Introduction

Prologue: A death in November

On September 2, 1963, Ngô Đình Nhu, the brother and chief political advisor to the South Vietnamese president, Ngô Đình Diệm, spoke in secret with the Polish diplomat Mieczysław Maneli to discuss the possibility of peace talks with Hà Nội. In the context of the deteriorating relationship between the Americans and the South Vietnamese, the meeting in Sài Gòn, which was seething "with rumors, plots, and counterplots,"[1] raised US suspicions that Nhu was trying to betray the alliance and forfeit the war.[2]

The crisis was stirred by an incident that occurred several months earlier. On May 8, South Vietnamese soldiers in the city of Huế killed several unarmed civilians opposing a government ban on the public display of Buddhist flags.[3] The episode ignited a wave of political protest during the summer that would come to be symbolized by the famous photograph of Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation. By "burn[ing] himself in front of reporters," working for the American media, the Vietnamese monk had apparently produced the "first really powerful image to shake the Western world, to momentarily crack through the chain of mediatized simulacra."[4]

Shattering the image of the South Vietnamese government as a "stable, viable and democratic bastion of the Free World,"[5] the photograph would become "a universal symbol of rebellion and the fight against injustice."[6] Taken during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the picture appeared to provide irrefutable evidence that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was a repressive regime, denying equality to its own Buddhist majority. The backlash in the international press would prompt

US officials to threaten a withdrawal of support and a complete suspension of aid,[7] at a moment when the insurgency appeared to be fulfilling its pledge to destroy the "dictatorial government of the American lackey, Ngô Đình Diệm."[8]

In less than two months after the meeting in September, Diệm and Nhu were killed in a coup backed by officials at the American embassy. The assassination on November 1 marked the beginning of a tragicomic cycle of changing regimes and incompetent leaders. This ended in April 1975 with the communist victory and the humiliating withdrawal of American forces, after two decades of war that left millions of Vietnamese dead. By that point, the Republic was already widely regarded as a political puppet, manufactured by the world's greatest capitalist power, waging an imperialist war against a poor peasant society. Refracted through political and cultural movements in the US and Europe, the victory against the Americans and the South Vietnamese would be celebrated as a symbol of world revolution: "In the wave of youthful protest against authority… in the 1960s, rejection of old sexual morality and an enthusiasm for the joys of marijuana and LSD became conflated with lunges against capitalism and imperialism, of which Vietnam appeared an exceptionally ugly manifestation."[9]

Viewed from this vantage point, Nhu's response to Maneli during their meeting on September 2 seems utterly strange and inexplicable. After a lengthy "exposition on the philosophy of the cult of personality,"[10] and its role in what he described as the Republic's increasing success in the war, Nhu, unaware that the end had arrived, announced the beginning of a "new phase" of the conflict.[11] For the South Vietnamese, the war, as he explained in his peculiar paradoxical style of speaking, had become a "social revolution" against the communist revolution in the countryside. As a total transformation of society, this revolution, moreover, was not simply a nationalist struggle to overcome communism. On the contrary, nationalism, according to Nhu, was merely an "alibi" exploited by Third World leaders who failed to recognize the "need for social revolution in under-developed countries."[12]

Casting the Buddhist Affair as a mediatized spectacle ("*ce spectacle unique au XXème siècle*"),[13] and an "imperialist plot" (*âm mưu đế quốc*) to crush the social revolution in the name of a Western ideal of democracy,[14] Nhu declared the "war cannot be won with the Americans because they are an obstacle to the revolutionary transformation of society which is the prerequisite of victory."[15] This obstacle was identified in particular with the mechanism of American aid, which Nhu (speaking through a government newspaper organ) had condemned, in unmistakably Marxist terminology, as an instrument of underdevelopment: "Vietnam Not a Guinea Pig for Capitalist Imperialism to Experiment On."[16] The "new phase" of the conflict, therefore, would call for resistance both against communism and American neo-colonialism. The Republic, as Nhu explained to an astonished Maneli, "is fighting against [both] the guerrillas and imperialism."[17]

Even more puzzling, however, than the idea that the South Vietnamese were engaged in an anti-colonial struggle against their American allies, was the fact that, for Nhu, the ultimate aim of the social revolution in the South was not to defeat communism. Rather, the goal was the abolition of capitalism. Just as the Americans were now an "obstacle to the revolutionary transformation of society," so the "capitalist regime" in the South "cannot effectively oppose Communis[m]."[18] In another display of his penchant for abstruse dialectical statements, Nhu, therefore, explained that the anti-communist war was in fact an anti-capitalist strategy: "I am really combating communism in order to put an end to materialistic capitalism."[19]

