school of history and revisionists also moved to this period. In the most general terms, it boils down to the dispute about why the war was lost, and should have Americans even engage in Indochina.

The book Cauldron of Resistance. Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and 1950s Southern Resistance is the result of the work on a doctoral dissertation of Jessica M. Chapman. It is composed of seven main chapters, arranged chronologically, divided into subsections. The narrative takes the reader from the very beginnings of the Vietnamese politico-religious organizations, back in the colonial French Indochina, and leads him through a turbulent first half of the twentieth century in the South Vietnam, up to the their decisive confrontation with Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955. It subsequently presents the state created by the Vietnamese politician. The book is equipped with a full scientific apparatus, and also has illustrative materials in the form of photographs, drawings, political flyers and maps.

The biggest plus of this publication is that the author reached to the Vietnamese source materials, devoted to the internal situation of South Vietnam in the 50s, and politico-religious organizations of Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen, important political actors at that time. She supplemented them with documents from the American and French archives, but the Vietnamese sources impose a narrative. Cauldron... however gets worse when it comes to the conclusions that the author draws from the documents that she used.

The main theses of the book are the following: Americans in Vietnam had committed a series of errors. Firstly, they looked at the country from the global Cold War

perspective, thus not taking into account local conditions, they moreover did it dogmatically, ignoring the fact that perhaps Vietnam was not really important from the viewpoint of US national security; secondly, they gave full and consistent support to Ngo Dinh Diem, who turned out to be an evil dictator; lastly, they did not understand and did not use the potential of "the most powerful noncommunist nationalists"[1] – namely the aforementioned politico-religious organizations.

Jessica Chapman, unfortunately, falls into the trap of adopting the vision presented by the entities she writes about. In the image displayed to the reader, politico-religious organizations are not destructive, opportunistic groups threatening the young and weak state, but its wasted opportunity. And Ngo Dinh Diem is generally shown in a bad light. Regardless, the book fits in a common trend in American historiography of blaming Ngo Dinh Diem for every possible problem that emerged in Vietnam in the late 50s and 60s. Likewise, a large part of the deliberations on the North Vietnamese Communists indicate that the author remains under the belief – still popular in the United States – that Ho Chi Minh could have been an Asian Tito – incorrectly – even without going into considerations about the difference between American perception of the leader of Yugoslavia and the reality. The book as such fits a broader trend of describing the US involvement in Vietnam as fundamentally erroneous, only that the moment of commitment was pushed back from 1965 to the 50s.

The sects, which the author herself rightly calls politico-religious organizations, from the very beginning rejected the possibility of an agreement with the government of Diem other than on their own terms – conditions, that maintained, if not downright expanded their existing influence, and paved the way for the seizure of power in the future. It is worth remembering that the leaders of Hoa Hao, Cao Dai and Binh Xuyen wanted not a role in the political jigsaw of South Vietnam, but a jackpot in that game of power. It's hard to understand how the author, after carefully describing ambitions, influences and intrigues (often conducted openly) of politico-religious groups, may subsequently condemn Diem for his forceful and decisive action against the organizations that tried to overthrow him.

Chapman points out that decisions taken by the State Department had often racist subtext, which stemmed from the belief of the superiority of whites and the immaturity of Asian nations that required assistance. Racial prejudices, without a doubt present at the time in the US foreign policy, cannot however obscure the fact that Vietnam in 1954 was indeed devoid of political and economic elites – and above all – civil servants, capable of the effective management of the state. It is doubtful whether such personnel could have been provided by the politico-religious organizations, in which every petty warlord started with appointing himself a General and trying to govern as a sovereign ruler. It's also hard to be surprised by American distrust towards the sects,[2] considering the history of their various alliances so well described by the author herself. Starting from the Japanese, they were only interested in a partner that could guarantee them their existing state of ownership or its enlargement. At

[1] Page 197.

[2] Pages 71–72.

the moment when he was not able to ensure that, or tried to extend some control over them, politico-religious organizations would abandon him without a second thought, regardless of whether they were the Japanese, the Communists, or the French. In addition, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao were internally divided, which meant that any agreement concluded with their leadership could be broken at any moment by one of their more ambitious, petty warlords.[3] And Binh Xuyen, under the mask of patriotism was an ordinary criminal organization, holding in their hands gambling, prostitution, extortion and trafficking of opium in the Vietnamese capital. In addition, the group controlled the Saigon police, thanks to a generous bribe paid to the Chief of state, the former emperor Bao Dai. The Department of State seemed to acknowledge all that, and there is no doubt that it was understood by Ngo Dinh Diem, which explains his stubborn resistance to the Franco-American attempts to impose on him the coalition government with the sects, that would in fact incapacitate him and prevent the development of an efficient state. The beliefs of the prime minister were well known to the politico-religious organizations, which were bothered not so much by a lack of democracy or the alleged character flaws of Diem, but the fact that in his vision of the nation, there was no place for the powerful, quasi-independent entities – the sects and their vast estates in the south of Vietnam.

