

## Saigon Revisited: Researching South Vietnam's Republican Era (1954-1975) at Archives and Libraries in Ho Chi Minh City<sup>1</sup>

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### I. Introduction

Scholarship on the history of the Vietnam War has made great strides during the past decade. The increased attention of historians to the Vietnamese dimensions of the conflict is an especially noteworthy and exciting development. In recent years, scholars such as Mark Bradley, Robert Brigham, David Elliott, Pierre Asselin, Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, Christopher Goscha, Sophie Quinn-Judge and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen have published pathbreaking studies on various aspects of Vietnamese society, politics, culture and military strategy. Significantly, all of these studies are based at least in part on research in archival and library collections held in Vietnam. As a result, the new scholarship on the war has treated Vietnamese sources and Vietnamese voices with the same care and critical scrutiny that was previously applied only to American documents and perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

The increased attention paid to the Vietnamese dimensions of the war is part of a general shift towards more internationally-minded approaches to the study of the conflict. At the same time that some historians have been mining archives in Vietnam, others have been exploiting previously unavailable sources held in Russia and China in order to shed new light on the involvement of those countries in the war.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, specialists in US foreign relations have

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<sup>1</sup> The authors thank David Biggs and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen for their helpful comments on drafts of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill NC: North Carolina University Press, 2000); Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Piece: Washington, Hanoi and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 2002); *idem*, "New Evidence from Vietnam," *Passport* 35, n. 3 (December 2004), 39-41; David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY M. E. Sharpe, 2003); Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1885-1954* (London: Curzon Press, 1999); *idem*, "The Maritime Nature of the Wars for Vietnam (1945-75): A Geo-Historical Reflection," *War & Society* 24, no. 2 (November 2005), 53-92; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68," in *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (2005), 479-500; Liên-Hằng T. Nguyễn, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Odd Arne Westad, ed., *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Indochina War, 1964-1977* (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, 1998); Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-1969," *The China Quarterly*, 142 (June 1995): 357-387; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communist Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997); Ilya Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and various editions of the Cold War International History Project *Bulletin*, especially issue 5/6.

begun using European and other non-American sources to revisit old questions surrounding the American intervention in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> The surging interest in Vietnamese materials and Vietnamese archives thus appears to be part and parcel of what might be fairly described as “the New Vietnam War History”—that is, it reflects the gathering determination to transcend the limitations of the staunchly American-centered historiography produced during the 1970s and 1980s.

Much of the recent research in Vietnamese sources has focused on the attitudes, strategies and decisions of the Vietnamese Communist Party, or VCP (known during the war as the Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam, or Vietnam Workers’ Party). The historians conducting this research have been particularly interested in materials produced by the VCP, by the North Vietnamese government (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV) and by the VCP-controlled front organization in the South (the National Liberation Front, or NLF). This interest in Communist archives and sources makes sense; after all, the DRV’s conquest of South Vietnam in 1975 was the greatest in a series of stunning military and political triumphs engineered by the VCP in the decades following the end of World War II. The editor of a recent collection of essays is therefore correct to assert that problem of “Why the North won the Vietnam War” remains a critical historiographical issue, and recent forays into DRV archives in Hanoi have provided stimulating new answers to this important question.<sup>5</sup> Still, if it is clear that the Communists and their allies played key roles in the Vietnam War drama, it is equally clear that they were not the only Vietnamese members of the cast. The VCP has dominated much of Vietnam’s modern political history, but it has not monopolized it. A more complete understanding of the Vietnamese aspects of the Vietnam War must also take account of the myriad non-communist parties, factions, sects and groups who also participated in the war in various ways at various times. Such an accounting requires attention to non-communist sources and perspectives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Margaret K. Gnoinska, “Poland and Vietnam, 1963: New Evidence on Secret Communist Diplomacy and the ‘Maneli Affair,’” Cold War International History Project Working Paper #45 (March 2005), <cwihp.org> (accessed 15 October 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York; Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, the scholarly literature on the war already includes several important studies of the attitudes, ideas and experiences of non-communist Vietnamese during the war, and some of these studies are based on significant research in Vietnamese materials. Perhaps the best example of such a study produced prior to 1975 is Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). The anthropologist Neil Jamieson also draws heavily on non-communist Vietnamese sources in his survey of twentieth century Vietnamese politics and culture; see Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially pp. 234-356. One very important recent work which uses non-communist sources to challenge the received wisdom about the origins of the Vietnam War is Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002). Catton was one of the first scholars to undertake research in the South Vietnamese government records described in this essay. For Ngô Đình Diệm’s activities prior to 1954 and an account of his successful campaign to become leader of South Vietnam, see Edward Miller, “Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945-1954,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (Oct. 2004): 433-458. On the experiences and activities of Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam after 1954, see Trần Thị Liên, “Les Catholiques Vietnamiens dans la République du Vietnam, 1954-1963,” in Pierre Brocheux, ed. *Du conflit d’Indochine aux conflits indochinois* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 2000), 53-80.

