Frazier on Stur, 'Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties'

Review published on Sunday, March 28, 2021


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Heather Stur’s *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties* joins a push among Vietnam War historians to take into greater consideration the perspectives of Vietnamese, and it contributes to the historiography by paying particular attention to South Vietnamese voices. Through archival research in Ho Chi Minh City, Stur provides insight into the lives and livelihoods of Vietnamese from all walks of life: urban elite, youth activists, religious leaders, military families, and diplomats. In doing so, *Saigon at War* moves away from the world of high politics and into everyday life on the streets of Saigon from the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 to the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Two main questions drive Stur’s analysis: who represented the authentic voice of the Vietnamese and why was it so difficult to build and maintain a democracy in South Vietnam? These questions and their answers go hand-in-glove with one another and, for Stur, point to the existence of a “chaotic yet proto-democratic national culture” in South Vietnam before its collapse (p. 7). *Saigon at War* illustrates that no single voice or group of people could be said to represent the desires of South Vietnamese people, yet many activists, urban elites, and religious leaders wanted the same thing: some form of representative government. Even so, a true democracy could not flourish under the circumstances because neither Saigon nor Washington harnessed a united front against the Communist North. Instead, a cacophony of voices led to disorder and confusion, and, ironically, the potential for a democracy that Stur identifies also resulted in the downfall of South Vietnam, she argues.

Stur illustrates the existence of a proto-democracy by homing in on a few key groups of people who made claims on the government and expected to be heard. For example, members of the educated elite had the ear of government officials as well as national and international press and used the attention to call for democracy, freedom, and peace—rhetoric that echoed the Saigon administration and Washington. Yet these politically savvy activists, some of whom had indirect ties to the National Liberation Front (NLF), undermined Saigon and its US counterparts by calling for freedom from outside interference and set themselves up as a “third force”—that is, a term meant to signify that they neither wanted to be ruled by Hanoi nor by the US-backed Saigon administration. Students formed another base of political activity, and like the peace activists a generation older, many youth activists similarly questioned the legitimacy of the unelected Saigon government. Even so, many opposed the Communist North—a detail that Saigon and Washington too often ignored.
According to Stur, political unrest in Saigon in the early 1960s provided a cover for NLF cadres determined to take down the government. Both communist and noncommunist activists took to the streets in protest of the unelected officials who led the country following the coup d’état that overthrew President Diem until the 1967 elections that resulted in General Nguyen Van Thieu’s presidency. The Saigon administration and its US allies often could not identify who was a communist instigator and who was a noncommunist citizen exercising their right to freedom of speech and assembly. Capitalizing on the confusion, the NLF committed strategic acts of violence within the city limits to destabilize Saigon, boost the morale of guerrilla fighters, and instill fear in Saigon’s citizens. The key, according to a 1967 US analysis of the situation that Stur cites, was for the NLF to commit acts of terrorism that yielded too few casualties to attract international attention but were visible enough to instigate the Saigon administration into acting as an authoritarian regime.

The Saigon administration played into the hands of NLF strategists, according to Stur, by cracking down on protests and locking up political prisoners, in many cases without trial. News of mass incarcerations followed by stories of torture in South Vietnamese prisons ruined any chance of South Vietnam receiving widespread international support and strengthened the NLF’s ability to claim to be the rightful inheritors of South Vietnam even after the 1967 election of President Thieu. Activists publicized acts of political repression—often committed against themselves—carried out by the Thieu administration. In the late 1960s, Vietnamese priests added to international scrutiny of South Vietnam’s prison system by publishing articles about political imprisonment in a Saigon-based Catholic magazine and by speaking out publicly. Such condemnation, especially on the part of the Catholic population which had staunchly supported anticommunist efforts in the early 1960s, made it difficult for the US administration to make the case to American citizens or to world opinion that US intervention was in fact boosting an intact democracy.

Stur’s study adds invaluable new research in her analysis of on-the-ground activities. She shows that time and again US diplomats’ distrust of activists and their difficulty in determining the intent of protestors led to missed opportunities for the Saigon government and its American advisors to cultivate homegrown support. By the mid- to late 1960s, the situation had turned into “mutual suspicion,” leaving activists who did not want an NLF victory with no reasonable outcome to champion (p. 108).

*Saigon at War* would be a welcome addition to either upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level curriculums on the Vietnam War, the global 1960s, or the US in the world, and historians, political scientists, and international relations scholars would do well to read it. Stur chose to structure the book as a layered history—that is, the chapters are generally arranged topically by type of Vietnamese actor (elite, youth, religious leader, etc.) rather than chronologically—as a way to highlight the diverse perspectives of South Vietnamese. Although some scholars may level the usual charges against such a choice in organization—change over time is not the central focus of the text and some repetition occurs in terms of explaining the historical context of given events—the structure makes the book conducive to assigning single chapters (e.g., if a professor wanted to compare student activism in Saigon with student activism elsewhere during the global 1960s, they could easily do so). In short, *Saigon at War* will no doubt become required reading for those wishing to research any aspect of the US war in Vietnam.

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