Another thoughtlessly repeated myth of American historiography is the opinion about the "inevitability" of the unification of Vietnam by the Communists.[4] The South fell in 1975 not as a result of a widespread popular uprising – that the Communists could not cause already in the 1968 – but the brutal, conventional invasion of the Vietnam People's Army, and the abandonment of an ally by the United States, which perhaps explains the convenient belief of Americans about the inevitability of unification. Once again, it turned out how domestic issues in America are able to affect the international policies of the US, bringing misfortune to its allies. And since South Vietnam suddenly found itself on the wrong side of history, and ceased to exist, it was convenient for the US to blame defeat on the inevitability of fate, rather than its own lack of action.

From the perspective of a country affected by communism, considerations that perhaps, if endorsed, Ho Chi Minh would have allowed power to some other parties, sound absurd. History is still waiting for a country in which the Communists would let potential rivals for power to function. Regardless, you don't have to search beyond the borders of Vietnam itself, just look where all parties disappeared in the 50s, which in 1945 became part of the allegedly nationalistic Viet Minh. In other words, it did not matter that "those who joined with them [the Communists – ed. aut.], however, frequently boasted no Marxist-Leninist ties and were often deeply suspicious of the social and diplomatic implications of the communist government."[5] Ultimately even joining the Viet Minh and loyal service did not guarantee safety, which was clearly

[3] Chapman writes herself, that in 1954, Hoa Hao sect was mired in the strife between four competing generals, to the extent that the French themselves described it as "brotherhood of enemies." Page 75.

[4] Page 201.

[5] Page 198.

shown by the fate of many veterans of the war with the French during the land reform and crack-down on the intelligentsia in the late 50's.

In the book, the role and influence of France in Vietnam during the first year of Ngo Dinh Diem's reign remains underestimated. While the text repeatedly emphasizes that Diem was "virulently anti-French,"[6] at the same time the author writes, for example, that "French officials in Paris and Saigon made no secret of their doubts about Ngo Ding Diem's leadership abilities, claiming that he was too insular, too naïve, and temperamentally unsuited to the task of unifying and rebuilding war torn Vietnam").[7] It is a very diplomatic representation of the French opinion about Diem, who in official talks with the Americans was described by Paris officials as "a religious fanatic […] putty in the hands of the crafty Vietnamese,"[8] "hysterical and beyond point of reason,"[9] "not only incapable but mad (fou)"[10] and "an extremely pig-headed man."[11] The author points out that there were some supporters of Diem among French policymakers, like deputy prime minister Paul Reynaud or the undersecretary in the ministry of the associated countries, Marc Jacquet.[12] Unfortunately, each of those individuals had a superior who was definitely hostile to the Vietnamese Prime Minister, thereby negating any positive impact they could have had on the situation in Vietnam. From the very beginning, the aim of the French was to remove Diem from power, and a period of "giving him a chance," forced in 1954 by the Americans, meant only postponement of, rather than the abandonment of that idea. Perhaps the best proof of it is the conversation of Lawton Collins with General Ely in mid-January 1955. After admitting that the progress of Diem's government "impressed, even astonished" him, the French officer smoothly passed on to the old arguments about the necessity of enlarging the government and considering personal alternatives in place of Diem.[13]

The author also seems to not notice, or does not appreciate, the great influence of the French, and especially Commissioner General Paul Ely, on General Collins. President Eisenhower's envoy remained heavily influenced by his French colleagues, which is evident in US diplomatic correspondence. Collins often assumed the French point of view, or presented plans proposed by the French as his own or developed

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[6] Pages 89, 198.

[7] Page 89.

[8] *The Ambassador in France (Dillon) to the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant)*, December 3, 1954, *Foreign Relations of United States (FRUS)*, 1952–1954, vol. XIII (part 2), pp. 2330–2335.

[9] *Telegram From the Chargé in Vietnam (Kidder) to the Department of State*, April 28, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 303–305.

[10] *Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Department of State*, May 8, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 372–378.

[11] *The Ambassador in France (Dillon) to the Department of State*, December 19, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952–1954, vol. XIII (part 2), pp. 2400–2405.

