



Hot As Hell

The Cold War's Impact on Nation-
Building in Former Indochina

By Elina Ziehm

Introduction

‘The Eastern world, it is explodin’. Violence flarin’, bullets loadin’.¹ The Cold War in the former French colonies Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos – also known as “Indochina”- went beyond threats and tension through the Iron Curtain, including heavy international involvement and escalation of civil wars. Some wars remain present in the minds of today’s Western society while others are forgotten or have never been discussed in depth. For example, the dramatic US loss of the Vietnam War has been discussed thoroughly by historians but the US intervention in Laos or the communist experiment of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia is one of the lesser studied topics, which despite that lesser focus, had crucial societal and political effects on these nations.

English-language historiography and the study of the Cold War has moved from an orthodox perspective prominent in the 1950s, which made the Soviets responsible for the Cold War, to a revisionist perspective in the 1960s that held American expansionism accountable, to the idea of an inevitability of the Cold War due to Soviet expansionism and US containment policies, namely post-revisionism from the 1990s onwards. However, what is often forgotten in this discussion is the effect of the Cold War on the newly decolonised nations, as well as the role they played in the struggle between the US and the USSR.² Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao societies had to undergo a hasty process of state formation and nation-building in order to keep up with the rapid international developments of the second half of the twentieth century.

Controlled by their coloniser, occupied by Japan during the Second World War, and subsequently independent between 1945 and 1960, the former colonies in Southeast Asia underwent different processes of decolonisation. Even so, they ended up trapped between interests on the frontiers of the Cold War powers.³

Therefore, this essay discusses how Cold War interventions shaped postcolonial nation-building in French Indochina between 1945 and 1975. First, it considers the nature and aspects of Cold War interventions and its effects on the civil wars and political nation-building. Moreover, it stresses the impact of guerrilla groups and aid programs on the efforts of political and economic nation-building. Finally, with regards to cultural development and identity formation, it examines the role of ideological intervention and art. The essay concludes that the interventions of the Cold War powers made independent nation-building challenging, as they manipulated the development of postcolonial Indochina through aid and advice, which was an alibi to assert their interests and display their power in the Cold War struggle. However, it also observes that local politicians were not always victim to foreign intervention but sometimes instrumentalized foreign aid and tensions to assert their own interests. Nation-building as a main concept in this essay is used in partial accordance with the definition provided by Harris Mylonas in the Oxford Bibliographies. He defines nation-building as a structural process that interacts and interrelates with industrial, urban, and social development to achieve national integration.⁴ As this essay focusses on newly established postcolonial states, nation-building also refers to the general creation

of a shared identity, integrated economy, and the establishment of an independent political system in a Cold War world order.

It is crucial to discuss the impact of the Cold War on nation-building as current global politics is still influenced and affected by the national identities, power dynamics and grievances of Southeast Asian countries that originate in the Cold War period. The young countries were shaped by the struggle between the US and USSR which reached beyond the scope of the anticlimactic competition in Europe between the Communist and Capitalist ideology of the two power blocs commonly imagined by Western society. This essay only focuses on the former French colonies Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as their interdependency before and during the Cold War allows for a comparative approach. Moreover, the focus enables an in-depth analysis rather than a listing of events.

Historical Background

The geographical areas that are today referred to as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had been gradually colonized by France from being a protectorate in 1862 to the formation of the Indochinese Union in 1887. During the Japanese occupation in WW2, from 1940 to 1945, France was driven out of the region but returned after Japan's defeat. Though they were eager to continue the colonial administration, it was met with opposition from the local population. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, leader of the communist Viet Minh, that fought against the Japanese occupation during WW2, declared Vietnam's independence in 1945. Yet, this was not accepted by France and a civil war between France and the Viet Minh

