

# H-Net Reviews

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**M. Kathryn Edwards.** *Contesting Indochina: French Remembrance between Decolonization and Cold War.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-28860-7.

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The term “forgotten war” has become a widespread and tiresome cliché. Americanists use it to refer to the Korean War, the War of 1812, and even the southern theater of the American Revolutionary War. Cold War and post-Cold War journalists have called American military engagements from Central America to Central Asia “the forgotten war.” One of the most prolific historians of empire, Christopher Bayly named the various cases of violence in Southeast Asia after 1945 “forgotten wars.” From South Africa’s quarter-century of military engagements against its neighbors in the so-called Border War to Indonesia’s generation-long genocidal occupation of East Timor, scores of conflicts have been deemed “the forgotten war.” In the 1960s and 1980s, the Algerian struggle for independence from France was another forgotten war whose memory was only recovered in the 1990s. Perhaps the best candidate for the term is the French Indochina War (1945/46-14); a war so forgotten that scholars, journalists, and politicians can’t agree on its starting date. Arguing that the French Indochina War’s ambiguous nature contributed to a collective national amnesia, M. Kathryn Edwards in *Contesting Indochina: French Remembrance between Decolonization and Cold War* does an excellent job at rewriting this forgotten war back into historical memory. Importantly, she does it without the baggage of cliché.

In some two hundred pages divided into seven chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, *Contesting Indochina* skillfully demonstrates the confusion surrounding the war. Edwards shows that during and after the war both participants and observers were at odds over how to define the war. She characterizes the debate as a

collection of either/or questions. Was it a war of colonial re-occupation? A war of national liberation? A war for social justice? Or was it a war against communist expansion? A war for democratic freedoms? A war for France’s universal values and culture? While sophisticated scholars like Edwards can explain how the war could be all of these seemingly contradictory things at once, the historical actors she studies absolutely refused to concede the possibility of multiple meanings. If political nuance, let alone ambiguity, has been scarce in the debates over France’s war in Indochina, Edwards tells us how passion saturates every aspect of the various affairs, polemics, and scandals.

The introduction argues that this war was not so much forgotten as overshadowed. Coming just after the “strange defeat” of 1940, Vichy’s collaboration, the Resistance’s murky track record, and Charles De Gaulle’s military triumph and then political retreat, and just before the profound traumas of the Algerian war where conscripted French citizens engaged in brutal counterinsurgency and counterterror campaigns that included the widespread use of torture and other war crimes and rogue officers threatened a series of putsches that toppled the Fourth Republic in 1958, the Southeast Asian drama appears pale in comparison. That the United States funded the later years of the French war and quickly moved into South Vietnam after French troops departed in disgrace draws the spotlight away from France and toward Americans. And, of course, there is always the shame of Dien Bien Phu. We should also note that the French military was composed of French troops and offices but it was the Foreign Legion and colonial troops

from North and West Africa who did much of the fighting. After the war, it was easy to forget about foreigners, Arabs, and blacks. But Edwards argues that there is another crucial factor that promoted silence and forgetting, namely the Cold War. She holds that the polarizing impact of Cold War rhetoric structured and distorted how the end of France's empire in Asia would be remembered. To accomplish her task, Edwards presents six of seven chapters as discrete case studies. Each chapter could stand on its own. Together they present a sophisticated, multidimensional inquiry into the history of memory. Before these half-dozen studies, chapter 1, "French Indochina from Conquest to Commemoration," presents quick history of the conquest of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; the development of anticolonial movements; the war from 1945 to 1954; a discussion of French public opinion; and sketches of the stages of remembrance. By breaking this last section into distinct periods, 1954-63, 1964-75, 1974-94, 1995-2005, and 2006-14, Edwards clearly demonstrates the historical unfolding of the phases of memory. Importantly, in addition to French domestic factors, events in Vietnam and the United States, as well as patterns in the larger Cold War, impacted this evolution of memory. This chapter does not give a definitive history of colonization, the war, or the postwar debates; rather it gives the reader a baseline of knowledge to move through the next six chapters.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at two sides of the same coin: how veterans' organizations, activists, and academics viewed the war. In "Remembrance and Rehabilitation: The ANAI and the Anticommunist Narrative," Edwards presents the National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina (ANAI). The largest of such organizations, its members included French veterans and settlers as well as ethnic Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer. With as many as 10,000 members in 1990, the ANAI was staunchly anticommunist. The ANAI organized events to mark specific incidents from Indochina's history, such as the Vietminh attack on French forces in Hanoi on December 19, 1946. That the ANAI considered this event to be the start of the war, rather than the shelling of Haiphong by the French navy on November 23 that resulted in over 6,000 civilians deaths, speaks volumes about its ideology. The group also published a bulletin, promoted certain works of history, and condemned those deemed apologists for communism. This right-wing coalition described the war as a battle against Marxist totalitarianism and for the freedoms and liberties of colonial France's civilizing mission. On the other side of the political spectrum were groups such as the Republican Veterans Organiza-

