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## <Book Review>

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**Phi-Van Nguyen. *A Displaced Nation: The 1954 Evacuation and Its Political Impact on the Vietnam Wars*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024.**

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Phi-Van Nguyen. *A Displaced Nation: The 1954 Evacuation and Its Political Impact on the Vietnam Wars*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Olga Dror\*

Phi-Van Nguyen has written a much-needed book focused on the flight of people from North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) to South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam [RVN]) after the Geneva Accords of 1954, which created two separate states. According to the author, “This book explains why people who evacuated from the north in 1954 became the most anti-communist group in the RVN” (p. 177).

*A Displaced Nation* consists of eight chapters, beginning with a discussion of the status of North and South Vietnam, “two states for one country” (p. 15), after the Geneva Accords and ending with “one Vietnam across borders” in the 1990s (p. 172). It argues that “population displacement, when used as a weapon to reinforce or undermine the legitimacy of contesting political attitudes, affects the projection of the nation state” (p. 6).

The book is interested primarily in the Catholics among the evacuees and tends to view them as mostly motivated by religion, yet with many of them inspired to assume a prominent symbolic identity in the politics of the Cold War, an anti-Communist identity that was diverse and changed over time.

A strength of this book is its emphasis on the “civil war” aspect of the French and American phases of the Vietnam wars that is missing in most writing about modern Vietnam. The author argues with well-documented assertions that, despite the involvement of the major Cold War powers, the struggle between the Vietnamese Communists and their Vietnamese opponents was fundamentally a Vietnamese affair. This is important because most writing about the wars in Vietnam focuses nearly exclusively upon the United States and other foreign states and upon only one of the Vietnamese contenders, the one based in Hanoi. Thus, this book adds to the increasing awareness among scholars of Vietnamese who did not want to live in a Communist state and who supported the cause of resisting Hanoi-led war.

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The book chronicles the history of the anti-Communist Catholic evacuees from the North in 1954. According to the author, these people exerted an influence over events and perceptions disproportionate to their numbers, an influence that was enabled by the agitation of Cold War propaganda. Their symbolic value as people who voted against Communism with their feet gave their voices a legitimacy that others lacked. But the author also affirms that “Catholics did not leave because of propaganda. They . . . had good reason for moving to the south” (p. 42).

When Nguyen concentrates on the topic of the activists among the 1954 Catholic evacuees and the subsequent trail of their political involvements, the book has much of interest and value. The first three chapters successfully set the stage for Nguyen’s analysis. Chapter 4 contains a good explication of the political situation in South Vietnam from 1964 through the first half of 1965, during the interregnum between the end of the First Republic and the beginning of American intervention.

Chapter 5 plunges out of Vietnam into the international anti-war movement and the wartime activities of 1954 Catholic evacuees, particularly Tran Tam Tinh in Canada. Although Tran was isolated from events in Vietnam, the author endeavors to use him to show differences of opinion among the Catholic evacuees.

Chapter 6’s account of anti-war Catholics describes what the author believes to have been Catholic public opinion turning against the United States for its betrayal of the Vietnamese anti-Communist cause by withdrawing from the war. Here Nguyen presents a poorly analyzed description of a “transnational network of Christians” who agitated “for peace”: “Christians around the world joined in solidarity to denounce Saigon’s authoritarianism” (p. 127). The author’s description of wartime restrictions in South Vietnam lacks a comparison with conditions in North Vietnam (p. 129).

In Chapter 7, post-1975 refugee politics of Catholics and non-Catholics are conflated. Chapter 8 tends to lump together various groups of 1954 evacuees with post-1975 refugees and overseas Vietnamese in general. Nguyen aims to highlight the self-appointed role of Catholic evacuees in the Cold War: “The Cold War had changed and so had the methods needed to fight it. But many evacuees still believed they had to lead the effort” (p. 165). The author has to deal with the diversity of Catholic evacuees while maintaining a focus on the idea that they were impelled for decades by their imagined role in the Cold War: “there is no single factor common to all the evacuees . . .,” but “the most important parameter . . . came from the Cold War and how it intensified, stalled, or weakened the political struggle in Vietnam” (p. 179). The evacuees’ identity depended upon the various states of the Cold War and its international vicissitudes.

The book concludes that the Cold War was “a highly subjective experience” (p. 181) and that “The end of the Cold War ultimately led many evacuees to acknowledge that the Vietnam of their imagination would never exist within the borders they envisioned. Vietnam would con-

tinue to exist across continents” (p. 182).

There are a few inaccuracies in the book. The author confuses the *modus vivendi* of September 1946 with the Franco-Vietnamese agreement of March 6, 1946 (p. 156) and recycles some salient myths about the 1954–63 period. Nguyen claims that “France granted the State of Vietnam independence in a treaty on June 4, 1954” (pp. 29, 51). This is not true. On June 4, 1954, French Prime Minister Joseph Laniel and Buu Loc, the prime minister of the State of Vietnam, initialed an independence treaty, but it was never ratified because within two weeks Pierre Mendès-France became the French prime minister, and he was determined to obtain an end to the war at Geneva without the complication of such a treaty. France never officially agreed to the independence of the State of Vietnam, which is why the October 1955 electoral exercise to depose Bao Dai as the head of state was in effect a declaration of independence.

The author also claims that France, the USSR, the UK, and the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam “signed” the Final Declaration of the Geneva Accords (p. 32). In fact, no one signed the Final Declaration in which mention was made of unification elections within two years, though the mythology of Geneva Conference attendees, including the United States and the State of Vietnam, having done so became a ubiquitous refrain in later polemical writings.

The book ignores the role of the United States in the deterioration of political stability in Saigon after 1956 (pp. 73–76) and claims that the request to the United Nations to investigate discrimination against Buddhists was made by Vietnamese Buddhists (p. 80). In fact, the request was initiated by Ngo Dinh Diem’s government itself. These errors are probably due to the author’s trust in elements of the anti-Ngo Dinh Diem and anti-war narrative. The simplistic and misleading narration of the South Vietnamese Land to the Tiller program is probably due to a desire to present an overwhelmingly negative interpretation of the Second Republic of Vietnam (pp. 118–119), a pillar of the anti-war movement.

This book provides a welcome addition to our knowledge of the politically active Catholic evacuees of 1954 and the vicissitudes of their hopes and dreams during the subsequent half-century. It shows that in the context of the Cold War, many prominent members of this group gained a sense of personal significance as people who voted with their feet against Communism. The symbolic value of having done so nurtured an ambition to be prominent among Vietnamese anti-Communists and to be mobilized for victory in the Vietnamese civil war.