This apparently implausible explanation of the political aims of the South Vietnamese state, which was reputed to be a bastion of democracy, has been taken as "evidence that Nhu was mad," dismissed as a symptom of his opium-induced paranoia, or one his Machiavellian schemes to preserve his own power.[20] The socialist concepts that Nhu described to Maneli, however, were in fact an integral part of the "philosophy of the cult of personality," or Vietnamese Personalism, which Nhu had developed before the founding of the Republic in 1955 as a "Personalist democracy."[21] This form of democracy, which was viewed as directly opposed to Western liberal democracy,[22] would not be based on individual rights and formal equality, but rather on the communist principle of "to each according to his needs." As Nhu affirmed in the manifesto of the Personalist Labor Party (*Cần lao Nhân vị Cách Mạng Đảng*), the "goal of production must be the satisfaction of needs."[23] Under a Personalist government, "production must serve the people," whereas in a capitalist regime, "it is man who is in the service of the economy."[24] This Marxian principle, moreover, was one that the Republic would attempt to apply in its anti-capitalist war against communism. For Nhu, the struggle against the Marxist insurgency in the South "was never just a security measure," but the "vehicle for a full-scale political and social revolution that would put into practice the long-proclaimed … ideals of the regime's own philosophy of 'personalism.'"[25] This "Marxist Personalism,"[26] therefore, as Nhu pointed out to Maneli, was the intellectual foundation for the counterinsurgency program, the "philosophy of the Strategic Hamlet Campaign."[27]

This commitment to a political theory that seems to so closely resemble the doctrine of the Communist Party suggests a different explanation on the crisis in 1963. From the perspective of Nhu's surprising account of the conflict, the Republic appears not as the first in a series of ill-fated experiments to prop up dependent and decadent political proxy regimes in the war against international communism. Nor were the Ngos, as John F. Kennedy would later remember them, patriots who, in spite of all their flaws, were deeply devoted to the national cause. ("They were just tyrants," said an acquaintance to Kennedy, seeing his shock at the news that the two Vietnamese leaders had been brutally killed in the coup. "No," he responded. "They were in a difficult position. They did the best they could for their country."[28]) In Maneli's report, Nhu appears not as a nationalist figure, but something stranger and more paradoxical, an anti-colonial leader, exploiting the wealth of an imperial power in order to wage an anti-capitalist war against communism: "Nhu spoke about his socialist concepts with many of the highest-ranking Western diplomats, and seemed to believe in them. And this during a period when he was drawing millions of dollars from American's 'nonsocialist' treasury."[29]

Seen from this unlikely perspective, the coup in 1963 appears, then, not as an event that marked the demise of an undemocratic regime and an American puppet. If Nhu's socialist concepts were not a sign of insanity, but principles that were actually applied in an anticommunist war against capitalism, then the collapse of the Republic may have been something other than the way it appears in much of the historical record: the defeat a revolutionary attempt to establish a socialist society different than that of the Communist Party. This society, according to Nhu, was in process of successfully fighting the war against the insurgency,[30] while freeing itself from the economic dependence imposed by its capitalist patron.[31]

This social revolution, however, would never be realized. In the place of a socialist society, "fighting against the guerrillas and imperialism," the Americans, after the coup, would help install a dependent "capitalist regime" that would be unable to "effectively oppose Communis[m]."

A South Vietnamese view of the war

The Unimagined Community presents a political and cultural history of imperialism and capitalism in the South Vietnamese context, from the colonial era to the end of the Vietnam War. As a conceptual frame for the project, the first part of the book reconstructs the ideology that informed the seemingly improbable account of the conflict that Nhu relayed to Maneli during their meeting in 1963. From the point of view of Nhu's Vietnamese Personalism, the war was not a contest between Marxism and nationalism, or communism and democracy (as it appears from a Cold War perspective), but an anti-capitalist struggle against Stalinism and US imperialism.

Inspired by a form of French Marxist humanism, this Vietnamese Personalism emerged both as a product of and critical reflection on the history of imperialism. According to this theory, the society that existed prior to the colonial period was radically altered by the introduction of capitalism and bourgeois democracy, which resulted in underdevelopment, rather than political and economic modernity. As a "Personalist democracy," the First Republic (*Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa Việt Nam*, 1954–1963), therefore, would seek to establish a non-Western form of modernity in a social revolution against capitalism and liberal democracy. While this revolution would make use of the "alibi" of nationalism, promoting the development of a South Vietnamese national culture, its ultimate aim was a communitarian form of democracy, based on the "withering away of the state," and the abolition of the form of the nation itself.

This social revolution would be crushed as a result of the coup. Its defeat, however, did not come at the hands of the communists. Nor was its end the result of its own authoritarian tendencies, provoking rebellion by the South Vietnamese masses. Rather, it was defeated by agents of the "imperialist" institutions that it sought to eradicate, institutions with which it was allied in the war against communism. Backed by the American embassy, the coup was carried out by members of an elite urban minority who dominated the underdeveloped capitalist economy, as well as the centralized structures of the state, which the social revolution had been designed to abolish.

