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Review by Harish C. Mehta, Independent Scholar

Lien-Hang Nguyen has drawn attention to the neglected topic of the ‘people’s diplomacy’ of North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV). Its importance cannot be overemphasized for two reasons. First, people’s diplomacy transmitted the DRV’s revolutionary/diplomatic agency far beyond its borders, enabling the North Vietnamese to make the case that they were victims of U.S. imperialism. Secondly, it forged powerful links with a vast global antiwar campaign in order to influence the U.S. government to end its bombardment which killed thousands of civilians, and to win moral support and economic aid from people abroad.

Yet the question lingers in some minds – does people’s diplomacy matter? Did it succeed in influencing the U.S. government to alter its policy, or to bring material aid to North Vietnam from abroad?

Nguyen points out that it does matter. The author begins her article with an appreciative reference to the global antiwar activism of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective (411). The use of the Collective, however, is not entirely appropriate because it was created in 1975, two years after the signing of the peace agreement to end the Vietnam War, and it played no role at the apogee of antiwar movement. Moreover, since the article under review mainly concerns informal/people’s diplomacy, the author’s choice of the Collective as a signpost of revolutionary times is unsuitable as it did not conduct wartime diplomacy. The author acknowledges that no member of the Collective had met any Vietnamese, ruling out any possibility of diplomacy (412).

Instead of the Collective, Nguyen could have chosen from a variety of U.S. women’s groups that conducted informal diplomacy with the Vietnamese. For instance, the first American peace activists to meet North Vietnamese officials were the members of Women Strike for Peace (WSP). The author briefly mentions WSP, on pages 417-418. The article could also have cited several important secondary texts that deal with the diplomacy of U.S. women, such as a definitive work by Mary Hershberger and others, and Vietnamese media
reports on WSP meetings with Vietnamese women starting in 1965.¹ The author also has not fully located the article within the historiography of informal diplomacy, as apart from citing works by Nguyen Dy Nien and Mehta, there is a lack of engagement with the larger literature on informal diplomacy, how it originated, and the pressures it faced.²

The idea of people’s diplomacy should be properly contextualized. President Ho Chi Minh created the people’s diplomacy model in 1964 – several years before scholars developed track- two diplomacy and soft power.³ An American psychiatrist, William D. Davidson, and a U.S. State Department foreign-service officer, Joseph V. Montville, coined track one and track two in an article in 1981.⁴ They defined track one as formal negotiations conducted by diplomats, and track two as conflict resolution by professional non-governmental conflict resolution practitioners and theorists. They clarify that national political leaders have tended to drift to war because of misperceptions and lost opportunities for peace. They argue that “a second diplomatic track can therefore make its contribution as a supplement to the understandable shortcomings of official relations, especially in times of tension.” Some years later, the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye invented the concept of soft power.⁵ States use soft power by deploying their citizens and cultures to attain diplomatic objectives. People’s diplomacy, thus, is located within the borders of informal, track-two diplomacy, and soft power.


Nguyen correctly observes that “although the anti-Vietnam War movement is usually analyzed as a turbulent period in modern American history, it was truly a global phenomenon” (412). Mention must also be made of Europe, where people’s diplomacy extracted maximum benefit, and where it most embarrassed the U.S. government.

The anti-Vietnam War movement began in Europe before it began in America. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell and the North Vietnamese jointly created the International War Crimes Tribunal in Europe and Japan in 1967 to try U.S. leaders for ‘war crimes’ in Vietnam – one year before the movement really took off within the United States. Scholars have shown that Americans who opposed the war in Vietnam were encouraged by the support they received from overseas, especially because Russell was assembling his Vietnam tribunal as the antiwar movement was growing in the United States.⁶

Europe was the epicentre of people’s diplomacy for a couple of reasons. First, DRV people’s diplomats faced powerful constraints in the United States as they never travelled to the country to attend an antiwar event. North Vietnamese, however, were regular visitors to antiwar events across Europe, as well as Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Their presence enabled direct North Vietnamese people’s participation in their own diplomacy. Secondly, many ordinary European citizens vigorously opposed the U.S. war in Vietnam, and they willingly provided economic aid.⁷