[12] Page 73.

[13] *Telegram from the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State*, January 15, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 37–40.

jointly.[14] He also sometimes happened to take a different position than the Department of State, and was oblivious to the differences in the American and French priorities in Indochina.[15] During the Sect Crisis, when the fact of French support to the Sects against the position of Washington was evident, Collins was able to write in a message that "our intelligence [...] is not good enough for me to challenge this evaluation of Ely [...] who have been completely friendly to us and our approach." He also endorsed the opinion of Ely that the occupation of downtown Saigon by gangsters of Binh Xuyen, was a kind of "legitimate revolution."[16]

The book also fits into American mainstream historiography demonizing Ngo Dinh Diem and his role in Vietnam and the US involvement in the country. He didn't have continuous and unconditional support of the United States, as the author seems to suggest in the conclusion of her book. Considerations of removing him from the office started to pop up among US policy makers from the moment of his appointment. The issue died down for a while after the victory over the sects and getting rid of the French, but after the appearance of the first serious problems in 1960, Ambassador Durbrow suggested the resumption of the search for an alternative to Diem.[17] Moreover, the failed paratroopers coup from November of that year demonstrated that many embassy staff members even openly hoped for the downfall of the Vietnamese leader.[18] The fallacy and hypocrisy of constant emphasizing the brutality and lack of democracy in Diem's politics has been already exhaustively described by Mark Moyar.[19] It is worth mentioning, however, that Diem was the only opponent whom the Communists regarded as a danger at that time, and today his person begins to be seen in a more positive light in official Vietnamese history, similarly to the perception of Chiang Kai-shek in Mainland China.[20] And personalism, quite commonly derided in US historiography as "obscure"[21] or "arcane,"[22] after a closer look, seems as an ideology that was carefully thought out and adjusted to Vietnamese conditions.

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[14] In the Memorandum sent to Senator Mansfield, his assistant outright stated that Collins "is halfway on their [French] side." *Memorandum from Frank Valeo to Senator Mike Mansfield*, April 25, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 288–289.

[15] Which was very diplomatically pointed out to him by John Foster Dulles. *Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Vietnam*, April 9, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 229–231.

[16] He also argued that Ely supports Diem, but in the same breath admitted that the French actually did not allow the prime minister to bring any military reinforcements to Saigon. The correspondence from Collins is full of contradiction of this type. *Telegram from the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State*, April 10, 1955, *FRUS*, 1955–1957, vol. I, pp. 231–235.

[17] *Telegram from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State*, September 16, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958–1960, vol. I, pp. 575–579.

[18] *Telegram from the Air Attaché in Vietnam (Toland) to the Chief of Staff, United States Air Force (White)*, November 11, 1960, *FRUS*, 1958–1960, vol. I, pp. 638–639; *Editorial Note*, undated, *FRUS*, 1958–1960, vol. I, pp. 660–663.

[19] M. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken, The Vietnam War 1954–1965*, Cambridge 2006, pp. XXXII + 517.

[20] http://www.asianews.it/news-en/After-50-years,-a-public-memorial-Mass-for-South-Vietnamese-President-Ngo-Dinh-Diem-allowed-29471.html (access: April 30, 2015).

[21] D.L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*, New York 2002, p. 146.

[22] S. Karnow, *Vietnam. A History*, New York 1985, p. 243.

Who knows, maybe given time, it would have turned out to be as successful as the state ideology of the nearby Singapore?

The assertion that US involvement in Southeast Asia radicalized the Vietnamese Communists, as I understood from the following sentence: "[…] it helped mold the Communist Party in Hanoi into something very different in 1975 than it was in 1954,"[23] is also puzzling. It is worth reminding that it was the Communists from the 1954 who unleashed a reign of terror associated with the land reform, and that they did not hesitate to slaughter rebellious peasants in the province of Nghe An.

In conclusion, Jessica Chapman's book, despite some flaws, is a valuable enrichment of our knowledge of a very complicated and difficult period of the formation of the Republic of Vietnam in the 50s of the twentieth century. Describing that period from the perspective of the politico-religious organizations, albeit at times attributing too much importance and positive qualities to them, gives additional depth to this subject and allows to view the struggle of Diem and the Sects from the perspective definitely different than just pawns in the hands of France and the United States, as sometimes it is presented. The book is, however, in some respects rather biased, and in some places it is almost painfully trying to fit into a specific trend of American historiography, that condemns any US involvement in Southeast Asia.

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[23] Page 201.