After the fall of the First Republic, the South Vietnamese leaders who came into power, avoiding the "need for social revolution in underdeveloped countries," would adopt the ambiguous banner of nationalism and democracy, which covered the absence of any alternative political project. The war, then, would become a conflict between communism and democracy, Marxism and nationalism. What followed, however, in the decade after the coup, would largely confirm the unlikely assertion by Nhu that a "revolutionary transformation of society" was "the prerequisite of victory." Along with the destruction and violence of the war of attrition, which replaced the social revolution in the countryside to establish a non-Western form of modernity, the economic and political liberalism of the later regimes would create an economically dependent urban society.

Extending the Personalist critique of liberal democracy developed in the earlier chapters, the second part of the book, shifting the attention to culture, examines what South Vietnamese writers described as an underdeveloped "postindustrial society" (*xã hội hậu kỹ nghệ*) that emerged in the cities after the fall of the First Republic. From the mid-1960s, a capitalist culture industry, promoting a new *société de consommation*, would diminish the role of journalism, high culture and art, leading communist critics to condemn this development as an American scheme to destroy the national consciousness. This conspiracy, however, was actually an unintended effect of political and economic liberalization, which had been suppressed under the Personalist regime of the early Republic. Instead of providing a medium for imagining the nation (to recall Benedict Anderson's famous account of the role of print capitalism), the culture industry in the South would dispense with the "alibi" of nationalism in an unexpected direction, in the creation of a kind of unimagined community: an urban audience for mass-produced culture that became increasingly detached from the reality of the war in the countryside.

The book concludes with several reflections on another unusual feature of US imperialism during the Vietnam War, related to the rise of mass culture. For Hannah Arendt, this imperialism was that of a liberal democracy whose policymaking was transformed by the practice of "image-making," or the production of mediatized spectacles. Many of these images, which have been celebrated as universal symbols of rebellion in the iconography of the era, take on a more uncertain significance from the perspective explored in this book. The photograph of Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation, which endures as a powerful image of political protest, would destroy a social revolution against capitalism in the South. The result was a crisis that created the need for a massive American military intervention, which the social revolution had tried to avert. In "a poignant example of resistance to Diem," the "spectacular self-immolation during the 1963 Buddhist crisis stamped an image on the Vietnam War that has never faded away." But the "demise of the Diem regime created the situation that the Buddhists fought to avoid at all costs: increased American involvement in South Vietnam's affairs and expansion of the war."[32]

In 1968, the power of the image to propel such unexpected reversals in the course of events was confirmed once again by the strange fate of the Southern insurgency (whose revolution had been reproduced in a non-Stalinist form by the government that the Americans had helped to demolish). During the Tết Offensive, the insurgency was desicively defeated as a result of an enormous military miscalculation by communist leaders. Through the agency of the image, however, this tragic defeat on the battlefield was transfigured as an unprecedented political victory for the communist forces. The Southern insurgency was immortalized by the mediatized representation of the appalling miscalculation that guaranteed its destruction.

On the other hand, for the South Vietnamese, image-making by the international media would have exactly the opposite impact. As Diệm correctly conjectured, months before the media coverage of the Buddhist Affair, the "war can only be lost by the American press."[33] But what he could not have imagined perhaps was that, after the coup, the authors of the mediatized representations that helped to bring down the regime would also play a principal part in shaping its historical image: "The anti-Diem faction dominated the [American] press through the efforts of a small group of journalists," including Malcolm Browne, who captured the photo of Thích Quảng Đức. "The significance of this is that those who championed the coup have written the popular history of its aftermath. [These] writings are best understood as an attempt to blame the outcome in Vietnam on everything but the coup."[34]

The sections below present a brief account of this popular history, followed by a more detailed description of the individual chapters of the book.

The South, the war and the myth of the nation

The Vietnam War is often portrayed as the final act in an ancient historical drama, that of the Vietnamese people united in their millennial struggle to achieve independence. For over a thousand years, the Vietnamese, according to the historical fiction, fought to preserve their identity and their national culture against the Chinese, eventually liberating themselves from their colonial masters in the ninth century AD. In the late nineteenth century, the French, following in the footsteps of earlier foreign invaders, conquered the country under the pretext of protecting the followers of their Christian religion. Acting contrary to the ideals of the French Revolution and the Rights of Man, they succeeded in subjugating the Vietnamese masses. To ensure their domination, the imperialists then tried to erase the national culture of their colonial subjects, attempting to civilize a people who "possessed a rich civilization … when the French were still living in caves."[35]

The colonial era came to a close in 1940, when Indochina was occupied by Japan. At the end of the war, the surrender of the Imperial Army created a political vacuum, allowing the Việt Minh, led by Hồ Chí Minh, to declare independence. This independence, however, would only be won through a long and difficult struggle. In response to the attempt by the French to reestablish control of the colony, the Việt Minh launched an anti-imperialist war, continuing the ancient tradition of resistance to foreign invaders.