Because Vietnamese Communist historiography emphasizes the central role of the VCP in modern Vietnamese history, scholars writing in Vietnam since 1975 have generally avoided the study of non-communist leaders and groups. Notable exceptions include Lê Cung, *Phong Trào Phật Giáo Miền Nam Việt Nam Năm 1963 [The 1963*

This paper reports on the emerging opportunities for research in a particular category of non-communist Vietnamese sources: materials that date from South Vietnam’s republican era and that are currently held in archives and libraries in Ho Chi Minh City. (For the purposes of this essay, the “republican era” is defined as lasting from the partition of Vietnam in mid-1954 to the fall of Saigon in April 1975.)<sup>7</sup> Access to republican-period sources in Vietnam has improved dramatically in recent years, and the collections in Ho Chi Minh City are proving to be particularly valuable because they contain many published and unpublished materials that are difficult or impossible to find elsewhere. This report is not a comprehensive guide to all of the current opportunities for research in republican sources in Vietnam. Rather, it is an introduction to a few key collections held at two institutions: the Ho Chi Minh City branch of the Vietnamese National Archives and the General Sciences Library. The authors expect that these collections will figure prominently in future research on South Vietnam during the 1954-1975 period—even though we also expect that scholars will supplement their work in these collections with research in other collections held elsewhere in Vietnam.

## II. National Archives Center II (2 Lê Duẩn Blvd., District 1, HCMC)

Website: [http://www.luutru.vn.gov.vn/trungtam2\\_e.htm](http://www.luutru.vn.gov.vn/trungtam2_e.htm) [English]  
<http://www.luutru.vn.gov.vn/trungtam2.htm> [Vietnamese]  
Hours: Mondays-Thursdays, 8:30-11:30am and 1:30-4:00pm; Fridays, 8:30-11:30am  
Phone: 84.08.8257857  
Fax: 84.08.8224625

The Ho Chi Minh City branch of the Vietnam National Archives is known officially as “National Archives Center II” (*Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia II*). Currently located opposite the Sofitel Hotel on Lê Duẩn Boulevard, Archives II is housed in a nondescript two-story concrete structure; the building’s most distinctive feature is the faded pink paint that adorns its exterior.<sup>8</sup> The Center was established in November 1976 to organize, store, and control access to the RVN government documents and other archival materials that were captured when Saigon fell to Communist forces in 1975. While most of the materials held at Archives II were produced during the 1945-1975

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*Buddhist Movement in South Vietnam*] (Hanoi: Đại Học Quốc Gia, 1999); Lý Nhân, *Thiệu-Kỳ: Một Thời Hãnh Tiến, Một Thời Suy Vong* [The Thiệu-Kỳ regime: The Rise and Fall], (Hà Nội: Công An Nhân Dân, 2000); and Văn Phan, *Đoàn Mật Vụ của Ngô Đình Cẩn* [The Secret Police of Ngô Đình Cẩn] (Hanoi: Công An Nhân Dân, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> The dating of South Vietnam’s “republican era” is more problematic than it first appears. Strictly speaking, the republican era in South Vietnam did not begin until Ngô Đình Diệm proclaimed the formation of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) on 26 October 1955. Prior to that date, the government that Diệm headed was officially known as the “State of Vietnam” (SVN), which had been established under French aegis in 1949 as one of the “Associated States” of Indochina. However, Diệm’s assumption of the SVN premiership and the partition of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel in July of 1954 were clearly the watershed events that led to the creation of a separate South Vietnamese state. Thus, we have adopted July 1954 as the *de facto* beginning of the republican period. Similarly, the RVN technically continued to exist for some time following the fall of Saigon in late April 1975. It was not until December 1976 that Vietnamese leaders officially abolished both the RVN and the DRV and proclaimed the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Nonetheless, the RVN government effectively ceased to function during the spring of 1975, and we have therefore chosen to mark the end of the republican era at 30 April 1975.

<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, a new archives building is under construction on the opposite side of Lê Duẩn Boulevard, next door to the Sofitel. The new facility is expected to open in 2008 or 2009.

period, some of the collections date to the French conquest of Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Although South Vietnamese government documents make up the bulk of the post-1945 holdings at Archives II, there are also materials produced by other governments and organizations. The Center's collections contain the records of certain offices and agencies of the French colonial government, many of which operated in Indochina until the mid-1950s. The Center also holds some of the pre-1954 records of the French-sponsored State of Vietnam, which was headed by the ex-emperor Bảo Đại from its creation in 1949 and which existed until it was superseded by the RVN in 1955. (The SVN materials from 1949-1954 are not currently available to researchers, and the extent of the overlap between these and the SVN materials in the Center des Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, France is unclear.) Other materials held at Archives II include some items produced by United States government agencies that operated in Vietnam between 1950 and 1975; among these are reports and other documents authored by the US economic aid mission. In addition, the Center has materials produced by some of the American non-governmental organizations that worked in Vietnam prior to 1975.