broke out. After eight years of guerrilla warfare, the French were defeated in the final battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the Geneva accords were signed that granted independence to the French colony Indochina. However, Vietnam was split along the 17th parallel, leaving the North under Viet Minh control and the South governed by the Catholic, pro-US Ngo Diem Dinh. After the first civil war, most members of the Viet Minh living in the South were relocated to the North, yet some remained. From 1955, Diem tried to extinguish the last members through killings, imprisonments, and resettlement, leading to increased tensions with the North and general social unrest. By the beginning of 1957, occasional violent protests by farmers developed into an organised rebellion movement that was from 1959 onwards supported by guerrillas from the North through the Ho Chi Minh path.⁵ This infamous path was a secret supply route of the communist guerrillas through the forests along the border regions in Cambodia and Laos connecting North and South Vietnam.⁶ The "red fear" of the US caused its deep involvement in the civil war which will be discussed in depth. After almost two decades of warfare, the US retreated from the region in 1975 and left behind destructed land from bombings with the chemical "agent orange" and about 3 million deaths.⁷

Similar to Vietnam, Lao nationalists called 'Lao Issara [Free Laos]' declared independence of Laos in 1945.⁸ Differently, they were defeated by French troops that re-established a colonial administration in 1946 but declared Lao an independent state within the French Union from 1949. Yet, another nationalist group known as Pathet Lao declared full independence and

occupied the northern regions of Laos in 1953 with the support of about 40.000 Viet Minh troops. Hence, Lao forces were also involved in the Vietnamese war against France, known as the first Indochina war. Subsequently, Laos was also given independence in 1954 during the Geneva conference.⁹ In the years after decolonization, Laos underwent several government changes that were manipulated by Soviet, Chinese and US interests which will be discussed in depth at a later point. At the beginning of the 1960s, the tensions within the country escalated into a civil war after a coup by the communists and counter-coup by the right-wing Royal Lao Army. Trying to prevent further escalation, Laos was declared a neutral country in a 1961 Geneva conference. Yet, the Pathet Lao remained supporters of the Viet Minh during the Vietnam war along the Ho Chi Minh trail, leading to a secret bombing campaign conducted by the US from 1964-1973 that aimed at diminishing the trail in Laos.¹⁰

Cambodia's path to independence was overall less violent than Vietnam's or Lao's. With the French return in 1945, Cambodia became an independent state in the French Union with French control over its economic output and international participation with Prince Sihanouk as head of government.¹¹ However, with the release of nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh from exile, the communist group Khmer Issarak was formed which launched minor undertakings to disrupt French colonial activities on the Thai border.¹² Trying to maintain popular support, Sihanouk announced in 1952 that Cambodia would be independent from France within three years. After gaining independence in 1954, Sihanouk fully took

power in Cambodia until he was overthrown by US-backed Lon Nol in a coup in 1970.¹³ During his administration, Sihanouk aimed at neutrality of Cambodia for the sake of international integration and economic development. However, the secret US bombing campaign 'Operation Menu' heavily disrupted the country, which will be discussed in depth further into this essay.¹⁴ To summarize, the independence movement was a transnational project from the start, with foreign intervention that shaped developments crucial to nation building.

Escalation of Civil Wars through International Involvement

The civil wars of the post-colonial period were escalated by the Cold War powers. This had crucial impacts on the ability of independent nation-building due to the general instability caused by chaos and social division exacerbated by international intervention. Particularly the Vietnam war is often perceived as simply a proxy war between the Cold War powers. However, Clemens Six, proposes to move away from this assumption and interpret the Cold War dynamics in Asia as a radicalising and intensifying force to pre-existing local conflicts.¹⁵ Looking at the decolonisation conflict, also known as the first Indochina war from 1946-1954, it can be observed that involvement by the USA and the Communist Bloc caused an escalation of the colonial conflict fought by the Viet Minh, Pathet Lao and Khmer Issarak against the French colonial administration.¹⁶ Moreover, the US supported president Ngo Dinh Diem in his campaign to eliminate his opponents and Viet Minh sympathisers that led to the infamous "Vietnam war", the second civil

war in the region in which the US was heavily involved.¹⁷ The same can be observed in Cambodia where the US provided aid to Lon Nol in his efforts to drive Vietnamese communists out of the country, and his armed struggle against the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communists.¹⁸ Six's thesis and the examples show that the Cold War powers were heavily involved in the civil wars and escalated them through their involvement. Particularly the US's involvement was motivated by anti-communism as they backed the allegedly anti-communist camps.