Following the defeat of the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, the Americans, mistakenly identifying a war of national independence with the international communist struggle, would become directly involved militarily. Rejecting the Communist Party's legitimate claim to represent the Vietnamese people, the USA, under the pretext of aiding a separate but equally sovereign Vietnamese state, provided support to a series of corrupt and incompetent governments in the South. Lacking a popular base of support, these regimes were forced to employ dictatorial methods in order to preserve their authority.[36]

The first of these regimes, which existed from 1954 to 1963, was "headed by President Ngo Dinh Diem, an autocratic, nepotistic ruler who valued power more than either his relations with the Vietnamese people or progress in fighting the communists."[37] A representative of the interests of a reactionary colonial-era elite, Diệm, a former mandarin and a Catholic, ruling a country with a Buddhist majority, conducted a campaign of mass repression and terror. Through a draconian program of forced relocation, Diệm attempted to gain "control over the peasants by herding them into 'strategic hamlets.' "[38]

The program was part of a "hodgepodge of ersatz Fascist … techniques that the regime resorted to in its efforts at political motivation and control," efforts that were directed by Diệm's younger brother Ngô Đình Nhu. Operating largely in the shadows, Nhu, an "admirer of Hitler" as well as communist dictators, "borrowed promiscuously from both right-wing and left-wing varieties of totalitarianism," in order to establish an extensive police apparatus in the South.[39] Controlled by a "proto-Fascist and mentally unstable drug addict," the "Strategic Hamlet Program," however, "as carried out by … Nhu proved to be a catastrophic failure."[40] The program would stoke deep-seated resentment among the

Vietnamese masses, "roused into a fury by an abuse beyond any [they] had previously experienced from this foreign-rooted government."[41] Instead of establishing a "stable, viable and democratic bastion of the Free World,"[42] the policies implemented by Diệm and Nhu would serve to destabilize the political situation, alienating the people, provoking widespread international outrage, and undermining the credibility of the US mission abroad.[43] As a result, the repressive tactics employed by the puppet regime in Sài Gòn could not overcome the communist people's war, which drew its primary base of support from the population itself.

Recognizing this failure, and the unpopular character of the regime they had helped to create, US officials supported a coup against Diệm and his brother on November 1963, seeking to replace them with more capable and less authoritarian leaders.[44] But because the new political puppets proved to be as corrupt and incompetent as the ones before them, the situation continued to quickly deteriorate, allowing the insurgency to prevail in the battlefield. Faced with the possibility of imminent defeat, US officials made the fateful decision to expand the American presence. Discarding the political pretence of supporting a sovereign national government, fighting a war against communist subversion, the Americans, then, would assume a leading role in the conflict. By the mid-1960s, the repressive program of mass relocation, which was employed unsuccessfully by the puppet regime in the South, was replaced by a high-tech war of attrition.[45] Having failed in its attempt to control the Vietnamese people by proxy, by forcing the peasantry into government camps policed by its political clients, the USA would deploy its immense military apparatus with the aim of killing the enemy as quickly as possible.

The war of attrition, however, in spite of the mass destruction and death, would fail in the end to overcome the insurgency, owing to the superior methods of organization employed in the people's war strategy. Drawing its strength from the indomitable will of the Vietnamese people, rooted in an ancient tradition of resistance to foreign invaders, the insurgency would defeat a vastly superior conventional army, reuniting the nation and restoring the country's independence.

This account of the conflict corresponds to what the Vietnamese Marxist writer and activist Ngô Văn Xuyết has described as a reductive representation of the war that "depicts the North as David bringing down Goliath."[46] In this image, the war appears as a contest between US imperialism and the Vietnamese people, steeped in a heroic tradition of anti-foreign resistance. This depiction of Vietnamese culture relies on what the historian Keith Taylor describes as an enduring fable, repeated in much of the historiography on the Vietnam War: “Most books about the mid-twentieth-century Vietnamese wars provide a prefatory myth about the Vietnamese being a unified people who for millennia have been enemies of the Chinese, and consequently have become experts at resisting foreign aggression.”[47] For example, Nguyễn Bá Chung, criticizing the American government for its “amazing … ignorance” of this nationalist myth, argued that the failure to “take into account … Vietnam’s two thousand year history of hard-fought existence … is the essence of the Vietnam tragedy.”[48] In a more recent work on the war, this 2,000-year history is identified as the source of an indomitable will to resist that enabled the Vietnamese people (who are identified with the communist forces) to overcome a vastly superior army: “Americans had never heard of Vietnam before the late 50s … but Vietnam had a long … history that goes back several thousand years.” As a result of this national history, “a ‘tradition of resistance’ had been forever instilled within the Vietnamese and would be used effectively by the communists in the 20th century.”[49] “Expelling foreign invaders,” therefore, as another writer concludes, “was an ancient Vietnamese custom.”[50]

