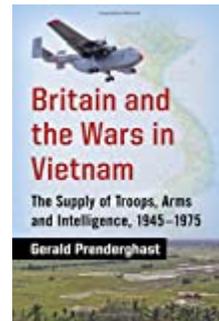




**Gerald Prenderghast.** *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam: The Supply of Troops, Arms and Intelligence, 1945-1975.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 328 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-9924-3.



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After the Second World War, the British Empire faced near bankruptcy, anticolonial activism, and wartime allies who hoped to rebuild or expand their nations and empires. Meanwhile, Britain was in the best position to fill the political vacuum left by the defeat of the Japanese Empire in a region that Britain would define and regulate as “Southeast Asia.” Facing its own need to scale back militarily, the British Empire still wanted to take a leading role in a newly emerging global order but lacked the strength or resources to make it possible. As a result, British participation in globalization after the Second World War in some cases became less about direct military intervention than strategic diplomatic positioning—carefully using and maneuvering allies in directions that were favorable to imperial and national goals. In so doing, Britain became a key player and influential member in a number of imperial, national, and global conflicts in Vietnam.

Gerald Prenderghast’s recent study *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam* attempts to educate general readers with an interest in “the military, logistics and intelligence aspects of Britain’s involvement” (p. 1). He sets out, as explained in the preface, to understand “the part Britain played in the wars in Vietnam between 1945 and 1975.” He characterizes this role “first as peacekeepers after

World War II, later as intermediaries in the French peace negotiations of 1954 and finally as allies to the Americans” (p. 1). Eighteen short chapters focus on different elements of the conflict, including different “wars,” to include “Britain’s War (1945-1946)” (chapter 1), “France’s War (1945-1954)” (chapter 3) and several categories of “America’s War” (chapters 4, 6, and 7). The chapters attempting to detail all French and American interests and activities leave little time to delve into the complex and ever-changing strategies of Europeans and Americans, while Britain fades into the background.

Later chapters bring Britain front and center by examining the British Army (chapter 10), Royal Navy (chapter 11), and Royal Air Force (chapter 12). Further chapters include brief summaries of the political objectives of several British prime ministers (chapter 8), the influence of British civilians (chapter 13), the sale of British weapons (pp. 14-15), and the interventions of British intelligence (chapter 16). One appealing feature of the text is that Prenderghast includes numerous pictures and tables that will be of interest to general enthusiasts of military history. However, one wishes that the images had been discussed at greater length or incorporated into the larger narrative. They tend to be illustrative of what is mentioned briefly in the text rather than analyzed as

sources.

When Prenderghast touches upon the imperial dimensions of Britain's role in the war the narrative offers some interesting food for thought. For example, he mentions that British officials trained American and South Vietnamese soldiers at the Malayan Jungle Warfare School (pp. 118, 225) while British firms sold weapons to and outfitted Australian and New Zealand troops (pp. 223-224). The British government even provided intelligence training to South Vietnamese agents in Singapore (p. 226) and used Hong Kong as a financial base (p. 223). Unfortunately, these elements are mentioned all too briefly. For example, Prenderghast makes little effort to situate the Jungle Warfare School in the contested environment of the anticommunist Malayan Emergency. Nor does he consider how Britain viewed its former dominions of Australia and New Zealand—former settler colonies and noteworthy commonwealth allies—in the larger scope of the transition from colonial to post-colonial world order.

A more rounded examination of Britain's longer-term imperial and military goals and strategies would have added much to the discussion. The fact that Louis Mountbatten—who would go on to serve as the last viceroy of India and a chief overseer of the disastrous partition—was also on the scene in Vietnam as Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia immediately after the Second World War certainly opens the door for a more cogently argued imperial focus. An unwillingness to engage more fully with an imperial lens is most evident in an early discussion of the troops of the Indian Army. Prenderghast frequently, and erroneously, refers to these troops as "British" whenever they successfully carried out operations. By contrast, he specifically refers to them as "Indian" and "Gurkha" when they "dealt ruthlessly with their opposition" (p. 33). A more nuanced account might examine the fraught loyalties and difficult postwar choices of many South Asian troops. During the Second World War, the anticolonial Indian National Army attracted prisoners of war and deserters from the British Indian Army and aligned with Japanese forces in Southeast Asia. How, then, might Punjabi and Gurkha troops have viewed their participation in further conflicts, after years of active duty service and calls for independence in India? Prenderghast does not consider such questions, nor does he explore how and why the Gurkha troops who had served in the Indian Army continued to serve the British Empire in Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong during the war in Vietnam and long after Indian independence.

A more diverse source base may have helped flesh out many of the parts of the book that seem underdeveloped. The vast majority of footnotes point to secondary source literature, which is cited at length. Yet some noteworthy works are omitted altogether. This includes D. D. Smith's *Britain and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (2007), which argues that Britain played an influential role in postwar order through the creation of the South East Asia Command, which set the course for ending communism through direct and indirect means. Meanwhile, Prenderghast cites other relevant works, such as Peter Busch's *All the Way With JFK?* (2003), in select chapters (chapter 5), but he does not give serious thought to Busch's argument. Busch examined Britain's long-term and lasting interventions in Vietnam by influencing American policy through SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization), co-chairing the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, which organized the withdrawal of French troops and established a ceasefire line between North and South at the 17th Parallel, and providing counterinsurgency through BRIAM (British advisory mission).

In addition to some limitations in secondary source engagement, the bulk of Prenderghast's primary sources come from the UK National Archives, which leads to some puzzling oversimplification. For example, Prenderghast claims that "the response of ordinary South Vietnamese to the British troops occupying their country seems to have been a positive one," yet his footnote points to a single British official report to validate this assertion (p. 33). While he includes quotations that characterize American actors as "infantile" (p. 8) or narrowly-mindedly selfish, (p. 110), he gives British troops and officials the benefit of the doubt on almost all counts. He describes it as "accidental" when troops under British authority burn down civilian housing (p. 26). He even gives a free pass to top British officials, claiming that they were "in a position familiar to most British officers and soldiers in general"—damned if he did and damned if he didn't—(p. 26). This optimistic refrain might be refreshing in its lack of condemnation if it had been applied to all of the actors in the story—the many diverse Vietnamese, French, American, and Japanese soldiers and civilians who similarly had to make difficult choices in a turbulent postwar world. Yet granting a free pass to "British officers and soldiers in general" is troubling, given the long and contested history of British imperial armies.

A more global and imperial lens would have been a major asset to *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*. This would have likely prevented Prenderghast from opening his work with the claim that "Britain's involvement in

America's Vietnam War was one of history's minor myths (p. 6). He drives this point home in his eighth and final chapter, which asks, "What Was British Involvement in Vietnam Between 1946 and 1973?" His response: "the real answer is: Not very much" (p. 225). This conclusion is likely to be unconvincing to scholars trained in British imperial history or in any of the imperial and colonial histories of the region. It is also misleading for general readers. Prenderghast's work does point to many interesting aspects of the wars in Vietnam that would benefit from further research. Thorough engagement with archives in India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singa-

pore, and Hong Kong would provide a more compelling portrait of the global and imperial dimensions of the conflict. In addition to the fact that imperial officials—including Mountbatten—served in multiple imperial locales, the strategies and prejudices of imperial rule often lent themselves to misunderstanding, maladministration, and a tendency to apply an inaccurate level of "sameness" to all colonial subjects. Meanwhile, the agendas of one colonial sphere were never isolated from the goals and interests of surrounding areas and empires. Without fully examining this imperial context, it can hardly be asserted that Britain's role in Vietnam was largely a "myth."

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