In Laos, international involvement did not only escalate the civil war but also impacted Lao's creation of a national identity significantly, as it further divided the country. In his book *Secularism, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in South and Southeast Asia*, Six uses Lao's multiethnicity as an example of a more nuanced idea that positions the Cold War as a radicalising and intensifying force for pre-existing tensions in history.¹⁹ After all, different from Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos did not fit into the definition of a nation-state: it was multi-ethnic, 90% of its population rural by the time of decolonisation in 1954 and about 50% of its inhabitants did not know the name of the land they lived on. Their identity was instead based on the tribe they belonged to, making the creation of a shared national identity difficult.²⁰ Additionally, according to Dewi Resminingayu, the different parties were influenced by the Cold War ideologies which divided the population further.²¹ For example in the 1950s, US, Soviet and Chinese interests backed leftist, right-wing and moderate political groups in Laos, trying to enforce their interests. This led to

continued attempts at coalition governments which were eventually overthrown throughout the decade and the tensions developed into a civil war from 1962.²² Six and Resminingayu are correct in interpreting Laos as an example of Cold War involvement that led to a civil war, however, they overlook the root cause of the local tensions: The Eurocentric idea of 'Nation State' that forced newly decolonised states which were multi-ethnic and decentralized into a particular political system, a centralized, sovereign state. Therefore, Laos does not only showcase the assertion of Cold War power interests leading to a civil war but also the Western idea of nation states as the only possible way of government and state formation.

In addition to the escalation of the civil wars, the US bombing campaigns caused destruction of land and human capital, vital to economic growth. Frey states that extensive bombing campaigns weakened the already struggling economies further and caused famines, internal displacement and a refugee crisis which delayed and interfered with the chance at a successful nation-building progress.²³ To exemplify, in South Vietnam, 9,000 out of 15,000 villages, millions of hectares of farmland and forest were harmed or destroyed, and 1.5 million cattle were killed. Moreover, the war resulted in 1.5 million military and civilian deaths, 362,000 invalids, and 900,000 orphans, as well as an exodus of about one million refugees by 1982.²⁴ In Cambodia, the secret bombings of 'Operation Menu' destroyed the border lands that were vital in agricultural production and caused an internal displacement. Operation Barrel Roll, which was aimed at fighting the communist Pathet Lao as well as preventing exchange

via the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos, had similar effects.²⁵ This not only shows that the US caused destruction in the civil war but can be interpreted as a display of power, to portray capitalism as superior to communism in the arms race of the Cold War. Most importantly, the excessive bombing campaigns were part of their ultimate goal of diminishing communism. Thus, US involvement was not exclusively to aid the interests of the allied groups but also part of their own affairs.

The Formation and Role of Guerrilla Groups in Cold War Interventions

Even though the strong international involvement prolonged and intensified the conflicts, it allowed for the formation of political and ideological groups in Indochina and thereby for the creation of a political and ideological landscape in the formation of independent states. Scholars Yangwen Zheng and Hong Liu argue that Southeast Asians adapted the Cold War ideologies – communism versus capitalism – and created their own interpretations that inspired the formation of local movements.²⁶ Especially during the decolonisation struggle, guerrilla groups formed which would have crucial impact on nation-building.

The Viet Minh were formed in 1941 and led by the Indochinese Communist Party that demanded independence after Japan was defeated – and which France denied,²⁷ escalating into the “First Indochina war”. In the past it has been argued by historians that Vietnam was pushed into the Communist Bloc due to their need for protection and US failure to support them in the early 1950s.

