

*The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947*. By MARTIN SHIPWAY.  
Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1996. xiii, 300 pp. \$49.95.

If the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964 has recently resurfaced in the U.S. at the center of debates on the validity of the initial American decision to go to war in Vietnam, the outbreak of war in all of Indochina on 19 December 1946 has long haunted French historians for much the same reasons. In both cases, research has concentrated largely on how French and American policy-makers, liberals and conservatives alike, came to adopt aggressive policies towards adversaries in northern Vietnam in order to safeguard their hold on its southern half.

French historian Philippe Devillers was the first to explore the complex chain of events leading to the outbreak of war in his 1952 classic, *L'Histoire du Vietnam de 1940 à 1952* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1952). Over three decades later, he published a collection of documents showing how French authorities in Saigon in 1945 and 1946 went about provoking the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam into war (*Paris-Saigon-Hanoi*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988). Inspired by Devillers, Norwegian historian Stein Tønnesson dug into the French archives in the 1980s to produce an impressively detailed analysis of the events leading to the outbreak of war in late 1946, published in French as *1946: Le déclenchement de la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1987). Since then, scores of conferences, memoirs, and articles have appeared, either in favor of or against these interpretations. In Vietnam, to my knowledge, few party-minded historians or military memoirs have challenged Major General Vuong Thua Vu's blanket statement that the Vietnamese high command decided to attack the French on the 19th, *point à la ligne . . .* (*Truong Thanh trong Chien Dau* [Formed in Struggle], Hanoi: Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1979, 2nd edition).

Leave it to British historian Martin Shipway to steer us in a new direction in *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947*. While Shipway pays his dues to Devillers and Tønnesson, he is not out to provide another factual account of the complex events leading to war. What he is after is an analysis of the "road to war" in terms of how a postwar French attempt at liberal imperial reforms—discussed 'on high' by General de Gaulle's men in Brazzaville in 1944 and first tested 'on the ground' in Indochina from 1945—disintegrated into war about a year later. Shipway shows how a nascent policy of "liberal" (his word) colonial reforms, one which was ready to recognize Vietnamese nationalism and to pronounce even the word independence, broke down as the contradictions of postwar metropolitan politics (especially the different colonial views opposing Gaullists and Republicans) made themselves felt and as French authorities in Indochina took matters into their own hands—even if it meant forcing the hand of all these increasingly indecisive Parisian policy-makers.

What Shipway adds to the debate is to place the war firmly within the context of France's postwar reformist debates, to give just due to the impact of metropolitan politics on imperial policy, and to get us thinking about the complexity of French colonial decolonization as well as, implicitly, the obstacles to Vietnamese nationalization. One of the most interesting things that Shipway reveals is the ongoing contradiction between old-fashioned colonial thinking, not alien to de Gaulle, and the emergence of a remarkably pragmatist (almost British?), reform-minded track. This forms the first half of his book. Nowhere is this new thinking better seen than in the ideas of the young Henri Laurentie, an influential political advisor in the Ministry of the Colonies. Laurentie warned of the need to reform in order to head off

Vietnamese nationalism's more militant tendencies. Laurentie did not want "colonial revolution" (p. 78).

What he got, as Shipway shows in the second half of his book, was a badly-tailored policy called the Indochinese Federation (first advanced, I might add, by Governor-General Albert Sarraut after World War I and resurrected when trouble was in the air by Pierre Pasquier in 1930 and Admiral Decoux in 1940). But one of the Federation's major weaknesses, once applied in Indochina, was its failure to accommodate the idea of Vietnamese national unity. Shipway shows how the federal idea began to fall apart *following* the "liberal" 6 March Accords, when Vietnamese nationalists insisted on unity and local French authorities began to move against that idea—thanks in no small part to the metropole's indecision.

If one learns much about Laurentie's liberal ideas, this reader would have liked to know just a little bit more about his allies, above all this enigmatic Léon Pignon. As I turned the last page of this book, I was still wondering how Pignon—one of Laurentie's trusted confidants, one of the main architects of the March 1945 Declaration on Indochina and a man who apparently took Vietnamese nationalist aspirations seriously at the outset—would become so bitterly opposed to the idea of negotiating with the DRV a year later. What happened? I am not sure that an early Cold War strain of anticommunism was behind his change of heart, at least not in 1946.

Second, if Shipway evokes the reforms undertaken by Decoux between 1940 and 1945, a brief overview of the history of French reformism in Indochina would have provided a nice historical backdrop to his discussion of France's postwar "imperial equation" (Daniel Hémerly and Pierre Brocheux, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë*, Paris: La Découverte, 1995). Indeed, Jacques Raphael-Leygues claims that at the outset De Gaulle did not want Admiral d'Argenlieu as his High Commissioner for Indochina. He first asked Sarraut. The latter declined, but not before asking de Gaulle to "name an Admiral . . ."

None of this, however, detracts from an excellent book. Well researched, clearly written and solidly argued, this study poses new questions, opens the possibility of larger comparisons, and is well suited for the expert and postgraduate courses on the complex relationship between European decolonization and Asian nationalism.

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*Het Rijk van Insulinde: Opkomst en ondergang van een Nederlandse kolonie.* By H. W. VAN DEN DOEL. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1996. 346 pp.

The romantic title of this book, "The Realm of Island India," comes of course from Multatuli's nineteenth-century classic, *Max Havelaar*. In it, Van den Doel, a historian and, as he insists, a product of Leiden University, presents us with a richly illustrated version of the "Rise and Fall of a Dutch Colony." The book contains 235 illustrations large and small and takes us through Indonesia's nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to independence, when (apart from the brief British and Japanese interventions) the state in the Netherlands ruled over its colony. It covers an introduction to the early period of uncertainty about how to run the colony, then a good deal on the Java War and the Cultivation System, the Conquest of the Outer Territories, the "Ethical" Movement, the beginnings of the nationalist