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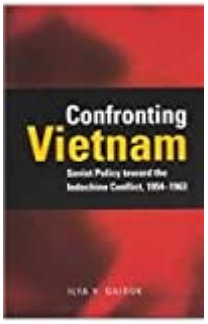

Ilya V. Gaiduk. *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963.* Cold War International History Project Series. Washington, D.C.: Stanford University Press, 2003. xxi + 286 pp. $55 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4712-7.

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From Cautious Friend to Reluctant Ally: The Soviet Union and the VietnamWar

In his first book on this subject, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (1996), Ilya Gaiduk harvested a great deal of fascinating data from previously closed communist archives and produced a volume on Soviet involvement in Vietnam and communist coalitional dynamics that has few if any peers in the literature. His second book, a kind of prequel to the first (which picked up the story of Vietnam near the moment of U.S. intervention) does not disappoint, and is a worthy and fascinating companion to the first. Although *Confronting Vietnam* is essentially a diplomatic history, it nonetheless tells a story that carries important implications for understanding the nexus of ideology and realpolitik in war.

Readers of *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* will recognize the Soviet Union of *Confronting Vietnam*: an ascending superpower torn between the need to improve relations with the West in Europe and the unfortunate burdens that fall to the self-declared center of a revolutionary ideological movement. When the North Vietnamese declared themselves to be engaged in a revolutionary struggle, both the USSR and China were faced with an ideologically driven requirement to aid them.

Neither at first showed much enthusiasm for the task; the Soviets were far more concerned with events in Europe (as they should have been), while the Chinese were still recovering both from their own unfinished revolution at home and the effects of the Korean War. Despite loud public pronouncements of support for the Vietnamese, what the Soviets really wanted was to prevent Vietnam from becoming a major issue between the great powers. This was an agenda shared by the other major powers in 1954, as Gaiduk writes:

"Although [the Geneva] conference dealt with the Indochina problem, Indochina itself was not the preoccupation of the conference; the representatives of the five great powers were more concerned with the general situation in international relations, European and national security, and the normalization of bilateral relations. They were ready to sacrifice the interests of the countries of Indochina if that would help them achieve their desired aims" (p. 50).

Indeed, although in later years China would grow more confident and embrace an almost lunatic militancy that in turn encouraged a greater radicalism especially

among Communist cadres in the South, the Soviet hope in this early stage of the Vietnam conflict was actually that China after 1954 would manage the Vietnamese problem and keep the whole mess out of Moscow's hair. The Soviets initially held their North Vietnamese comrades at arm's length, "lest the Soviet-DRV alliance undermine the process of detente ... with the West," and continually pressured Hanoi to moderate its tone and demands (p. 61).

While this Soviet cautiousness is by now no surprise, Gaiduk's account shows just how far the Soviets in this period were willing to go to keep Vietnam off the table as an issue with the West. When Moscow floated the proposal in 1957, for example, to admit both Vietnams and both Koreas to the United Nations simultaneously, it did so apparently without consulting Hanoi and thus caught its own ally flat-footed–which apparently was the intention. (Hanoi consequently complained to the Security Council that such a proposal was contrary to the spirit of the Geneva Accords.) Gaiduk wonders whether the Soviets were really so dense as to be oblivious to the unintended consequences of such a move, particularly the de facto recognition of the Saigon regime. But in the end, this was less important to Moscow than the larger game in Asia, which was to counter the growing U.S. alliance system in the region by ensuring "the neutrality of as many countries as possible in the international struggle between capitalism and communism," especially given that neutrality, rather than a communist orientation, was the best that could be hoped for in most of those nations at the time (p. 87).

In short order Soviet policy in Europe and the ideological struggle in Asia came into conflict. In many accounts over the years, Soviet strategy in the West has often been misunderstood and mischaracterized as almost completely pragmatic and coldly realist. But this is to miss an important set of fundamental assumptions in Soviet thinking at the time, chief among them that more relaxed relations with the West would allow the USSR to portray itself as a peaceable, more viable, more humane alternative, and in effect encourage the West to drop its guard both militarily and ideologically while the Soviet Union gained the time it needed to consolidate, suborn other vulnerable nations, and expand.