tion, the Association of Veterans and Victims of the Indochina War, and the Franco-Vietnamese Friendship Association, various scholars and intellectuals, and the municipality of Montreuil in the famous Paris "red belt," a French Communist Party electoral stronghold. This left-wing alliance condemned the alleged whitewashing of colonial history and argued that the war was a struggle for national sovereignty and social justice. While prominent scholars, such as Charles Fourniau and Alain Ruscio, were active members of the Communist Party, noncommunist intellectuals were also in this camp. This chapter details a variety of events and figures such as the founding of a pro-Vietnamese research center at Paris VII, veterans groups who fought against war and imperialism, and museum exhibits in Montreuil that offered a hagiography of Ho Chi Minh. Edwards clearly and concisely shows the intense polarization of these two interpretations of the war. She also points out the irony that each side thought it was fighting for freedom from a tyrannical system, one communist and the other imperialist.

The next four chapters each take a different theme. Chapter 3, "Morts pour la France? Official Commemoration of the Indochina War," explores the ways in which the French state memorialized the war, culminating in the development of the FrÃ©jus Monument to the Dead of Indochina in southern France. The second half of this chapter discusses the various themes associated with official commemoration, such as heroism, colonial partnership, and anticommunism. Deeply associated with a fraternal militarism and the victimization at the hands of the Marxist state, such ceremonies and monuments were directly linked to right-wing interpretations of the conflict. Chapter 5, "The Forgotten of Vietnam-sur-Lot: Repatriate Camps as Sites of Colonial Memory," takes the reader to a rarely discussed refugee camp in southwestern France where Vietnamese and Franco-Vietnamese French citizens were housed. These individuals were the unfortunate human debris of decolonization. Edwards challenges the commonly accepted idea that the program was a successful case of assimilation. Her archival research offers a revisionist narrative characterized by tension and conflict, including occasional physical violence. Edwards does an excellent job of illustrating how the experiences of these individuals and families linked the histories of decolonization and immigration. Chapter 6, "La Sale Affaire: Collaboration, Resistance, and the Georges Boudarel Affair," tells the story of the sudden eruption of a memory war in the 1990s. When addressing the national Senate, Boudarel, a well-known expert on Vietnamese history and politics, was interrupted by a

member of the audience who claimed to have been a prisoner in Vietminh POW camp. The veteran accused the Paris VII academic of having deserted the French army, joining the enemy, and torturing his fellow French. The national press took on the affair. Newspapers engaged in polemics based upon their editorial board's political persuasion. Veterans groups such as ANAI joined the fray, as did other academics and national political figures. Edwards shows, once again, that the logic of either anticommunism or anticolonialism saturated the entire episode. She argues that the Boudarel Affair was one of the rare national discussions of the forgotten war. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, months of acrimony resolved nothing. The last full chapter, "Missing in Action: The Indochina War and French Film," discusses the inability of French popular culture to come to terms with the war and its legacies. The bottom line in this chapter is that there are not very many films about France's experience in Vietnam. Like the case of the dog that did not bark, the paucity of French films that engage the war or colonialism in Vietnam is Edwards's point. In the few films that were made, once again, the ambiguous tensions between decolonization and Cold War shaped their production and reception.

The very brief conclusion links France's fractured collective memory of the war with a discussion of the war's memory in Vietnam. This is the weakest section of an otherwise strong book. While it mentions some important aspects of France's memory wars, the observations on Vietnam are superficial and contain one striking error (the location of the famous War Remnants Museum is incorrectly listed as Hanoi, not Ho Chi Minh City). But this should be taken with a grain of salt as this is a work of French and not Vietnamese history.

There is little to criticize in this well-researched and carefully worded monograph. Perhaps the discussion of the 1992 film *Indochine* in chapter 7 could have recognized that despite the beautiful scenery and carefully reconstructed depiction of the colonial good life, the second half of the film is a sustained and systematic critique of colonial exploitation. Edwards is very careful to repeatedly state that this is not a comprehensive history of all things related to the war, but the exclusion of the work of war correspondent-cum-novelist Jean Lartéguy is disappointing. The veteran of De Gaulle's Free French Forces fictionalized the war in his first two books and then published widely read novels set in Algeria, the Congo, and elsewhere. Lartéguy's writing, with its critical and nuanced portrait of the end of the French empire and the hot battles of the Cold War, is one of the few sources that could appeal to both sides of the political divide.

Published as the eight editions in the University of California Press's prestigious series *From Indochina to Vietnam: Revolution and War in a Global Perspective*, *Contesting Indochina* is not a history of the forgotten French Indochina War. Rather, it is an insightful and important addition to the growing field of history and memory. Edwards makes a solid case for why this war was overshadowed by World War II, the Algerian War, and the American War in Vietnam. Her balanced analysis and careful research clearly lay out how the war generated two competing discourses, one anticommunist and one anticolonial. To the frustration of all parties, there seems to have been no possibility of victory or reconciliation. Thus this memory war ended in stalemate and stalemates are often forgotten.

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