People’s diplomacy produced tangible results in Europe. An Italian communist campaign to help North Vietnam resulted in several thousand Italians donating 100 million lira to set up a field hospital in North

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Vietnam in 1965. The French Communist Party launched its ‘Shipment for Solidarity’ program, collecting more than 400 million francs from French donors in November 1967. The party matched these funds, and collected another 216 million francs by its own efforts. French citizens donated an additional 121 million francs for food and medicines shipped to the DRV.

Nguyen explores the diplomatic role played by the National Liberation Front’s Foreign Minister Nguyen Thi Binh. This senior NLF leader, however, is not a representative of DRV people’s diplomacy – or even of NLF informal diplomacy. First, as she held formal diplomatic and governmental positions, she put herself outside the parameters of people’s diplomacy, which excludes diplomacy conducted by officials. Second, she belonged to the non-communist NLF, which was forging its own foreign relations abroad, quite separately from the DRV’s. The author argues that “Vietnamese people’s diplomacy was not only focused on the American antiwar movement,” and that “the Communist Party went to great lengths to secure the support of postcolonial countries in the Third World” (414). The support extended by poor developing countries, however, was mainly sympathetic, and did not yield diplomatic dividends.

Nguyen cites a number of hurdles that are making it difficult for American scholars to present the story of Vietnamese revolutionary agency, such as “linguistic challenges associated with research, restricted access to archival materials, and difficulty reaching individuals involved” (412). Such obstacles need to be overcome before scholars can reach archives in other countries as well. To add an update here, in recent years Vietnamese archivists have been welcoming researchers to their vast, and largely unexplored, collections. The author’s explanation for the neglect of Vietnamese agency – that “scholars of the [antiwar] movement in the United States have much to contend with given the diverse American experiences in antiwar protest (412)” – reveals a longstanding U.S.-centric mindset in the academy.

Nguyen cites the Subaltern Studies School of Indian historians to underscore the danger of viewing the world exclusively through the eyes of the colonial state and its archives (413). Some subalterns, however, believe that the colonial/imperial archives are ‘tainted’ as they contain derogatory language to describe the colonial subject, and these historians reject the grand narratives of imperial capitalist expansion. Other subalterns and postcolonial theorists suggest that the way forward lies in using both colonialist narratives alongside the archives of the colonized subject.

The author observes that the DRV peace negotiator at the Paris Peace Talks, Le Duc Tho, “was successful in rattling his counterpart, [U.S. Secretary of State] Henry Kissinger, by bringing up the antiwar movement”

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(415). The author adds: “Aside from playing jedi mind tricks that succeeded in flustering Kissinger during the negotiations, Vietnamese communist leaders also implemented people’s diplomacy to win worldwide support and sympathy for Vietnamese independence.” I would argue that not only was Kissinger rattled, but even earlier President Lyndon Johnson was worried about the impact of DRV propaganda and informal diplomacy on European leaders who declined to support the Johnson war in Vietnam.12

A further elaboration of the soft power component of people’s diplomacy is required in order to evaluate whether or not such diplomacy eventually succeeded in its goal to influence the U.S. government to end the bombing of North Vietnam and begin peace talks. First, President Johnson was worried about the global influence of DRV diplomacy. LBJ complained to Birch Bayh, Democratic senator from Indiana, in June 1965, that the Vietnamese revolutionaries “are winning the propaganda war against us.” LBJ added: “and they are also winning the other war against us because they are winning the propaganda one.” He continued: “They have Harold Wilson on the ropes and they have the Prime Minister of Canada dodging and ducking.”13

British Prime Minister Wilson had made it clear that Britain would not directly support the United States in Vietnam, and he had criticized LBJ’s Vietnam policy, particularly his decision to start regular bombardment of North Vietnam in January 1965.14 National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy warned the president that Wilson “won’t do anything on Vietnam – his peace people won’t let him.”15 Bundy was referring to the growing opposition in Britain led by dissident members of Wilson’s own Labour Party and peace activists – with close links with North Vietnamese – who criticized the Wilson government for failing to stand up to the United States when it came to Vietnam.

