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Pierre Asselin. “We Don’t Want a Munich”: Hanoi’s Diplomatic Strategy, 1965–1968.”

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The title of this article, and much of its body text, embeds discourses that resonate across the boundaries of ideologies, borders, time periods, and historical settings. It juxtaposes the appeasement of an aggressive Adolf Hitler by the peace-seeking Western Allies from 1937 to 1939 with the steadfast refusal of the North Vietnamese to appease the United States that had intervened in South Vietnam with military force. It encapsulates the chief concern of North Vietnamese diplomacy not to repeat the error of appeasement that was committed by the Western Allies before the Second World War. The difference in the late 1960s was that Hanoi denounced the United States as the aggressor. Indeed, some of the cartoons that North Vietnamese artists produced during the Vietnam War compared U.S. policies with those of Hitler. One cartoon that appeared in the Vietnamese official newspaper *Nhan Dan* by the artist Luong Khoi showed U.S. President Richard Nixon being garlanded and praised by Hitler.¹ Another cartoon by the same artist depicted Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger disguising themselves as a bird of peace, while underneath the disguise hangs a Nazi swastika.²

The title of Pierre Asselin’s article is drawn from the following well-chosen 1965 statement of North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong: “We don’t want a Munich which will spare us from war now but bring dishonour upon us” (548). North Vietnamese leaders would not appease the United States. Not yet, anyway.

¹ See, *Nhan Dan*, December 31, 1972, 4.

² *Nhan Dan*, September 22, 1972, 4.

The leaders of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRVN, or North Vietnam) were acutely aware of the gullible nature of British diplomacy that had played into the hands of Hitler by timidly avoiding a confrontation with him. The ‘Munich quote’ comes from a conversation between Pham Van Dong and a French diplomat in Hanoi. Implicit in the Munich comment is the suggestion that the leaders of the DRVN were not gullible, and that they did not want a Munich-type peace settlement with the United States, only to be deceived later. Dong and his colleagues took the calculated, and risky, decision not to seek an immediate peace in 1965 because the United States had begun increasing troop levels in the south, and would soon begin bombing the north.

The author has brought much-needed focus to this under-studied topic of the diplomacy of the war: how North Vietnamese diplomacy evolved from the Munich mindset to a willingness to negotiate. In doing this, Asselin demonstrates his versatility by using a variety of archival sources, Vietnamese, British, and French, in order to show how Hanoi’s leaders ended their Munich mindset when the failure of the Tet Offensive in 1968 forced them to reassess their war strategy and enter into exploratory peace talks with Washington’s leaders.

Asselin’s intention is to ‘explore’ Hanoi’s diplomatic strategy during the Vietnam War (548), to ‘describe’ the manoeuvring of the Hanoi leadership (548), and to ‘identify’ the forces shaping those manoeuvres (548). The author explains that the early historical literature on DRVN diplomatic strategy was inadequate because historians lacked access to Vietnamese materials and their studies were speculative and are now outdated. More recent scholarship has unearthed new materials from Chinese and Russian archives, but its excessive reliance on Chinese and Russian materials misrepresents the Vietnamese as being passive actors, when they were much more assertive in their exchanges with China and the Soviet Union. Asselin praises a more recent crop of historians for attempting to understand DRVN diplomatic strategy from the perspective of the North Vietnamese (549-550).³ But, according to Asselin, there is much more work to be done.

³ Asselin cites Allan Goodman and Gareth Porter as being representative of the early historians of the Vietnam War. See, Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America’s Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, CA, 1978); and Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam and the Paris Peace Agreement* (Bloomington, IN, 1975). Qiang Zhai and Chen Jian have used Chinese sources, and Ilya Gaiduk has employed Soviet archival materials. See, Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001); and Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago, 1996). David Elliott and William Duiker have made extensive use of Communist sources. See, David W. P. Elliott, “Hanoi’s Strategy in the Second Indochina War,” in *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, ed. Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (Armonk, NY, 1993); and William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO, 1996). Robert Brigham has produced an insightful study of National Liberation Front diplomatic initiatives. See, Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, NY, 1998). Most recently, Pierre Asselin, Lien-Hang Nguyen, and Harish C. Mehta have made extensive use of Vietnamese archival materials to explain DRVN diplomacy. See, Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); and

The author acknowledges that it is still too early to offer “the final word” on North Vietnam’s diplomatic struggle, as further historical research and debate is needed to illuminate the topic. Having conducted research in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2007, I am happy to report that a rich trove of materials is now open to scholars at archives in those two major cities. These materials are largely records of Ministries, Departments, and the National Assembly, but the records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have for the most part remained closed.

Asselin presents a “new perspective” on DRVN diplomacy by “focusing on the concerns and dispositions” of DRVN leaders as they implemented their resistance war (550). The author succeeds in giving DRVN leaders a powerful voice and represents them as conscious actors in their struggle, as actors who regarded diplomacy as a “servant and whipping boy of the revolution,” and an instrument of war (551).

