

The great leap

Peter Zinoman

There are three ways in which Christopher Goscha's *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* represents a milestone in Vietnamese history.

Strange as it may seem, Goscha's book is the first comprehensive survey of Vietnam's modern history to be published in English since Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* came out more than thirty years ago. In addition to being significantly more up-to-date than Karnow's and profiting from an additional three decades of historical hindsight, *The Penguin History* benefits from its author's vastly superior knowledge and scholarly skill set.

Karnow covered the Vietnam War for the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Washington Post* but lacked specialised training and, most importantly, Vietnamese language skills. Goscha, on the other hand, is his generation's pre-eminent academic historian of modern Vietnam. Casually conversant in French, Vietnamese and Thai and trained by renowned specialists in Vietnam's history including David Marr and Nguyen The Anh, he has published a large body of research in the form of articles, edited volumes, reference books, translated documents and research monographs. The latter include foundational texts on the origins and development of Vietnamese nationalism, the Southeast Asian context of the Vietnamese Revolution and the history of the First Indochina War. His fourth major monograph, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, draws on his voluminous earlier work as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of the relevant secondary scholarship in English, French and Vietnamese.

A second notable feature of *The Penguin History* is its remarkable topical breadth. An initial chapter introduces key themes in the country's pre-modern history during the two thousand years that preceded the onset of the modern era in Vietnam at the end of the eighteenth century. A second chapter explores the violent nineteenth-century colonial encounter between France and the Nguyen government, the country's last imperial dynasty. Chapters 3 through 6 focus on the French colonial era (1862-1945), paying attention to the history of politics, state-building and cultural, economic and social change. In these chapters, Goscha charts the emergence of durable political forces such as imperialism, nationalism, communism, republicanism and a host of organised religions that originated in the colonial era but have continued to vie relentlessly for dominance against each other up to the present day.

Chapter 7 addresses the brief but critically eventful period of World War II that began with the occupation of French Indochina by Japan and ended with the temporary rise to power of the communist-led Viet Minh after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Chapters 8 and 9 masterfully address the First Indochina War (1946-54), which pitted the Viet Minh against France and its non-communist Vietnamese allies, including a nascent nationalist government led by Bao Dai, the last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty. Chapter 10 looks at the separate northern and southern states – the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam and the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam – that emerged after the signing of the Geneva Accords by France and the Viet Minh ended the first war in the summer of 1954. Given the numerous chapters on French colonialism and the Franco-Vietnamese conflict, it is somewhat surprising that Goscha devotes only a single chapter – chapter 11 – to the Second Indochina War (aka the Vietnam War) and the heyday of the US intervention (1963-1975).

Chapters 12 and 14 break with the largely chronological narrative to focus on the history of cultural and intellectual change, on the one hand, and inter-ethnic relations, on the other, throughout Vietnam's "long twentieth century." And chapter 13, together with a brief conclusion, explores the history of domestic politics, liberalising economic reform and foreign relations during the postwar era from 1975 until the present.

Given the length and complexity of the era under study, it is not always easy to discern a precise rationale behind the inclusion of some topics and the exclusion of others, or to grasp the reasons for the relative degree of attention granted to various historical issues. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the selection of material for *The Penguin History* was largely determined by three impulses: a commitment to place Vietnamese actors at the centre of their own history; a belief in the hugely transformative impact on Vietnamese society and politics of a century of French colonial rule; and a contrarian resistance to conventional Western approaches in general, and US studies in particular, that treat the military intervention of the US as the climax of modern Vietnamese history.

The radical Vietnam-centrism and downgrading of the US role featured in *The Penguin History* distinguish it from existing Western accounts of the country's recent history. This comes across most dramatically in its treatment of the Second Indochina War, which reverses the focus of most books on the topic by providing a poignant account of the conflict's devastating consequences for millions of Vietnamese men, women and children, while all but ignoring its impact on several hundred thousand US combat troops. Other staples of US-centric histories of the war receive extremely short shrift from Goscha, including Ho Chi Minh's brief association with the Office of Strategic Services during WWII, the role of the domino theory in justifying the US intervention, or the rise and evolution of the US anti-war movement. While Goscha details the destructive consequences for the country of US military intervention, he does not even mention many of the most famous war-era scandals that dominated US media coverage of the war, such as the release of the Pentagon Papers, the massacre at My Lai or the shooting of protesting students at Kent State University.

