

Grossheim, Martin: *Die Partei und der Krieg. Debatten und Dissens in Nordvietnam*. Berlin: Regiospectra Verlag 2009. ISBN: 978-3-940132-05-5; 284 S.

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History, as Winston Churchill once quipped, is written by the victors. Not so in regard to the war in Vietnam. The trauma still reverberates in American politics and across the country. Libraries have been filled with accounts of the war from a multitude of perspectives. However, we know relatively little about the victors, 'the other side' of this long war. Language constraints and a relative dearth of available Vietnamese sources have prevented historians from writing rich, archive-based narratives of the North Vietnamese experience of the war which go significantly beyond the official accounts published under the auspices of the Vietnamese Communist party. Enter this most recent book by Martin Grossheim, a specialist of Vietnamese contemporary history. The book goes well beyond what we have known so far about the party's history and about decisions within the Vietnamese nomenclature. As such, it is a major contribution and a revelation for all who are interested in contemporary Vietnamese history. At the same time, the study also disappoints. It disappoints because Martin Grossheim has not shared more of his profound knowledge with us readers.

The book kicks off with a discussion of the conflicts within the Communist party about the position to be taken vis-à-vis the division of the country in 1954, the subsequent consolidation of the South Vietnamese regime, and the growing American presence in the South. More fully and better documented than ever before do we learn about the party's decision in 1959 to „sanction the establishment of armed revolutionary forces in South Vietnam“ and the application of violence alongside the political struggle against the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. This position had not been uncontested. Rather, it reflected the victory of a group within the party led by Southerner Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, as of 1956

director of the party's internal organization. During the latter part of the 1950s, Le Duan managed to bypass and neutralize Truong Chinh, until 1956 the party's secretary, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu. Both had called for a more cautious approach towards the South and for prioritizing the development of a socialist economy in the North. But following the disastrous land reform – a euphemism for the involuntary and violent collectivization of the North Vietnamese peasantry – Truong Chinh fell from grace, and Ho Chi Minh helped to promote hardliner Le Duan to the party's politburo in early 1957. While Ho's role and position remains somewhat vague, we learn a great deal about the party's internal struggle, the competition for leadership, and the people involved in the conflict. Of interest is also the perceptive analysis of the relation between North Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Grossheim confirms that Hanoi acted in a very independent way, in fact contradicting the Soviet Union's emphasis on 'peaceful co-existence' promulgated in the years after the death of Stalin in 1952. In an equal vein, Le Duan and the party leadership did not follow Chinese advice, which also called for restraint and non-violent means of promoting unification.

The second chapter entitled 'Intellectuals in North Vietnam during the 1950s' assesses the role of intellectuals and their position towards an emerging party orthodoxy characterized by top-down approaches and the establishment of hegemony on the part of the Le Duan faction. While more liberal intellectuals and party members drew on the example of Nikita Khrushchev's more liberal policies, the Le Duan group leaned towards China. For instance, much like the Chinese leadership, it allowed for more open political debates during 1956, which, when threatening established orthodoxies, were brutally suppressed. By the end of the 1950s, many who had dreamed of a more liberal communist system lost their jobs within the party, at universities or in the media. Some were convicted to exile in the countryside or to long prison sentences. Grossheim is at his best when he discusses the *dramatis personae* (many hours of tedious research must have gone into identifying per-

sons and reconstructing their functions and ideas!) and relates them to the larger debate about the nature and character of a Communist society in North Vietnam.

The narrative further chronicles the party's militant position towards re-unification in the wake of Le Duan's election as chief of the Lao Dong party in 1960 and his continuing efforts to crack down on what he perceived as oppositional to his policy of directing North Vietnam's society and economy towards the single goal of reunifying the country. The debates between Soviet-leaning communists and those who favored the Chinese communists, reconstructed from East German accounts, Vietnamese journals and the existing literature are fascinating in that they provide insight into the ways and means by which the Le Duan group assumed complete control over the party. Once Hanoi decided to send down troops to the South (1964), the film and music industry, the media, and the party were further cleared of anyone who voiced the slightest doubts about North Vietnam's ability to wage war against the United States. Campaigns to identify and isolate non-conformists were even conducted in countries as far away as East Germany, where a handful of Vietnamese students studied (Grossheim puts the number at 22 in 1964). Some even sought asylum, causing diplomatic hiccups between East Berlin and Hanoi.

A final chapter takes the narrative down to 1967, when Le Duan and Le Duc Tho cracked down on party members, who in view of the massive U.S. bombing campaign against North Vietnam advocated peace negotiations or called for de-escalating the conflict. For instance, in 1967 Vo Nguyen Giap suggested a more defensive approach which would entail less heavy losses in lives. Hardliners could not silence Giap directly, but by imprisoning those close to him, the militants could silence even the widely-revered war hero. Developments on the international level also assisted in cementing the militant option. Hanoi perceptively capitalized on the Soviet-Chinese conflict in order to gain support from both sides, while at the same time carefully circumscribing Russian and Chinese influence in North Vietnam.

Martin Grossheim reconstructs this history

from a wealth of sources, among them extensive archival sources from the East German foreign office and intelligence outfits. More importantly, he must have read about every single Vietnamese journal or newspaper published between 1955 and 1967. The book is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of the Vietnam War or in the history of communist parties. What I miss is context. Apart from the international scene, which is, by necessity, touched upon sufficiently, the party's war against non-conformists or deviating views is described as taking place in a black box. We learn next to nothing about socio-economic conditions, the effects of the land reform, nascent industrialization, ways and means by which society was mobilized for the war, or decision-making processes in regard to waging the war. As such, the book is about what is indicated in the sub-title, debates and dissent in North Vietnam – not less, but not more either.

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