As a scholar who has conducted research in various Vietnamese archives for several years, Asselin is well placed to provide insights into the rich, though often archaic, language of the Vietnamese Revolution that DRVN leaders used in their confrontation with the United States, such as the “Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation” or *cuoc khang chien chong My, cuu nuoc* (547). The leaders argued that the south was fuelling “counterrevolutionary” (*phan cach mang*) sentiment within the DRVN (571); and that once President Lyndon Johnson ordered a bombing halt in 1968, Hanoi resolved anew to “fight to chase out the Americans, fight to overthrow the puppets” or *danh cho My cut, danh cho nguy nhao* (581).

The author makes several valid points that are often missed in the literature: first, that the sporadic interest DRVN leaders expressed in ending the war diplomatically between 1965-1968 was only “willingness for talks, not pledges to negotiate” because Hanoi’s so-called “peace proposals” in the early years of the conflict were aimed at winning foreign support and sympathy, and not encouraging serious peace negotiations (553). Second, the author argues that DRVN leaders were “careful not to associate themselves with the more crude forms of Chinese polemics,” and that they instead demonstrated their flexibility in order to encourage the perception that they were less concerned with conquering the south, and more concerned with questions of independence, peace, and reunification (553-554). The DRVN, in other words, was distancing itself from the Chinese position that Hanoi must not negotiate with the United States. Third, DRVN leaders understood the “vulnerability of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration to the vagaries of American politics,” and that U.S. public opinion could be manipulated (554).

Harish C. Mehta, “People’s Diplomacy’: The Diplomatic Front of North Vietnam during the War against the United States, 1965-1972,” Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, 2009.

A crucial nuance that is often overlooked in the literature is the carefully choreographed effort of DRVN leaders to remain outwardly neutral in the Sino-Soviet dispute, and to actually work to strengthen the unity with, and between Moscow and Beijing. Asselin convincingly brings this point out by quoting the following policy directive from an official DRVN record known as *Ngoai Giao Viet Nam, 1945-2000* (Vietnamese Diplomacy):

To defeat the imperialists' purposes, Hanoi ordered that its diplomats "absolutely make no negative comments about" China or the Soviet Union. They should instead "talk about the contributions of [both] the Soviet Union and China" to socialist internationalism (560).

Asselin, however, does not mention a crucial fact that is cited in *Ngoai Giao Viet Nam*, that it was "President Ho Chi Minh that assigned the obligation to [DRV] diplomats to direct our ambassadors in foreign countries to talk to the ambassadors of the Soviet Union, but absolutely not make any negative comments about China; and when talking with Chinese diplomats our ambassadors absolutely must not make any negative comments about the Soviet Union."⁴ The mention of Ho Chi Minh in this context is significant because it raises the controversial question as to whether Ho Chi Minh was still in charge of DRVN diplomacy in the mid-1960s. According to the above text, it would appear that he was still instructing DRVN diplomats on the proper way to conduct themselves in the stormy Sino-Soviet dispute. Even though Ho Chi Minh no longer played an active role in the state, he nonetheless served as spiritual father of the nation whose sage advice was always heard. This particular Vietnamese text suggests that he was still instructing officials of the ministry of foreign affairs.

The DRVN decision not to hold peace talks during the early stages of the war was not unanimous. It has been well known since the 1960s that there were some leaders in Hanoi who doubted that they could win a war against the United States. East European diplomats in Hanoi reported on the dissent within the Hanoi leadership, with some leaders calling for peace talks. For instance, some historians refer to the existence of a "peace faction" within the DRVN leadership that clamoured for peace talks with the United States, while a "militant faction" wanted to press ahead with war (561-564). Asselin does well to provide us with the important Ho Chi Minh statement to the effect that for the majority of DRVN leaders the onset of war solidified the resolve to forego negotiations and to pursue "victory at any price" (561).

Even though Ho Chi Minh was in a state of retirement, and the "moderate factional" leaders had been sidelined by the militant faction under Le Duan, the top national leaders that U.S. antiwar activists regularly met on their visits to Hanoi were Ho Chi Minh, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, and the Chief of the People's Army of Viet Nam General Vo

⁴ See *Ngoai Giao Viet Nam: 1945-2000* (Revised edition), Hanoi, 2005: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia), 211.

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Nguyen Giap (563). These so-called moderates remained the public face of the Vietnamese Revolution, and the principal exponents of DRVN diplomatic interaction with Western and Asian peace activists. When seen in this way, the DRVN leadership does not seem so much divided on the basis of factional beliefs, as on the basis of functional groups.

Asselin makes a significant point about the DRVN's famous Four-Point Plan, which was offered to the United States in 1965. Some scholars have mistakenly interpreted the Plan as a genuine offer to negotiate; Asselin, on the other hand, argues that the Four-Point Plan was "never intended" as a basis for discussion, and was instead a "take-it-or-leave-it offer" that simply demanded the unilateral U.S. military withdrawal from Indochina (566). Besides demanding U.S. military withdrawal, the Four-Point Plan called for the neutralization of both South and North Vietnam, settlement of South Vietnam's internal affairs in accordance with the programme of the National Liberation Front, and peaceful reunification of the two halves of Vietnam.

In his article, Asselin has admirably explained the transition of DRVN diplomatic strategy from the Munich mindset in 1965 that rejected selling out core national objectives in order to obtain a false peace with the United States, to a realisation after the military shock of the Tet Offensive in 1968 that peace talks were necessary in order to attain those objectives, even if a little bit of appeasement, Munich-style, was necessary.

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