Second, the effectiveness of people’s diplomacy is evident in the transnational collaboration between Ho Chi Minh/North Vietnamese mass organizations and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF) to organize the International War Crimes Tribunal. The tribunal hearings in Denmark, Sweden and Japan in 1967 investigated U.S. ‘war crimes’ in Vietnam, principally the use of chemical weapons and practices prohibited by international conventions.16 The relationship between the BRPF and the North Vietnamese – journalists based in London, and an entire range of mass organizations, and individuals – represented resistance to the U.S. effort to sustain a non-communist regime in South Vietnam.

12 Telcon, Johnson and Bayh, 15 June 1965, 1:20 p.m., Recordings and Transcripts of Telephone Conversations and Meetings, White House Series, June 1965, Box 7, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas.


14 Schwartz, Lyndon Johnson and Europe, 71, 75.

15 Meeting notes, 29 July 1965, Bator Papers, Box 23, LBJ Library.

On 3 August 1966, newspapers announced that a tribunal headed by Russell and the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre would try President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara as ‘war criminals’ for their policies toward Vietnam. The judges would make their decision based on the testimony of hundreds of witnesses and scientific data on chemicals used in U.S. military operations.

Third, people’s diplomacy, and its central role in creating the tribunal, proved to be an irritant at first to a few U.S. officials, and soon morphed into a sore that caused increasing concern to the U.S. Government. Officials from the State Department, the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the United States Information Agency launched a campaign overseas to discredit BRPF staff, and persuaded several Third World leaders to withdraw their support to the tribunal. U.S. officials even mulled a project to organize a “counter seminar” in Europe to blunt the war crimes tribunal.

People’s diplomacy proved so effective by the mid-1960s that President Johnson began to fear that North Vietnamese officials could no longer be cast convincingly as Soviet and Chinese stooges. Many of America’s Western allies did not send troops or provide aid to South Vietnam because people’s diplomacy enabled antiwar movements to offer alternative perspectives on the DRV which made the enemy seem less threatening.

Fourth, people’s diplomacy was more effective than traditional DRV diplomacy in gaining the support and sympathy of Westerners who were averse to communism. Testimonies of Western eyewitnesses criticizing the effects of American bombardment on Vietnamese civilians helped legitimize the Vietnamese communist cause.

People’s diplomacy damaged the image of the United States as an aggressor, and cast North Vietnam as a victim of imperialism. The worldwide linkages forged by people’s diplomacy made it difficult for the United


18 Mehta, “People’s Diplomacy,” 252. The tribunal included Russell as Honorary President, Sartre as Executive President, and Yugoslav historian Vladimir Dedijer as Chairman of Sessions. After dropouts and new additions, the tribunal members included: German political scientist Wolfgang Abendroth, German writer Gunther Anders, Turkish parliamentarian Mehmet Ali Aybar, American novelist James Baldwin, Italian parliamentarian Lelio Basso, French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, former Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chairman Stokely Carmichael, General Secretary of the Scottish National Union of Mineworkers Lawrence Daly, American activist and editor of Liberation David Dellinger, Polish Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher, Jewish lawyer Haika Grossman, Philippine poet laureate Amado Hernandez, chairperson of the Cuban Committee for Solidarity with Vietnam Melba Hernandez, Pakistani Supreme Court lawyer Mahmud Ali Kasuri, Swedish author Sara Lidman, Vice-Chairman of the Japanese Civil Liberties Union Kinju Morikawa, former Students for a Democratic Society President Carl Oglesby, Japanese physics professor Shoichi Sakata, French mathematician Laurent Schwartz, and German playwright Peter Weiss.

States to prolong the war. Without people’s diplomacy U.S. leaders would have been less restrained and they might have tried to prolong the war until U.S. power prevailed.

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