

Vietnam suffered the fate of having such awesome firepower unleashed on it by leaders of a superpower who got things wrong from the start.

NICK FREEMAN
University of Bradford

***Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam.* By Greg Lockhart.** Sydney: Allen and Unwin, in association with the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1989. 314 pp.

Perhaps no army of any underdeveloped country enjoys the same prestigious status as that of Vietnam's military. This unique position has been assured by its patriotic struggle against the French and by the now legendary battle at Dien Bien Phu. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) has had its prestige enhanced by its victory over the most powerful army in the West, and by its success in its war with the Chinese-supported Pol Pot regime on its south-western flank and the "bloody nose" it inflicted upon the invading Chinese armies during the Sino-Vietnamese border war in early 1979.

Yet surprisingly, until the appearance of Douglas Pike's PAVN in 1986, there has been no book-length study on this subject. There has, nevertheless, been a deluge of books on the Vietnam war. With a few notable exceptions, most of these are examinations of the anguish and frustrations of the American inability to defeat a deadly, omnipresent and invisible foe. While Pike does to a certain extent attempt to focus on the Vietnamese side, his book is essentially within this tradition.

Greg Lockhart's greatest contribution in writing this book is to give us a plausible conceptual foundation for what really is the main-force of the Vietnamese revolution. He shows how the PAVN developed in 1940, not merely as a tool of the communists, but as the military arm of a popular nationalist revolt. Its organization showed the extent to which it became embedded in rural society. This was reflected in its ability to build its main-force units from village self-defence forces. The Viet Minh's victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu was not only a triumph of innovative military strategy but also one of logistical effort and popular mobilization.

Lockhart emphasizes through his use of Vietnamese language sources that Vietnamese nationalism was essentially a product of the early twentieth century and that the emergence of the PAVN was a distinct manifestation

of a sense of national consciousness that emerged in Vietnam under French rule.

As a consequence of the French conquest, there seemed to be a fundamental rethinking by the intelligentsia of colonial Vietnam on what constitutes political legitimacy. Political legitimacy was no longer defined as the institution of the monarchy but as “the people”. Lockhart then emphasizes how this readjustment in political thinking led some to remould the idea of village-based military organization inherited from traditional Vietnam in ways that prefigured the operational methods of the PAVN.

Lockhart stresses that the August Revolution of 1945 was the decisive event of modern Vietnamese history. He argues that this was not, as has sometimes been alleged, simply an opportunistic *coup d'état* in Hanoi. This uprising in the capital was the culmination of months of preparation by Viet Minh “armed propaganda” teams who rallied support in the provinces for the revolutionary cause through the use of a combination of inspiration and violence. In this critical period, the Viet Minh laid the foundations of a new state power in Vietnam. The failure of the French and later the United States to come to terms with this phenomenon is seen by Lockhart as the root of the “great double-tragedy” that was to follow.

Lockhart’s account of the origins of the PAVN could have been more complete had he focused on the perceptions of the peasants on contemporary events in Vietnam rather than depend solely on interpretations of the crises of the monarchy and colonialism from the intelligentsia and the August Revolution through the impressions of Party cadres and military leaders. If such sources are available, a study on the social history of the Vietnamese revolution from this perspective would be fascinating since the perceptions of peasants are quite different from those of the intelligentsia and political leaders.

Nevertheless, with its interesting blend of military, political and cultural history, Lockhart’s book is a splendid achievement. Uniquely, he views the rise of the PAVN through Vietnamese eyes. In a situation where the Vietnamese people had no alternative but to fight for their independence, the army played a commanding role in constituting the power of the nation state. Due to its origins, the PAVN epitomized the “nation in arms”. Its central role in Vietnamese society continues till today. By being integrated into the Party and the state’s administrative and decision-making process, it therefore has a legitimate political role to play. Indeed, as the best organized institution in the state, it has been used by the state to mobilize the population and secure popular commitment to the regime.

In its capacity as the “people’s” army, it also contributes manpower and expertise to major projects such as state farms, flood control, harvest and industrial management. Nevertheless, three significant events have

had a profound effect on reducing the prominence of the PAVN. First, with its economy in near collapse, the Vietnamese Government has been forced to cut spending in many areas, particularly military spending, owing to galloping inflation, shortages and a fall in state revenue. Secondly, the tapering of Soviet military aid has made it necessary to trim down the size of the army. Finally, with the withdrawal of Vietnamese main-force elements from Cambodia in 1989 and the improvement of Vietnam's relations with China and ASEAN, the threats to Vietnamese security is no longer evident.

Regardless of its reduced strength, the PAVN will still continue to remain a formidable military force in the context of Southeast Asia. A successor volume on Vietnamese military history after 1954 will have to re-evaluate the role of the PAVN in a Vietnam dominated more and more by economic rather than military considerations.

LEONARD C. SEBASTIAN
Department of Politics
Australian National University

Singapore: City-State in South-East Asia. By Philippe Regnier. Translated by Christopher Hurst. London: Hurst, 1991. 301 pp.

Almost inevitably, any book dealing with Singapore and ASEAN is out of date by the time it is on the market. Regnier's examination of Singapore's economic development is no exception. First published in French in 1987, this edition is an "up-dated" English translation. Although some of the conclusions and prognostications may as a result be incorrect, the book does provide an overview of Singapore's regional economic relationships from 1965, when the city-state attained independence, to the creation of ASEAN in 1967, and until the late 1980s.

Singapore's outlook was hardly promising when it was thrust into independence. This fact has coloured the development of the country ever since. Brigadier General George Yeo put it well: "The psyche of Singapore was deeply affected by the trauma of that unwanted independence. A profound sense of insecurity took over. It was not just the insecurity of being small. It was also the insecurity of being largely Chinese in a largely non-Chinese Southeast Asia". It is precisely this sense of insecurity that moves the ruling People's Action Party to constantly exhort Singaporeans