For Ngô Văn, such representations distort the fundamental complicity between the ideals espoused by the American government and those of the communist forces. In the war, the Americans, who had fought to defend capitalism and bourgeois democracy, would be defeated by a Stalinist bureaucracy whose reign would serve only to perpetuate the same institutions in a more authoritarian cast: “The Vietnamese bureaucracy … with its ‘cultivated middle-class’ background, master of a hierarchical one-party state, has done nothing but replace the bourgeoisie and the landowners in exploitation of the proletariat and the peasantry.” Through the program of collectivization, carried out after the war, the labor and land of the Vietnamese masses would be expropriated as commodities, collectively owned by the bureaucratic elite, who imposed an authoritarian form of state capitalism. In the end, a “Stalinist party came to power through the terrible suffering and sacrifice of millions of peasants, who were rewarded by their renewed enslavement to the nationalist bureaucracy, as a workforce necessary for the primitive accumulation of capital … for the sole profit of a new variety of moneygrabbers.”[51]

In light of this tragic historical outcome, the Vietnam War can be understood as belonging to what Guy Debord has described as a series of spectacular “battles between competing versions of alienated power.” During the Cold War, these conflicts pitted the “most advanced economies” against the “state bureaucracy … of … countries living under colonialism or semi-colonialism." The antagonists in these battles, who appeared to embody opposing political systems, were, in fact, the "functions of a single tendency that … is capitalism."[52] Thus, after the war, the bureaucratic elite in Vietnam, having asserted that "socialism differs from capitalism in crucial ways, and proving it by applying its premises to pursue the war successfully … were converted to the notion … that all economies … must surrender to the … immutable objective laws of the market, whoever is nominally in power."[53]

Outline

This study disputes the representation of the war as a contest between US imperialism and the indomitable will of the Vietnamese people, rooted in a national history of heroic anti-colonial struggle. As I argue in Chapter 1, this ancient tradition was in fact a modern invention, a product of new forms of mass media, introduced by the colonial administration as part of the mission to civilize. This imperial project, moreover, did not simply betray the ideals of the French Revolution and the Rights of Man. Rather, as I argue in Chapter 3, the imperialism of the early colonial state was defined by the attempt to impose a Western ideal of democracy, one that was fundamentally opposed to the structure of Vietnamese civilization.

In the precolonial period, the country, which consisted of a myriad of semi-autonomous village communities, was ruled by a weak imperial court, a nominally absolute legal authority, lacking a modern apparatus of power that could intervene in the daily affairs of its subjects. This civilization, therefore, was that of a despotism whose largely formal prerogative constituted the juridical superstructure of a communal or democratic organization of peasant production, based on a custom or unwritten tradition of village autonomy. During the early colonial era, this organization was transformed by the introduction of capitalism and Western democracy, based on a system of individual rights guaranteed by the colonial administration. Together with the impersonal power of the market economy, these rights, enforced by the disciplinary institutions of a centralized state (such as the police and the colonial prison), served to weaken the authority of the imperial court, while undermining the traditional autonomy of the village.

The disciplinary machinery of the colonial government also included a new system of mass education, based on instruction in the vernacular script, and the creation of a modern Vietnamese media, disseminated through print capitalism. These institutions, which enabled a modern bourgeois public sphere to emerge in the colony, were originally established, with the support of the French secret police, as a tool for monitoring the political activities of the colonial population. In the attempt to deploy this modern form of publicity as a technique of surveillance, the French administration, however, would also create the conditions for a new "imagined community" of the nation, and the development of a new national culture.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the vernacular press would be instrumental in spreading the modern mythology of a 2,000-year history of resistance to foreign invasion. As I argue in Chapter 1, this modern tradition was the result of an anti-colonial interpretation of the precolonial past, based on a European conception of national sovereignty. In the interpretation, the legal prerogative of a weak imperial court, whose power was limited by the customary autonomy of the Vietnamese village, was rewritten as the sovereign right of a "people" possessing a distinct national culture, over the territory it had historically occupied. In this nationalist history, the Vietnamese people (who had appeared in the imperial records only as "subjects" (*dân*) of the "civilized" rule of the king) would become the foundation of a new "popular sovereignty" (*dân quyền*). Projecting the modern conception of sovereignty into the precolonial past, writers, working in the modern vernacular media, created a new national history of a new national people. In this history, the latter appear as a unified subject, engaged in a 2,000-year struggle to preserve its national heritage against all foreign invaders.

