
Another savage little war broke out in Southeast Asia early in 1978; another border conflict involving countless human casualties, inhuman atrocities, and ecological devastation. The "region of revolt" depicted not very long ago by Milton Osborne could equally well be described as the region of recurrent violence. This time the belligerents were Vietnam and Cambodia, communist neighbours of less than three years, but traditionally acrimonious foes for more than a millenium. The bewildered Western world relied on bitsy media coverage for a comprehension of this latest episode of carnage, whilst the media itself depended for information on the tasteless, moralistic verbal propaganda machines of Hanoi and Pnom Penh, and on barely-decipherible, one-sided film footage released by the much more formidable Vietnamese government to bolster its cause in world opinion. To search for perspective, understanding, and the deeper truths about the complex conflicts of this complex region, the interested outsider must turn to works of historical record and causal explanation. Scholars such as Dr. Colbert in her clearly-written, carefully-argued monograph are helping to patch together parts of the contextual quilt. But only parts.

Dr. Colbert is a scholar-civil servant who has worked for three decades now as an Asia specialist in the U.S. Department of State. Not surprisingly, the standpoints and activities of the United States figure prominently in her book, especially the manner in which American policy-makers after World War II were torn between a desire to strengthen their Western allies on the one hand, and a desire to foster self-government in the then Western colonies of Southeast Asia on the other, a dichotomous situation which Dr. Colbert portrays well. The period she has chosen for intensive study begins with the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941 and ends with the partition of Vietnam in 1954. The book is divided into thirteen chapters arranged into four parts—"Decolonisation and After", "The Cold War Comes to Southeast Asia", "The Geneva Settlements", and "The Two Directions" (SEATO and Bandung), with a concluding chapter entitled "Indochina: Portents for the Future".

Because of the recency of this period, Dr. Colbert's study must be viewed as an interim account. Her sources as listed in the bibliography consist of various official publications by seven national governments (only two of them Southeast Asian) and the United Nations Organization, together with a wide selection from the now burgeoning stock of books and scholarly articles on the period. It is one of the occupational hazards of the contemporary diplomatic historian that, aside from the controversial "Pentagon Papers", there is no classified archival material legally available for public scrutiny. To some extent, this gap must have been filled by Dr. Colbert's rich experience in the American policy-making process, and by her use of the memoirs published by former politicians and civil servants. Nevertheless, enforced reliance on official publications lends a rather formal, "external" flavour to her presentation of foreign policy issues, with less room being allotted to the earthy internal dynamics of policy-formation.

Much of the detailed information which the author has painstakingly reconstructed in her book is already familiar to students of the period, but it is useful to be reminded of the following events so crucial to the modern history of Vietnam, for example. Dr. Colbert records that as early as 6th March, 1946, France recognized

Vietnam as a free state with its own government, parliament, army, and finances, while a referendum would be held to determine whether Cochin China would remain separate or became part of Vietnam; that in September, 1947, after France had attempted to retake Vietnam by force, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam asked the UN Secretary-General to request the Security Council to end the war and to initiate peace negotiations on the basis of Vietnamese independence and territorial integrity, respect for French cultural and economic interests, and the withdrawal of French forces; that Vo Nguyen Giap saw Indochina in 1950 as the "forward stronghold of the democratic world in Southeast Asia" (an intriguing twist of terminology); that Ho Chi Minh described the Geneva Settlement of 1954 as "a great victory for our diplomacy" (obviously a claim for gullible public consumption); that the leaders of southern Vietnam specifically disassociated themselves from any agreement at Geneva likely to damage their own positions; that in a referendum held during October, 1955, in the South, 98% of those voting favoured the dethronement of Bao Dai and the establishment of a republic with Diem as its President; and that 65% of the Northern Roman Catholic community were among the approximately 900,000 refugees who fled to the South immediately after the Geneva Settlements. These somewhat conflicting events over a short period of time point to an appropriately ambivalent assessment concerning the "inevitability" of a united communist Vietnam, at least in 1956.

In the case of Malaya, Dr. Colbert accurately reaffirms that the communist insurgency there was exclusively Chinese in membership, and was rendered impotent by the arousal of "long-dormant" Malay nationalism. On the broader issues of decolonisation, the author includes some brief but superbly illustrative quotations from such luminaries as Jawaharlal Nehru (p. 74), R. Palme Dutt (p. 128), and Liu Shao-Ch' i (p. 128).

Given a work of such scope, it is possible to raise minor queries about some of the broader generalizations advanced, especially in the introductory section. The author points out that the colonial borders of Southeast Asia were fixed largely as the outcome of Western imperial competition, but it is surely ironical that Southeast Asian nationalist elites staked so much after independence on preserving those same externally-imposed boundaries. Again, the assertion that overseas Chinese communities "grew and prospered in the hospitable climate afforded by western control" (p. 15) is valid as far as it goes, but the role of traditional indigenous elites who collaborated with Nanyang Chinese for mutually beneficial economic ends should not be ignored. Too often, and inaccurately, the cultural pluralism of contemporary Southeast Asia has been ascribed to Western colonial governments alone. Finally, the description of pre-World War II Australia and New Zealand as "in the area but not of it", and as looking to Britain to protect and advance "their very limited interests in the outside world" (p. 14), does not take account of the recent studies by W. J. Hudson and N. K. Meaney who have demonstrated a nascent Australian diplomatic concern with Asian and Pacific events dating from the late nineteenth century onwards. For an Antipodean, virtually any serious attention to Australian interests in an international study is heart-warming! However, Dr. Colbert is inclined to present New Zealand as an adjunct to Australia, a perception emphatically not shared in Wellington, or Canberra, for many decades now.

A more fundamental reservation concerns the main focus and balance of the book. Perhaps this reviewer is strongly influenced by the Asia-centric times in which we live, but it was rather disconcerting in a book about Southeast Asia to discover that Chapter One began in Washington at a meeting between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston