

“National Liberation and the Cold War in Viet Nam:
Spatial Representations of War after 1954”

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Abstract

Reducing the complex historical, social and regional aspects of the Vietnamese wars to a simplistic dichotomy regarding the period after the 1954 Geneva Conference is a widespread phenomenon. In this flawed binary—both in popular discourses and in scholarship—the conflict is one between countries (or political entities) called “North Viet Nam” and “South Viet Nam,” separated by a border at the 17th parallel. Usually, “North Viet Nam” is assigned the role of aggressor.

The paper analyzes spatial claims of the Vietnamese states founded in 1945 and 1949, their connections to nationalist precepts and loyalties, and how the 1954 Geneva Accords sought to accommodate these opposing assertions. The emerging binary of “South Viet Nam” and “North Viet Nam” after unification elections were denied reflects a Cold War need for clear demarcations that belied complexities of competing nationalist visions, regional identities, political loyalties, and mutually exclusive state claims. Particularly, routinely conflating “South Viet Nam” with the Republic of Viet Nam implicitly assigns sole legitimacy over a space smaller than the RVN’s declared reach and larger than its actual control for most of the war. Consequently, Vietnamese in the center and south opposed to the RVN are rhetorically and symbolically excluded from this space, hindering a better post-Cold War understanding of the wars.