

The Vietnam War

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Gilbert, Marc Jason, ed. *The Vietnam War: Teaching Approaches and Resources*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991.

Olson, James S. *The Vietnam War: Handbook of the Literature and Research*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993.

In his contribution to the first of these works, Larry Cable laments the fact that when it comes to "the search for an interpretive stance" the Vietnam War presents far greater difficulties to the teacher than does World War II. Perhaps one reason is that, both in Europe and in the Pacific, the logic of World War II can be presented in terms of the response of the United States to specific actions on the part of Germany and Japan: actions arising from decisions which can be traced in detail in the captured archives of Berlin and Tokyo, and which were rendered explicit by international war crimes tribunals after 1945. The Vietnam War, on the other hand, has still not been adequately studied from the 'enemy' side; and the question of how far it was initiated by decisions taken in Hanoi remains extremely controversial. It has therefore been easy for the majority of American writers — 'hawks' as well as 'doves' — to assume that the effective decision making was all on the side of the United States. North Vietnam tends to be seen as the authentic representative of Vietnamese 'nationalism,' whose leaders did nothing more than respond to 'aggressive' moves by the United States. The notion that the war was renewed in 1959 by the deliberate choice of Hanoi, and was escalated in 1964 with encouragement from Beijing, is usually dismissed as Cold War rhetoric — or worse. South Vietnam, on the other hand, is treated as merely the creation of the Eisenhower Administration, following the Geneva Partition of 1954: a pawn to be supported or abandoned at Washington's whim. It is hardly surprising that both these bibliographical works take the American perspective for granted; and that neither has much interest in viewing the Vietnam War as a two-sided conflict with important international, not just American, consequences. Apart from Cable's contribution, indeed, the papers edited by Marc Jason Gilbert tell us more about current American teaching methods and problems than about Vietnam; for the most part they can be ignored by readers whose main interest is in the conflict itself.

James S. Olson's *Handbook*, however, deserves more serious critical attention. Its 23 chapters — about a third of them by Olson himself and the remainder by university colleagues teaching in Texas and elsewhere — set out to cover all aspects of the Indochina conflict. They attempt, more successfully in some cases than in others, to strike a balance between describing the existing secondary literature and providing a historical framework of events and themes. If the resulting impression is one of fragmentation, that is to some extent a reflection of the character of the literature itself. Few works have addressed themselves comprehensively to analyzing all aspects of the subject; most are confined to one theme, taking only limited cognizance of other dimensions. In particular there is a

gulf between specialization in the history of Vietnam, as a country in Asia, and in the war as a problematic experience for America. Olson makes some attempt to cover works dealing with the background of Vietnamese history, and of the 'French War' before 1954; but neither treatment is very authoritative. Some of the most interesting and effective contributions are those devoted to relatively 'peripheral' topics: notably one by Karen Sleezer — albeit heavily biased — on the issue of war crimes; and others by Marilyn Clark on the anti-war movement; by Ernest Obadele-Starks and Amilcarr Shabazz on Black Americans and the war; and by Bradford Wright on the Vietnam War and comic books.

Nevertheless — to quote Cable again — "the central reality of the Vietnam conflict was the war itself." Unfortunately it is here that Olson's book is at its weakest. Not only is its perspective almost completely American-centric — so much so that for a non-American to review it may seem like an intrusion on private grief — but it is also largely a civilian, non-governmental perspective. There is a section on the memoirs of leading American government and military participants; but the critics of policy are much more fully represented. Virtually no attention is paid to the official military histories and monographs which have been produced by the historical branches of the Army, the Marine Corps, the Air Force and the Navy. Nor is there much effort to distinguish between the main phases of the conflict and the changing context of judgments about American success or failure. The air war apart, relatively little space is devoted to books which have sought to analyze particular operations and campaigns. There is, for example, no discussion of the controversies surrounding the battles of the Ia Drang or Khe Sanh. It is apparently enough to focus on general critiques which have somewhat vaguely emphasized over-reliance on too much fire-power; the rest is assumed to be self-evident. Some attempt to cover the 'international relations' dimension is made in a contribution by Gary Bell; but the significance and consequence of the war for the rest of South East Asia are only briefly considered. There are also chapters on Laos and Cambodia, but the latter is devoted mainly to a discussion of the post-1975 Pol Pot regime. North Vietnamese policies are only thinly treated — just possibly a section intended to deal with the Communist revolution has been omitted by mistake — while the recently revealed military involvement of Soviet and Chinese forces on the Communist side receives no mention at all.

The claim of the handbook to cover "research" as well as "the literature" is certainly not borne out by its content. No pretence is made to introduce us to the range of archival sources involved, nor to the various microform collections of declassified documents now available. A single chapter on "published primary sources" is devoted mostly to the memoirs of officials, generals and politicians, with barely three pages on "government documents" (covering in detail only the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971). Only the scantest attention is paid to the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, which on Vietnam has now reached the mid-1960s; or to the output of the Joint Publications Research Service and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. More surprisingly, there is only

brief reference to the wealth of Congressional documentation on the war and its consequences — both in debates on the Senate floor and in hearings before the committees of both House and Senate. Nor is significant attention paid to the writings of Senator William Fulbright.

It is difficult to judge how far these weaknesses should be laid at Olson's own door. Certainly there are many works he could have discussed and has preferred to ignore, especially on the military side, and one should probably take issue with his decision to give greater weight to writings since 1975 than to the many excellent works published during the preceding decade. On the other hand, it might be argued that some of the imbalance of emphasis reflects an imbalance in the existing research and literature itself, especially since 1975. The serious study of the Vietnam War has perhaps been among the casualties of the 'new' history, which came to the fore in American universities in the late 1960s and has flourished ever since. That new fashion — focusing mainly on quantitative economic problems, on intellectual structures and meanings, and on grassroots experiences — has tended to despise political, diplomatic or military narratives which merely analyze the course of events. Such an approach has left academic historians singularly ill-equipped to come to terms with the Vietnam War as a war and as international history: involving not only structures of meaning and experience but also the actual exercise of power and its very real consequences. One may hope that in time the fashion will change yet again, as the world of the 1990s comes to terms with a pace of international change that allows the past to be taken for granted less and less. Perhaps then the historiography of the Vietnam War will cease to be an academic Cinderella.

In the meantime, despite all these possible criticisms, it must be said that Olson's selection does nonetheless include a great many interesting and informative works, on a wide variety of themes. Few will come away from these chapters without learning something new.

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