Disseminated through a popular medium that had been created in part as an imperial tool of surveillance, this history was adopted by the elite, inspiring widespread resistance to colonial rule. Thus, the apparently ancient tradition of expelling foreign invaders would be used to oppose the very imperialism that had helped to create it, in establishing the vernacular press as a tool for policing its subjects.

During the Vietnam War, the diffusion of the new national culture would become an integral part of the program employed by the Communist Party to mobilize the Vietnamese masses and to instill in them an indomitable will to resist, apparently rooted in ancient tradition. In that sense, the communist people's war strategy was used to create the very "national people" who would fight to defend its immemorial sovereignty against American neo-imperialism.

In historical works on the war, the uncritical acceptance of the modern mythology of an ancient Vietnamese culture has served to discourage a more careful examination of the South Vietnamese side of the conflict.

Portrayed as a government that was hopelessly compromised by its collusion with US imperialism, the Republic has been widely regarded as a political puppet, unworthy of the millennial history of foreign resistance invented in the colonial era. As a result, in "much of the writing on the war, the South Vietnamese," as George Herring has noted, "are conspicuous by their absence, and virtually nothing has been done on their dealings with the United States."[54]

This book will address this conpicuous absence by presenting a wide-ranging discussion of South Vietnamese culture as it emerged in the context of the colonial era and the Cold War. In doing so, however, it will also attempt to call into question a fundamental presupposition of both "orthodox" and "revisionist" accounts of the conflict.[55] This assumption is that the Republicanism of the South Vietnamese state was, from beginning to end, that of a nationalist government aimed at establishing a democratic alternative to communism based on the principle of popular sovereignty.[56] In the case of the First Republic, the project proved unsuccessful because of the failure of its president, Ngô Đình Diệm, to implement democratic reform and to broaden the popular base of his government.

This presupposition has served to conceal a remarkable political and social experiment, carried out under the shadow of US imperialism. Contrary to the conventional view, the war, for the First Republic, was not an anticommunist crusade, undertaken by a regime that was incapable of creating a stable democracy. Rather, the early Republic, as it evolved in its nine years of existence, could be more accurately characterized as a Marxist humanist state, applying a political philosophy known as "Personalism," which espoused a Marxist critique of capitalism and bourgeois democracy.

Chapter 2 examines the intellectual origins of this Vietnamese Personalism through a close reading of the work of the French Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Contrary to the caricature of his thought as an incoherent and reactionary religious ideology, the latter was in fact a philosophically rigorous form of Marxist theology, one that appealed, moreover, to anti-colonial leaders from throughout the developing world. In the chapter, the interpretation of Mounier's Marxist critique of capitalism and liberal democracy will provide the broader theoretical framework for this study and its reexamination of the war from a South Vietnamese perspective.

During the First Republic, the philosophy of Personalism, as I explore in Chapter 3, would inform the development of the Strategic Hamlet

Campaign, which was the primary strategy in the struggle against the insurgency. Contrary to existing accounts of the latter, the program was not simply a totalitarian technique of mass repression, developed by foreign advisors such as the British counterinsurgency expert, Robert Thompson. Rather, it was conceived by Diệm's brother Ngô Đình Nhu as a "social revolution" (*cách mạng xã hội*), aimed at transforming the entire economic and political structure in the South.

This revolution was supposed to provide an alternative to that of the government's communist rivals. This alternative, however, was not simply a mixture of nationalism, capitalism and liberal democracy, institutions that were inherited from the colonial administration. On the contrary, the leaders of the early Republic were acutely aware of the difficulties of establishing a Western-style democracy and a liberal economy in the context of war and underdevelopment, difficulties that were exasperated by American influence and aid. Instead of seeking to establish a bastion of capitalism and bourgeois democracy, the South Vietnamese leaders, therefore, in devising the Strategic Hamlet Campaign, would attempt to actualize an *alternative version of communism*.

But as such, the war in this earlier phase was not a conflict between socialism and democracy. Rather, as this study contends, it was a *contest between two different forms of anti-colonial communism*. Rejecting the ideals of liberal democracy, which had been introduced as part of the mission to civilize, the early Republican leaders would come to conceive of the conflict as a social revolution against both liberal democracy and the Stalinism of the Communist Party.

Drawing on the historiography invented in the colonial era, Republican leaders presented this Marxist humanist struggle as a modern version of the national myth of the "Southward Advance" (*nam tiến*), the South Vietnamese counterpart to the ancient tradition of resistance to foreign invaders. The revolution, then, in the South, would be cast as the continuation of the process of geographical expansion that, over the course of some 700 years, established the national territory of the Vietnamese people. In contrast, however, to the communist deployment of the modern mythology of an ancient tradition of anti-imperialism, the aim of the second Southward Advance was not the creation of a sovereign national government. Rather, the leaders of the early Republic envisioned a kind of return to a precolonial tradition of village autonomy, modernized on the revolutionary model of a direct "democracy at the base."[57]

This model was partly derived from the Personalist notion of praxis (which Nhu translated as *cần lao*), an act of free individuals, liberated, through their voluntary subjection to a "communal discipline," from the impersonal rule of the market as well as the disciplinary apparatus of the national government. In a "withering of the state," this autonomy, based on a personal discipline that is freely imposed, would serve to preempt the power of the centralized government, creating the conditions for a stateless form of non-Western modernity, superseding the notion of national sovereignty. The early Republic, therefore, would attempt to defeat the insurgency by employing a form of social organization, based on an ancient tradition of village democracy, that could operate independently of the centralized state.

But in that case, the war, as it was waged by the South Vietnamese government, was not simply a nationalist struggle. In contrast to the communist people's war strategy, the dissemination of a national culture, which the early Republic employed as part of its program of "nation-building" (*xây dựng quốc gia*), was not aimed at creating an "imagined community" of the nation. Rather, the nationalist myth of the Southward Advance was used in the program as a means of imagining a stateless form of modern community. During the period of the First Republic, the war, then, was not a conflict in which US imperialism employed a superior conventional army against a people steeped in a long national history of anti-foreign partisan warfare. Rather, it was a contest between two Vietnamese states, applying the same people's war strategy, while embracing two different conceptions of communism: one based on the dictatorship of the proletariat and the other oriented toward a socialism without the state.

By 1962, moreover, the revolution to establish this stateless form of democracy had begun to succeed in containing the insurgency in the South. As I argue in Chapters 3 and 4, however, the aim of creating a democracy at the base, or a socialism without the state, would put the leaders of the early Republic directly at odds with the Americans, as well as the South Vietnamese urban elite. For this group, the social revolution seemed like an authoritarian seizure of power by the executive branch, whose program of decentralization threatened the political prerogative of the ministries and military elite in Sài Gòn. In that sense, the goal of creating a democracy at the base, preempting the authority of the centralized government, was directly opposed to the aim, embraced by the Americans and urban elite, of establishing a parliamentary state in the South.

Ultimately, this "misalliance" between the Americans and the leaders of the early Republic would lead to its downfall. In 1963, the regime was overthrown in a coup supported by the American embassy in a misguided attempt to uphold the image of the Republic as a liberal democracy, an image that its leaders had rejected in favor of a stateless form of democracy, and a return to rural autonomy. Contrary to the conventional view, the collapse of the First Republic, therefore, was not a result of its failure to establish a viable parliamentary government. Rather, it was the increasing success of the Strategic Hamlet Campaign (as an alternative version of communism) in superseding the central agencies of the constitutional government, and decentralizing the struggle against the insurgency, that caused the fall of the First Republic.

But in that case, the early South Vietnamese state was neither a reactionary puppet regime, hired by an imperial power to repress its own population, nor an independent nation that was undermined by its own lack of democracy. Rather, the First Republic, in the years just before its collapse, was something more paradoxical and improbable. It was an anti-Stalinist socialist government, attempting to carry out its own communist revolution against the insurgency, a revolution that would put its objectives at odds with those of its neo-colonial patron, who conspired to overthrow the regime for the sake of liberal democracy.

As I explore in Chapter 4, this contradiction would compromise both the counterinsurgency strategy (which the early Republic conceived as a social revolution, rather than a program of pacification), as well as the psychological warfare campaign carried out in the North. For the South Vietnamese, the campaign was to be an extension of the counterinsurgency strategy, a second Southward Advance to reconquer the North. For the Americans, on the other hand, the aim of the program was to employ modern mass communication technologies to discredit the communist government, to undermine its nationalist image and publicize its lack of liberal democracy.

In the end, the coup that defeated the Personalist revolution would produce a profound political crisis, compelling US officials to dramatically expand the American military presence. Having undermined the Marxist humanist program of the early Republic, policymakers in Washington would come to rely on a high-tech war of attrition, employing information and image-making in order to overcome the insurgency. The violence of the war of attrition would result in widespread rural depopulation. The early Republican program of social revolution in the countryside, then, would be replaced by an "urban revolution," aimed at isolating the insurgency by displacing the rural population en masse. In the cities, moreover, the policies implemented by the later Republican governments would help to precipitate the emergence of an enormous consumer society, dependent on American aid. Chapter 5 will look at the rise of a new popular culture, which would become an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in South Vietnamese cities from the mid-1960s, as the violence continued to escalate in the countryside.

This popular culture, and the consumer society from which it emerged, was viewed by the Communist Party as an instrument for enslaving the masses that was far more effective than American psychological warfare campaigns. Having failed to crush the indomitable will of the Vietnamese people (rooted in an ancient tradition of resisting foreign invaders) through the use of superior violence, the Americans attempted to "invade the national culture" through popular media, in order to undermine the will to resistance. In the cities, therefore, the "decadent cultural products of American neo-colonialism" were deployed, purportedly, for the purpose of destroying national consciousness. The development of a "neo-colonialism" consumer society would be used to dissolve the national culture, which had previously served as a medium for imagining the nation. Divested of their national identity by the products of a foreign popular culture, urban South Vietnamese would become increasingly indifferent to the revolutionary appeals of the Party.

As I argue in Chapter 5, the development of popular culture, contrary to this communist account of neocolonialism, was not part of a psychological warfare campaign to manipulate the South Vietnamese masses. Rather, it was an unintended outcome of policies, implemented by the later Republican governments, in accordance with the American aim of establishing a bastion of liberal democracy and free market capitalism. In the cities, this created a climate of intellectual and cultural freedom, conducive to artistic experimentation and vigorous democratic debate in the media, which were completely unknown in the North.

Because of this liberal tendency, however, the later Republican regimes would largely abandon the project of disseminating a national culture in order to create an imagined community of the nation. This liberalism with regard to the question of culture would lead to the emergence of a largely unregulated market for media in the South. As the violence continued to escalate in the countryside, the market would become almost completely confined to the cities, reinforcing the separation between the rural and urban populations. Freed from the censorship imposed by the early Republic, the market, moreover, would divert the attention of South Vietnamese intellectuals away from the creation of high culture and art toward the production of mass entertainment. This entertainment included new forms of serialized fiction, genres on which the newspapers depended for profits from advertisers, who promoted the products of an underdeveloped society of high mass consumption. During this period, the free market for media would impose a compulsion upon artists to meet the increasing demand for popular fiction, while producing an uneven distribution of culture, which helped to isolate the imagination of rural and urban South Vietnamese. If print capitalism, therefore, during the colonial era, had helped to establish a new national culture, during the war, the unregulated market for media would work to unravel this imagined community. This effect of the media, in the era of high mass consumption and imperial image-making, would realize the aim of the early Republic in a direction that its leaders had never expected. Whereas the First Republic, in its opposition to capitalism and liberal democracy, had imagined a stateless form of community, the liberalism of the later Republic would give rise to an *unimagined community*, as a form of anti-modernity.

Chapter 6 proposes a reading of one of the most successful examples of South Vietnamese serialized fiction from this period of the war: Bùi Anh Tuấn's Ian Fleming-inspired Z.28 novels. Like other popular works from the period, the novels' primary source of appeal is the language of advertising employed in the prose, a phenomenon that became pervasive in South Vietnamese cities during the war. The novels consist of narratives of surveillance composed out of passages modeled on commercials for brand-named commodities. The success of the Z.28 series, however, was not only due to the appeal of its Vietnamese superspy character as a figure of vicarious consumption. In the novels, the character also appears as a symbol for the South Vietnamese state and its precarious position within the broader geopolitics of the Cold War. The frivolous tales of high mass consumption, therefore, set in a world reduced to an advertised image, also suggest a reflection on the place of the nation within the Cold War balance of power. In the Z.28 series, the RVN appears as a state whose autonomy is undermined by the military and economic support it receives from its American ally. The Republic, in other words, is portrayed as a nation whose political sovereignty is threatened by its dependence upon its superpower patron. The American government, then, is characterized in the series as both an ally and an object of political enmity. In the Z.28 novels, the Vietnamese spy appears as a figure who opposes this ambivalent ally not through overt forms of resistance, but rather through the act of consuming

American aid in the form of brand-named commodities. Thus, in the novels, the celebration of consumerism implies both an endorsement of the "neocolonial" consumer culture that emerged in the South as well as a repudiation of the imperialism or dependence on American aid that created this culture.

Finally, turning to the American perspective, Chapter 7 presents an analysis of the role of image production in American liberal democracy as a distinguishing feature of US imperialism during the Vietnam War. As the USA took control of the conflict, "image making," which Arendt defined as both the production of media spectacles and the creation of data, would play an increasingly significant part in the campaign against the insurgency. While intelligence and high-tech surveillance were employed in order to detect and destroy an unconventional army, the projection of the image of US omnipotence was used to "persuade" the enemy to surrender the war.

This unconventional army would finally be defeated in 1968. In an enormous strategic mistake, the communist leadership launched a general offensive at Tết that allowed the Americans and South Vietnamese to virtually destroy the entire Southern insurgency. This tragic defeat on the battlefield, however, would become a decisive success for the communist forces on the terrain of the spectacle, turning American public opinion against the Vietnam War.

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