This argument implies the weakness of newly decolonised states and their need for a protective partner in international relations. As the US apparently failed to provide this stability, the argument stresses that Vietnam turned to the other hegemon, the USSR and with it, communism. However, based on newly released material from Vietnamese archives, Tuong Vu and Wansa Wongsurawant claim that the communist ideology spread to Indochina through Vietnamese efforts as they genuinely believed in the ideas of communism.²⁸ Due to the negative experiences during colonization and domination during French and later Japanese occupation, communist ideology of empowering the working class and anti-imperialism appealed to the anti-colonialists in Vietnam, thus forming the Communist Party of Vietnam in the 1930s. Communism spread from Vietnam to the rest of Southeast Asia through migration, and Vietnam, along with China, became one of the largest diffusers of communism in the region.²⁹ In addition, the aid from the Communist Bloc allowed for the communist ideology to expand to regions in Laos and Cambodia where they created communist “resistance” groups, such as the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Issarak, which set the foundation for later communist movements.³⁰

After the Geneva conference in 1954 that divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel, the Viet Minh took political control over North Vietnam and also supported the ‘National Liberation Front’ (NLF) – commonly known as the Viet Cong – in the South through the ‘Ho Chi Minh path’.³¹ The NLF was formed in response to the anti-communist insurgencies undertaken by Diem and his US supporters.³² This implies that US

involvement caused the formation of a protest movement that divided the nation and ultimately led to the "Vietnam war". The ultimate success of the communist insurgencies in the civil wars would heavily contribute to the nation-building programs post 1975.³³ For example, in Laos, the colonial opposition became a crucial part of the national history during the Pathet Lao regime and the former leaders were celebrated as national heroes.³⁴ Therefore, even though some ideologies such as capitalism in South Vietnam were forced upon the newly decolonised nations, other political ideologies such as communism in Vietnam inspired their political nation-building programs and the creation of a political identity.

However, US officials believed that the formation of guerrilla groups was caused by poverty and economic weakness. They based this assumption on the modernisation theory which heavily impacted their involvement in Indochina. Weber's modernization theory, adapted by economists and social scientists in the 1950s and 60s, distinguished between 'backward' and 'advanced' regions with the US as the 'summit of modernity', hence it was the US's duty to support the 'backward', 'Third World'.³⁵ Consequently, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), founded in 1961, provided development funds to increase development towards modernity such as agricultural and infrastructural improvement and contain the spread of communism. This conclusion resonated with the US orthodoxy which argued that the agrarian revolts were initiated by "communist-oriented leaders of the genuine grievances of a rural, backward population" and

through gaining their 'hearts and minds', which will be discussed in more depth later, resistance against the "communist threat" could be achieved.³⁶ At the heart of this idea is the belief in superiority and notions of racism with which not only the US but also the USSR – with its comprehensive wariness of Asian communist movements – approached the intervention in former Indochina.³⁷ Therefore, US involvement was based on a social theory that further supported the belief in superiority and strength of their system.

Development Aid and Its Effects on Economic Development

While Cold War powers were responsible for destruction and instability through military interventions, they simultaneously tried to support economic nation-building through aid and funds. Prompted by the modernisation theory discussed in the former paragraph, the US supported South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia with large amounts of development aid. USAID built infrastructure, financed commercialisation, and created agricultural cooperatives to boost the economy with about US\$2 billion aid in South Vietnam between 1955-1962.³⁸ Laos and Cambodia were also given funds and aid but to a lesser extent than South Vietnam.³⁹ As tensions in the region continued – despite the large amounts of aid – scholars shifted away from modernization theory towards relative deprivation theory. Developed in the 1960s it suggested that the 'feeling of relative economic deprivation' caused a frustration among the population which motivated them to revolt.⁴⁰ As for Soviet aid, Carlyle Thayer argues that it was rather limited during the Khrushchev period from 1953 to