But this kind of patient strategy was a non-starter for revolutionaries engaged in an armed struggle in a partitioned country, and Hanoi soon found itself trying to thread the needle of friendship with, and material reliance upon, both the Chinese and the Soviets, with whom they did not agree on important ideological issues. Attempts to imitate the Soviets, for example, and "admit their errors openly and liberalize ideological restrictions" nearly ended in disaster in 1956, and Gaiduk notes that "Vietnamese leaders had every reason to blame these difficulties on their Soviet and Chinese comrades":

"From this time on, perhaps, they chose not to follow the lead of their powerful allies in domestic policy, always referring to the specific situation of their country. It was, however, more difficult to differ from their allies in the sphere of foreign affairs. Hanoi clearly could not openly discount the principle of peaceful coexistence, but the North Vietnamese supported it only if it did not contradict their plans with respect to the South" (p. 93).

Whether Moscow could have kept a tighter lid on the situation in Indochina became a moot point after 1956, when the Sino-Soviet split broke into the open. Hanoi's ambitions (and revolutionary commitment) had presented Moscow with an irritating, but manageable, problem; China's emergence as a radical communist superpower-in-waiting was a different matter entirely.

And yet despite the ideological affinity that Hanoi would naturally feel for a communist ally more radical and daring than Moscow–and one willing to blithely write off nuclear war as carrying a "high price" but nothing for communists to fear–the Sino-Soviet split actually complicated matters immensely for the North. Gaiduk points out that Hanoi was in a greater bind than any other communist state, unable for a host of practical reasons either to align itself with Moscow as the Eastern Europeans did, or to jump ship and join Beijing, as the hapless Albanians did for a time (p. 109). Northern communists would often say that they were using "China's strategy and Moscow's weapons," but insofar as that was true, it meant that Hanoi was left trying to balance relations with two "allies" it could not fully trust and who in any case were enemies to each other.

The Soviets henceforth used what leverage they had to try to prevent the conflict in Vietnam from reaching proportions that would trigger greater Western involvement (which brought predictable Chinese accusations of cowardice and a sell-out), and thus bring the United States and Soviets into more direct confrontation. It is important to recall that at this time Soviet military doctrine, serving Khrushchev's efforts to cut the size of Soviet conventional forces, was predicated on the idea that there were no such things as "local wars" and that any conflict between East and West would inevitably escalate to nuclear war. The Soviets would repeatedly, and

presciently, warn Hanoi (as they did in 1960, when the North began to escalate the violence) that the United States and SEATO would be unlikely to accept the "loss to the socialist camp of such a first-class strategic position as South Vietnam" (p. 114).

By the early 1960s, the Soviets seemed to have "decided in favor of disengagement from Indochina," a policy that Gaiduk claims "preordained the failure of Soviet policy aimed at settlement of the conflict" (p. 209). The Soviets did not do all that they could have to prevent the outbreak of open war, he asserts, precisely because the issue in this period never rose high enough on the Soviet agenda to gain enough attention or commitment in Moscow for the Soviets to resolve it. Not that the Americans were any better: *Confronting Vietnam* depicts Washington as tone-deaf to the struggles within the communist coalition and unable to exploit several possibilities that could have resulted in compromise. Whether the Americans should have been interested in compromise is an arguable and normative question, but it is clear from Gaiduk's account that the United States never fully understood how badly the Soviets wanted to keep the Vietnamese situation from erupting into something larger.

But erupt it did, with the North and their Southern comrades escalating with the offensives of 1964. These succeeded so well that they brought on the very U.S. intervention the communist allies were all hoping to avoid, and Soviet warnings suddenly seemed prescient, even prudent. While these warnings showed an acute understanding of the greater geopolitical significance of the Indochinese situation, in the end it was ideological necessity that forced Moscow to support the North Vietnamese. The Soviets could not afford the luxury of purely realpolitik considerations in Vietnam any more than the Americans could, and the struggle became a microcosm of the Cold War. Chained to Hanoi by their own ideological commitments and their struggle with the Chinese heretics, the Soviets became reluctant allies in a war they did not want and had tried for a decade to prevent.

Confronting Vietnam is a readable, accessible work that is appropriate both for specialists and for students at all levels. We can only hope that Gaiduk is already at work on completing the trilogy and preparing the last volume on Soviet policy in the region from the late 1960s to 1975. In the meantime, *Confronting Vietnam* should be required reading not only for historians of the period or the region, but for any student of war, international relations, and ideology. Taken together with *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, these volumes are a masterful portrait of a superpower wrestling with its own identity while trying to lead an unlikely coalition of allies in Asia whose greatest sin, perhaps, is that they worshipped from the same Gospel as their elders in Moscow, but took it to heart with even more deadly seriousness.