



Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives)

By Geoffrey C. Gunn

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This book offers the first detailed English-language examination of the Great Vietnamese Famine of 1945, which left at least a million dead, and links it persuasively to the largely unexpected Viet Minh seizure of power only months later. Drawing on extensive research in French archives, Geoffrey C. Gunn offers an important new interpretation of Japanese–Vichy French wartime economic exploitation of Vietnam’s agricultural potential. He analyzes successes and failures of French colonial rice programs and policies from the early 1900s to 1945, drawing clear connections between colonialism and agrarian unrest in the 1930s and the rise of the Viet Minh in the 1940s. Gunn asks whether the famine signaled a loss of the French administration’s “mandate of heaven,” or whether the overall dire human condition was the determining factor in facilitating communist victory in August 1945.

In the broader sweep of Vietnamese history, including the rise of the communist party, the picture that emerges is not only one of local victimhood at the hands of outsiders—French and, in turn, Japanese— but the enormous agency on the part of the Vietnamese themselves to achieve moral victory over injustice against all odds, no matter how controversial, tragic, and contested the outcome. As the author clearly demonstrates, colonial-era development strategies and contests also had their postwar sequels in the “American war,” just as land, land reform, and subsistence-sustainable development issues persist into the present.

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Editorial Review

Review

Famine and war are frequent bedfellows, with civilian deaths due to starvation and malnutrition sometimes outnumbering battlefield casualties. This scenario was clearly the case in colonial Indochina as WW II reached its climax. The great famine of 1944-45 is largely unknown or forgotten in the West, and this new book by Gunn appears to be the first title in English to discuss it at length. In examining the famine, Gunn discusses the role of natural disaster, rice requisitions by the occupying Japanese forces, and ineffective administration by Vichy French authorities. However, most of the book is a prelude to the famine itself, as Gunn examines Vietnamese agriculture, prewar resistance to French rule, and the rise of the Viet Minh and its efforts to gain a foothold in rural areas. This book is a welcome addition to scholarship on Vietnam . . . Summing Up: Recommended. Researchers, faculty, graduate students. (*CHOICE*)

The Great Vietnamese Famine of 1944–1945 claimed two million lives, Ho Chi Minh declared as the Viet Minh seized power in Hanoi during September 1945. . . . Seeking to unravel the causes of the disaster and the emergence of the Viet Minh as an organised force, Gunn brings to bear 30 years of experience in Indochina. . . . Gunn is reluctant to pin blame for the Great Famine on any single group; more research is needed, he notes; there was a combination of circumstance and action and it is that combination he has elucidated with care and clarity. (*Asian Affairs*)

Of particular interest to many readers . . . will be Vietnam's great famine which provides the book's subtitle. . . . So little has been written on it [the famine]. That makes the present book's piecing together of bits of evidence a welcome addition to the literature. . . . The book will take a place as a valuable addition to work on the history of Vietnam and of famines. (*Economic History Review*)

In this study of the political, economic and military struggles between the French, the Japanese and the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) over the producing, marketing and consuming of rice in Vietnam, Geoffrey Gunn enhances and augments our understanding of the long-term and short-term causes of the Viet Minh victory in 1945. . . . *Rice Wars* will reward readers if only for the expertise and compassion with which Gunn deals with the famine. . . . Gunn addresses one of the more important and difficult questions about modern Vietnamese history when he interrelates the famine with the political, economic and military conditions that enabled the Viet Minh to guide and participate in a movement against the expropriation of most of the rice crop by the Japanese. (*Journal of Contemporary Asia*)

Rice Wars is a welcome addition to the scholarship on modern Vietnamese history as well as the history of war and famine. The book sets out to understand the causes of the famine and to argue that this humanitarian disaster contributed to the Viet Minh's rise to power in August 1945.... *Rice Wars* provides a good overview of the agrarian situation of French colonial Vietnam, and more importantly, it affords a comprehensive examination of the Great Vietnamese Famine and its context. (*Pacific Affairs*)

Despite resulting in the deaths of between one and two million people, the great famine of 1945 that decimated the population of northern Vietnam has received little scholarly attention. Geoffrey Gunn's meticulously researched and historically grounded study fills this surprising gap. Gunn examines the role rice played, both in the colonial economy and in promoting earlier revolutionary activity before focusing on the war years from 1940 to 1945. His apportionment of blame between French authorities and Japanese occupation forces is balanced and judicious, and his study as a whole contributes significantly to our

understanding of the reasons for famine and how it could have been prevented. (Martin Stuart-Fox, University of Queensland)

Geoffrey Gunn's *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam* is a superb multidimensional analysis of the great famine that struck northern Vietnam in 1945. Gunn has mined the French colonial archives for new sources of information and applied what he terms 'a correlated political economy approach' to identify the various factors at play that led to social revolution, the demise of French colonialism, and the triumph of communism in modern Vietnam. (Carlyle A. Thayer)

Geoffrey Gunn analyzes the causes of the 1945 Vietnamese famine, the pre-famine French-managed agrarian system, and post-famine developments. He absolves France of some of the responsibility, puts the main blame on Japan, and discusses the agrarian policies of the Viet Minh. With its focus on the political economy of rice cultivation and food distribution the book forms a most valuable contribution to our understanding of the Vietnamese Revolution and the background for the Indochina Wars. (Stein Tønnesson)

About the Author

Geoffrey C. Gunn is professor emeritus of economics at Nagasaki University and visiting professor at the University of Macau.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Megan Martelli:

Reading a book tends to be new life style in this particular era globalization. With reading you can get a lot of information that will give you benefit in your life. Together with book everyone in this world can certainly share their idea. Textbooks can also inspire a lot of people. Plenty of author can inspire their reader with their story or even their experience. Not only the storyplot that share in the books. But also they write about advantage about something that you need instance. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach your young ones, there are many kinds of book that you can get now. The authors these days always try to improve their ability in writing, they also doing some exploration before they write to the book. One of them is this *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power* (Asia/Pacific/Perspectives).

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