1964, but economic and military aid increased during the Brezhnev period, 1964-1982, trying to increase Russia's influence in the Region due to Sino-Soviet tensions in the 1960s.⁴¹ The increasing power of China transformed the Soviet-US bipolarity into a 'Cold War Strategic Triangle'.⁴² Besides deepening ideological disputes and territorial claims, competition over influence in the 'Third World' further strained the relationship.⁴³ North Vietnam as well as Cambodia and Laos received funds and support from the Communist Bloc. North Vietnam, for example, received a total of \$832 million of which \$452 million were in credits between 1955 and 1965 from the USSR and China.⁴⁴ Soviet aid supported various projects such as 17 electric power projects, broadcasting stations and an anti-malaria campaign.⁴⁵ Moreover, during the Lao civil war in the 1950s, the Kong Lae, supported by the Pathet Lao, were sustained by Soviet airlifts containing fuel, ammunition and food.⁴⁶ This shows that the aid given was not necessarily out of generosity but rather as a means to sustain the forces that fought for the respective ideology of either side or prevent the groups from changing sides. Cambodia on the other hand with its policy of non-alignment under Sihanouk did not receive direct aid, however, it was supported by large international investment in infrastructure. Through donations from both sides, megaprojects in the transportation sector could be undertaken. Ultimately, the aid allowed for the newly created nations to invest in projects and integrate into the global economy but also to continue fighting their civil wars as part of their state-building process.

Conversely, the large amounts of aid made the newly founded nations heavily reliant on

their benefactors which ultimately had destabilising effects. Cambodia saw some economic growth under the rule of Prince Sihanouk, yet it primarily exported primary produce such as rice and rubber. With the removal of protective tariffs in 1969, the economy was hit hard –Sokty Chhair and Luyna Ung describe it as being similar to the economy after decolonisation in 1954.⁴⁷ This implies that national institutions were not able to absorb the development aid in a sustainable manner, which ultimately led to dependence. Additionally, the aid could not protect the fragile economies from external factors. North Vietnam struggled greatly due to natural disasters that decreased the agricultural output. Moreover, it had difficulties with balance of payments which could not be solved through foreign aid.⁴⁸ Another essential aspect was the government's reliance on the aid and strength of their benefactor for its power and control. This became evident in 1975, with the surrender of the South Vietnamese army shortly after the US had left the conflict.⁴⁹ In the same year, the Khmer Republic, heavily reliant on US power, collapsed soon after US withdrawal from the region.⁵⁰ Similar to Cambodia, the US-supported Royal Lao Army imploded after the US left the region and was replaced by the Pathet Lao.⁵¹ Therefore, aid caused a heavy dependence of the governments and led to instability when absent. It also reflects the substantial control and political power the US had had in the region. It was not only an advisor or benefactor but a regent that controlled weaker puppet regimes.

Development Aid and Its Effects on Economic Development

Besides military and economic interventions

whose benefits for nation-building were questionable, the USSR and US also tried to shape the identity formation and political nation-building of the newly decolonised nations. With the control gained from Indochinese dependence on aid and advisory, the Cold War powers tried to immobilise or support the guerrilla movements and intervened in political nation-building. In South Vietnam, the US installed the US-backed, anti-French Ngo Dinh Diem in 1956 after prohibiting nationwide elections in fear of a communist victory. Despite the large amounts of aid and supervisors the US provided for nation-building, the opposite was achieved. As the majority of South Vietnam were rural Buddhist peasants, the policies of the well-educated Catholic Diem alienated rather than unified. Thus, the involvement of the US prevented elections that could have reunified Vietnam and thereby an action crucial to political nation-building. This implies that the national interests of the US outweighed the national interests of South Vietnam, and the US abused their influence to prevent the spread of communism rather than support the creation of a newly decolonised nation. By 1963, the US perceived Diem as a burden and backed a coup to overthrow him, which demonstrates that heavy US involvement complicated the establishment of national sovereignty, crucial to postcolonial nation-building.⁵²