Goscha's emphasis on the greater importance of France relative to the United States in Vietnam's modern history reflects a third feature of the book that contributes to the impression it represents a turning point in the field: its unstated but thoroughgoing revisionist orientation. Revisionism, in this context, refers to views about aspects of modern Vietnamese history that challenge the heavily politicised interpretations that emerged and calcified in the thinking of foreign observers during the hothouse environment of the Vietnam War. While many of these popular interpretations have been undermined over the past twenty-five years by academic research, they have proved difficult to dislodge from less academic (and more journalistic) accounts. A key contribution of *The Penguin History*, therefore, is the way that it showcases revisionist academic perspectives in an accessible format and plain-spoken prose. Goscha's approach seems likely to bring some of these revisionist interpretations, for the first time, out of the academic shadows and into the mainstream of public discourse about the country.

A good example is Goscha's treatment of the significance of imperialism and colonialism in Vietnamese history. In conventional historical accounts that emerged out of the war era, the most significant element of Vietnam's national identity is the country's long history of victimisation at the hands of foreign hegemony. While Goscha acknowledges this dimension of the country's history, he points out repeatedly that the Vietnamese experience of victimhood coexists with an equally extensive history of predation, conquest and forced assimilation of weaker polities and ethnic groups to the south and the west as well as in upland areas far from the lowland centres of Vietnamese settlement. Just as many historians explain the fierce anti-imperialism of the Vietnamese communists as a product of the country's history of colonial victimhood, Goscha links this counter-history of colonial aggression to Ho Chi Minh's paternalistic attitude toward communist movements in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia. "The Vietnamese," he concludes, "were colonisers, too."

A second example concerns Goscha's analysis of the key political dynamics behind Vietnam's violent and tragic post-colonial wars. Most accounts portray these conflicts as the product of a bipartisan struggle between the forces of Vietnamese nationalism, led ultimately by Ho Chi Minh's nationalist-minded communist movement, and the forces of imperialism, spearheaded by French colonialists and US neo-colonialists, both of whom were aided by local Vietnamese collaborators.

In place of this familiar two-pronged analysis, Goscha introduces a tripartite scheme in which the forces of imperialism struggled against two domestic political traditions that were themselves relentlessly arrayed against each other. The first is Ho Chi Minh's authoritarian national-communist movement and the second is what Goscha refers to as an essentially liberal and democratic republican political orientation. Derived from the core political tradition animating France's Third Republic, Vietnamese republicanism found articulate exponents throughout the twentieth century. In Goscha's account, this included a who's who of colonial-era intellectuals: "Phan Chu Trinh, Phan Boi Chau, Phan Van Truong, Nguyen The Truyen, Huynh Thuc Khang, Nguyen Thai Hoc, Nguyen Tuong Tam, Tran Trong Kim and perhaps the country's greatest democratic spirit Nguyen An Nguyen." Goscha locates a common republican spirit in northern Vietnamese dissidents who opposed communist tyranny in the 1950s and in a wide swath of politicians and intellectuals who supported the southern Republic of Vietnam between 1954 and 1975. The Francophone background of these intellectuals make this part of Goscha's argument especially plausible. But his effort to lump post-Renovation era (i.e. post-1986) dissidents like Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong to the republican camp seems strained given that the life trajectories of these individuals remained bounded by the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the transnational parameters of the post-WWII socialist bloc. Nevertheless, Goscha's approach must be seen as a monumental step forward in efforts to make sense of the fundamental political fissures that plunged Vietnam into one of the longest and bloodiest civil wars of the twentieth century. □

Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, Allen Lane: 2016