‘Damn it, what a fate!’

A fuller history of Vietnam

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VIỆT NAM:
A HISTORY FROM EARLIEST TIMES TO THE PRESENT
by Ben Kiernan
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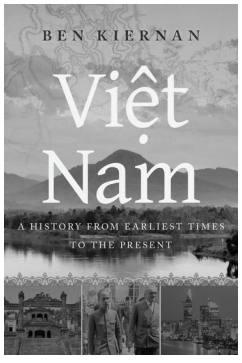
‘Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there.’ The American reporter Michael Herr thus concluded his celebrated work *Dispatches* (1977), confident that his readers understood what he meant, even if most of them had never set foot in the country. The very word possessed an almost incantatory power. In the United States, as in Australia, opposition to the military intervention and its cross-fertilisation with other forms of dissent dominated the historical period. ‘Vietnam’ became an all-consuming cause célèbre as much as an actual geographical entity, ‘a war not a country’, in the revealing phrase used by Herr himself. Indicatively, *Dispatches* said plenty about the war’s traumatic effect on Americans, but very little about the Vietnamese themselves.



The vicariousness of ‘Vietnam’ is directly addressed by the Yale-based Australian scholar of Southeast Asia, Ben Kiernan, in the opening chapter of this major new history of the country. The use of diacritics in work’s title, *Việt Nam*, signals that Kiernan intends his work to be an act of precision and of reclamation. Multiregional and polyethnic, Vietnam ‘has always been much more than a war’, he writes. A long, slender land of rivers framed by the Red River Delta in the north and that of the Mekong to the south, and bordered by the South China Sea, it is apprehended as a real landscape populated by real, if diverse, people. The place we now call Vietnam is ‘a land shared and contested by many peoples and cultures’ over three millennia, ‘a series of homelands that have become a shared territory’. Just as the country cannot be reduced to a single twentieth-century war, nor can its history be simply distilled into one national narrative.

Kiernan makes the actualities of Vietnamese life and landscape a central focus of *Việt Nam* by identifying the many ecological and environmental challenges that have confronted the country over thousands of years of human habitation. These challenges are less sensational than the ‘American War’, but just as testing and, in their own way, equally ruinous. Significantly the war attracts fewer than sixty pages in a book of more than six hundred. Admittedly, there is no shortage of other conflicts to discuss. Vietnamese history has been regularly punctuated by revolts and rebellions, sieges and coups, atrocities and massacres, fractures and unifications, vicious internecine struggles, and several waves of conquest and colonisation, of which the American incursion was the most reckless and least enduring.

Wars and conflicts are stock-in-trade for writers of national histories. Where Kiernan excels is in his engagement with the complex cultural and environmental factors that make the country so distinctive. In particular, he highlights the country’s ‘aquatic culture’ from prehistoric times right up to this day, the travails of linked but ethnically disparate agrarian societies mutually beset by catastrophic deluges and flash floods as well as by crippling drought and consequent famine. In the mid-1940s, a million people perished from hunger in Tonkin. Kiernan quotes a poem penned by an eyewitness: ‘At dawn you’d gingerly push your door ajar / To check if there was someone dead outside.’ Then, after huge rains, the Red River dike system breached and the region was flooded, devastating the summer rice crop. This was but one episode in a recurring cycle of ‘natural’ calamity that continues today. Kiernan notes how climate change is presently leading to the salinisation of the Mekong Delta, destroying species of fish and also threatening the rice-growing livelihood of the twenty million people

Mekong River, 2007 (photograph by flydime via Wikimedia Commons)

who inhabit the area.

Kiernan stresses the crucial importance of the elements – water, in particular – to understanding the Vietnamese. 'Water motifs', he suggests at one point, possess a 'cultural power as distinguishing features of the Vietnamese landscape'. He is specifically describing an early thirteen-century folktale, but it is an observation that can be applied to what we know of the Vietnamese people today. After all, as Kiernan notes in a rare but pointed reference to his home country, the Vietnamese were Australia's 'first boat people'. In their perilous sea journey southward in the late 1970s, the refugees 'demonstrated their Vietnameseness'.

Kiernan intends his work to be an act of precision and reclamation

Mobility and migration constitute one of the great themes of Vietnamese history. The postwar Vietnamese diaspora has enriched Australia and numerous other countries as well, from Canada to France. As Kiernan notes: 'The country's long experience of regional diversity, polyethnic populations, and a multireligious heritage that ranges from local spirit cults to the influences of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianiam, and Catholicism makes for a vividly pluralistic culture, which in turn overseas Vietnamese are recreating across the globe.' Through burgeoning trade and tourism and through the flow of its people backward and forward to their adopted countries, Vietnam is helping to shape the contemporary world. 'Long a crossroads of civilizations', today the country is on 'the cutting edge of globalization'. No longer is it a blank map upon which foreign powers (notably China) seek to inscribe their will, though Kiernan draws the sobering conclusion that its regional security is doubtful. Domestically, he adds, Vietnam's 'environmental integrity' and its 'prospects for democracy' remain 'unresolved'.

A further strength of Kiernan's textured approach to historical accounting is his treatment of the changing status of Vietnamese women. Stopping off in Tonkin in 1688 during one of his circumnavigatory voyages, including to the north-west coast of Australia, the English buccaneer William Dampier commented on the unbridled licentiousness of the local women, 'who offer themselves of their own accord to any strangers, who will go to their price'. As a result, Dampier wrote, 'Most of our men had women aboard all the time of our abode here.'

The GIs and the Diggers who fought in Vietnam were rather more honest in admitting the sexual plunder that went hand-in-hand with combat during their tour of duty. Kiernan makes sure that Vietnamese women themselves are heard in his narrative and are not simply defined by men, showcasing (for example) the work of the late eighteenth-century poet Hồ Xuân Hương, known for her iconoclastic barbs at institutionalised Confucian patriarchy. In 'On Being a Concubine', she quips: 'One gal lies under quilts, the other chills. / To share a husband – damn it, what a fate!' She was speaking from experience, for she was once a concubine herself. While the picture is far from perfect in the Vietnam of today, women now enjoy one of the world's highest labour force participation rates, high access to education, and low maternal mortality.

Kieran's readiness to detect and define the significant details lurking in the sweeping historical panorama, make *Việt Nam* a major contribution to contemporary Southeast Asian scholarship. He is a fastidious researcher, but unafraid to express an essentially personal viewpoint or response. I note that his Preface was written from 'the Sailor's Bar', a seaside pub in Ireland's County Kerry. This lends an appropriately nautical touch to a sympathetic study of a tenacious and capable people, whose exodus across the vast ocean from their troubled homeland has ending up contributing so much to contemporary Australia. ■

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