In comparison, in Cambodia, US involvement was more indirect than in Vietnam but still had a significant impact on political nation-building. In 1970, the national assembly of Cambodia voted 86-3 to remove Sihanouk from power and the US-backed Khmer Republic under anti-

communist Prime Minister Lon Nol was created.⁵³ While the US denies its involvement, Sihanouk himself accused the CIA of initiating this coup, yet, his accusations were not taken seriously due to a lack of evidence.⁵⁴ However, Hersh argues Sihanouk's removal from power has been of US interest and claims there is evidence that Lon Nol had been approached by the CIA in 1969.⁵⁵ This is another example of the US's actions to establish their own interests without respect to national sovereignty.

Similar to Cambodia, the US was heavily involved in Laos' domestic politics. Even though the communist party had the majority in the national assembly in the 1958 elections, Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell claim the US installed more US-friendly leaders by withholding aid until they were in power. Moreover, they stress the 1960 elections were rigged by the US through an increase in aid and buying of votes.⁵⁶ The USSR's involvement also remained present –Cheng Guan Ang describes the Soviet support during the 'Laotian crisis' as a means of gaining political influence through diplomatic relations desired by Moscow in the context of the Sino-Soviet rivalry.⁵⁷ This illustrates that Cold War powers disregarded national sovereignty and involved themselves in domestic politics which led to a decrease in sovereignty and national independence. Moreover, it shows the lack of political legitimacy that puppet states suffered from. Unsurprisingly, this had crucial impact on political stability and the establishment of independent governments on a national level.

Moreover, the Cold War powers had significant influence on diplomatic relations.

Ang observed that the 1954 Geneva Conference exposed the dynamics inside the communist brotherhood, which were ultimately assertions of national interests, visible in Moscow's pressure to settle the war early instead of continuing to fight for unification.⁵⁸ This implies that Cold War powers influenced international diplomatic decisions by undermining the newly established nations in an international setting. Another example of international involvement in foreign policies is the Geneva conference in 1961-1962. Despite the fear of "losing Laos to communism", the US – based on a Soviet proposal – engaged thirteen other countries in negotiations at the conference to end the escalating civil war in Laos.⁵⁹ After a year of negotiation, Laos was declared a neutral country and all foreign troops had to be removed, preventing an armed struggle fuelled by the USSR, China and the US.⁶⁰ Thus, tensions between the hegemonic states influenced not only Laos' domestic but also its foreign policy, forcing it to neutrality. The involvement of fourteen countries in the conference illustrates the historiographic perspective that Asia cannot be analysed through a single Cold War narrative but is part of a complex and interconnected network of events and actions on a global level. Scholars increasingly acknowledge that the Cold War developments in the "Third World" were not 'sideshowes to the main event' but vital events of the Cold War itself.

Driven by their ideologies, the Cold War powers aimed at influencing cultural nation-building of the "uncommitted Third World" through propaganda programs. Zheng and Hong Lui argue that the global ideological competition was interrelated with the

establishment of Asian nationalism.⁶¹ For example, the US spread propaganda material such as pamphlets among the population that depicted the American system as a means to freedom and democracy and communism as subversive and hegemonic.⁶² Most impactfully was the creation of a "strategic hamlet program" that consisted of the displacement and isolation of entire villages into "agrovilles" in order to create a new sense of nationalism as a basis for nation-building. Moreover, they believed the prevention of communist influence would allow for a bond to be built between the Diem regime and the population. In 1960, Cyril Falls described the project as 'the most mammoth example of social engineering in the non-Communist world'. However, 46 years later, Latham argues the project was a failure from the very beginning as nation-building could not be achieved in an oppressive environment.⁶³ Ultimately, Latham's claim proved to be correct. However, to come to this conclusion, the Vietnamese population had to suffer through manipulation and internal displacement because of a social experiment conducted by an outside power, that aimed at asserting its interests for the sake of an ideological battle.

In the opposing bloc, China emerged as a dominant power that conducted propaganda operations in Indochina. Its propaganda emphasised 'unity of friendly and peaceful nations' and was distributed through the same means and with the same aims as the US.⁶⁴ Subsequently, the propaganda missions of the two opposing powers led to a cultural warfare that was fought on the backs of the newly decolonised nations in the region.⁶⁵ Therefore, the Cold War interventions affected the creation of a national identity

through dissemination of propaganda and social engineering.

However, local actors also used the Cold War tensions and aid to their own benefit. In 2009, Vu and Wongsurawat argued that nationalists manipulated the blocs to secure development aid for their nation-building programs.⁶⁶ For example, the alliances with the communist camp enabled and inspired the Viet Minh to undertake social, cultural, agricultural, economic, political, and military reforms that would create a basis for the newly envisioned state during the decolonisation war.⁶⁷ Moreover, Vietnam made use of the Sino-Soviet tensions and competition over influence in the 'Third World'.⁶⁸ Hanoi did not align itself with Moscow or Beijing but received aid from both.⁶⁹ Consequently, the competition between China and the USSR was used as a tactical scheme by Vietnam rather than a burden on domestic politics. This example follows the historiographical notion of placing Vietnam not simply as a 'proxy' but analysing its impact on the course of the Cold War.⁷⁰ Moreover, according to Robert Horn, the assumption that 'Third World' states were controlled by the USSR is not appropriate to the Soviet policies in Indochina. He goes further claiming the USSR's dependence on local developments and policies has limited its ability to influence but rather obligated Moscow to amend its influence in reaction to local developments.⁷¹ This argument is another example of the historiographical trend discussed in the former example.

In regards to neutral Cambodia, Sihanouk did not align himself with any of the powers but played them against each other to secure benefits such as aid or investment.⁷²

This resonates with a study from 1969 that dismissed the 'hearts and minds' approach as well as development aid, arguing that local players had economic interests and rebellion was a rational choice, a means to an end.⁷³ Therefore, the assumption that former Indochina was trapped and powerless between the Cold War powers has been dismissed by historians who point out that the hegemony was manipulated by the local actors and Cold War tensions were exploited. Even though the Cold War powers had significant control over the governments and groups as demonstrated, local actors ultimately influenced the decision-making of the US and USSR, and with it the course of the Cold War. The development of the conflict was not only influenced by external power but an interplay between external and internal forces.

The Role of Artistic Movements in Identity Formation

In order to get a deeper understanding of the cultural developments, this last section briefly discusses the effects of the Cold War on artistic movements. This essay focuses on visual art as a reflection of cultural influences because art and national identity are closely related.⁷⁴ Art can be a representation of ideologies, revealing the degree of patriotism, censorship and freedom of speech.⁷⁵ However, this section should serve as a brief analysis that should be expanded upon in further research. Yet it can be argued that the Cold War ideologies significantly shaped the creation of art within the newly founded nations. After the division in 1954, artistic movements in North and South Vietnam differed greatly. While North Vietnamese art was censored and

pushed towards a socialist ideology, artists in Saigon had more opportunity for artistic expression. According to Liem and Day, artistic diversity was absent in North Vietnam and dominated by socialist realism that romanticised labour and industrialization that followed Soviet and Chinese examples.⁷⁶ Regarding South Vietnam, they argue that the art community aimed at remaining apolitical and Cold War tensions were excluded from their work. However, a young artist movement in Saigon depicted the ongoing war as a civil war with Vietnam's "true destiny" being restrained by the intervention of the Cold War powers.⁷⁷ Therefore, Vietnamese art from this period can be interpreted as a depiction of the different ideological systems and their impact on national identity formation.

On the contrary, art movements in Cambodia depicted the neutralising efforts and 'revitalisation of ancient glory' by prince Sihanouk. During the colonial period, Cambodian art was forced into stagnant and traditional handcraft. However, with decolonisation, Sihanouk encouraged reformation of Cambodian culture inspired by the "hearts and minds" programs of both Cold War powers. By the 1960s, Khmer art combined traditional subjects such as Angkor temples or rural women with notions of a "modern Cambodia". Yet the influence of Cold War powers was visible in movies: many of the main characters explored the presence of Soviet/Chinese or US propaganda.⁷⁸

Therefore, the competing Cold War ideologies shaped cultural expression and dominated some artistic movements in Indochina. The historiographical shift from the reductionist perspective that dichotomized between East and West to a

less Eurocentric approach can be observed. Instead of applying an either/or perspective, the case of Cambodia and Vietnam illustrates that Southeast Asians developed their own interpretations of the ideologies they were confronted with, shaping the creation of their national identity.⁷⁹ However, this conclusion is based on a secondary research and to gain a better analysis and understanding of the impact of the Cold War on art it would be necessary to conduct a primary research with an in-depth analysis of specific artistic works. Moreover, it could also be valuable for the analysis to work beyond the discussed timeframe in this essay and look at long-term developments pre- and post the Cold War to gain an understanding of the role of identity in arts in the respective cultures.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Cold War influenced nation-building in Indochina on a political, economic, and cultural level. The way in which Cold War powers intervened in the newly formed states differed in some respects while it corresponded in others. The US interventions based on the modernisation theory led to economic aid as well as propaganda missions to influence the opinion of the local population. Economic aid was crucial to the establishment of a national economy and creation of a political system. However, in Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam, the US used aid to create a dependency on which to install regimes and administrations that acted in their interest. This led to the US undermining domestic sovereignty and diplomatic relations. In North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the Communist Bloc also interfered with aid and propaganda in the nation-building process of the newly formed

states, causing them to be trapped between the opposing ideologies and exacerbating civil wars. Moreover, the tensions within the Communist Bloc shaped the intervention of China and the USSR due to competition over influence in the region. Ultimately, the Cold War powers used the unstable situation of the newly formed states to assert their control and interests. However, the tensions, particularly competition between the hegemonic powers, were instrumentalized by national regimes for their own nation-building programs.

In regard to the historiographical interpretation of the Cold War in Asia, the shift away from Eurocentrism had crucial impacts on the way in which the region is studied. Historians are beginning to analyse the local players as influential parts of the Cold War struggle going beyond the idea of the Cold War being a bipolar conflict. Instead of seeing the newly decolonised states as victims or proxies of the USSR and US, scholars have started to realise that the most important aspects of the Cold War were not of military or strategic nature but concerned the political and social development of newly decolonised nations. To gain deeper insight into the effects of the Cold War on nation-building, it would be useful to conduct primary research on today's societies and their social, economic, and political structures in the respective nations. This would allow an insight into the long-term effects of the interventions and the ways in which they shaped national identity and political systems.

¹ P. F. Sloan, and Barry McGuire, "Eve of destruction," track 1 on *Eve of Destruction*, Dunhill, 1965.

² Yangwen Zheng, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi, *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1.

³ Christopher E. Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945-1954): An International and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011).

⁴ Harris Mylonas, "Nation-Building," Oxford Bibliographies Online, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0217.xml>.

⁵ Marc Frey, *Die Geschichte des Vietnamkriegs* (Munich: C. H. Beck oHG, 2016), 65-67.

⁶ Frey, *Die Geschichte des Vietnamkriegs*, 122.

⁷ Frey, *Die Geschichte des Vietnamkriegs*, 233.

⁸ Nina S. Adams, "Patrons, Clients, and Revolutionaries: The Lao Search for Independence, 1945-1954," in *Laos: War and Revolution* (London and New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

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