Archives II is currently in the midst of a long-term project to re-organize all of its post-1945 collections. This project involves re-indexing all of the relevant documentary series and creating new finding aids. Mr. Nguyễn Xuân Hoài, the director of Archives II, estimates that this massive undertaking will not be completed for many years. In the interim, many collections will be unavailable to researchers. For example, it appears likely that most of the non-RVN materials described in the preceding paragraph will be inaccessible for some time to come. Fortunately, however, the Center's staff has already completed the reorganization of two important collections of RVN documents. Thus, there is a substantial body of Vietnam War-related material available to researchers at the Center, and scholars can expect additional documentary windfalls in the coming years.

*The Office of the RVN President (Phủ Tổng Thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa) Collection.* This collection was the first major collection of RVN materials to be reindexed. While the precise provenance of many of the documents in this collection is difficult or impossible to establish, most appear to have been gleaned from the files of officials who served as information channels between the President's Office and other parts of the government bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup> Because the RVN state was dominated by its Presidents for much of its existence, this collection offers a fascinating cross-section of the inner workings of the RVN regime—though researchers using the collection should keep in mind that this cross-section is rather skewed, since it is essentially the view from the Presidential Palace in Saigon.

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<sup>9</sup> The Archives' holdings from the 1858-1945 period include French-language documents produced by the colonial Governors of Cochinchina and the Resident Superiors of Central Vietnam, as well as Han records produced during the Nguyễn dynasty. For a useful overview of French-language collections from the colonial period held at Archives II, see Christina Firpo, "Viet Nam National Archives II, Ho Chi Minh City," *CORMOSEA Bulletin*, 28 (Dec. 2004), 8-18.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, many of the documents in this collection appear to have been handled by the Secretary of State at the Presidency (Bộ Trưởng tại Phủ Tổng Thống). In theory, this official functioned as a sort of clearing house of information for the RVN President, and wielded authority roughly equivalent to that of a US White House Chief of Staff. In practice, the influence of the different men who held this post varied widely.

The Office of the RVN President collection contains two chronologically delimited series, designated as the “First Republic” and the “Second Republic,” respectively (“Phông Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa” and “Phông Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhị Cộng Hòa”). These names reflect the practice of periodizing the political history of the RVN according to the tenures of its two best-known leaders. The “First Republic” series contains records pertaining to the Presidency of Ngô Đình Diệm, who assumed the office when he proclaimed the formation of the RVN on 26 October 1955 and held it until his assassination on 2 November 1963. The “Second Republic” series consists of materials produced during the Presidency of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who was elected to the office in 1967 and served until the last days of the war in 1975. As a result, there are not many documents in this collection that date from the first fifteen months of Diệm’s tenure during 1954-1955, when he held the office of SVN Prime Minister; nor are there many documents from the 1963-1967 interregnum during which the RVN did not have a President. (Researchers interested in these important periods in South Vietnamese history should examine the Office of the Prime Minister collection, described below.)

Of the two Office of the President series, the one covering Diệm’s Presidency (1955-1963) is the largest, containing some 21,109 folders. The number and title of each folder is listed in a ten-volume finding aid that is kept in the Archives II reading room. Researchers should consult the preface at the front of Volume 1 of the finding aid for a helpful overview of the collection and its contents. As the preface explains, the collection is divided into nine topical sections; within each section, the folders have been arranged more or less chronologically.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the finding aid contains no indices, which might be used for cross-referencing materials on particular topics. In addition, the descriptions of the folders contained in the finding aid are often short and vague, so it can be difficult to determine the contents of particular folders prior to requesting them.

The series covering Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s Presidency (1967-1975) is substantially smaller than the Diệm-era series. The 7,634 folders in the second series are organized into fourteen sections. As with the first series, materials are arranged in chronological order within each section.<sup>12</sup> Short descriptions of each folder are listed in a four-volume finding aid, the first volume of which contains a useful introduction to the series. Again, there are no indices in the finding aid, so locating materials on particular topics requires patience.

Organizational shortcomings aside, both of the Presidential Office series are brimming with interesting and valuable materials. The series for the Diệm period is particularly rich. The documents it contains include: records of RVN cabinet meetings; materials concerning Diệm’s various nation building initiatives, such as his Land Development, Agrovillage and Strategic Hamlet programs; materials pertaining to RVN foreign affairs, including correspondence between authorities in Saigon and RVN embassies overseas; reports authored by provincial and district officials on a variety of topics; materials on the drafting of the 1956 RVN Constitution and

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<sup>11</sup> The nine sections are: Basic Issues (folders 1-636), Organization (637-3,740), Awards and Competitions (3,741-3,981), Internal Security (3,982-8,576), Foreign Affairs (8,577-9,379), Economics and Finance (9,380-15,977), Culture and Society (15,978-18,085), Activities of the President (18,086-19665) and Administration (19,666-21,109).

<sup>12</sup> The fourteen sections are: Basic Issues (folders 1-258), Internal Security and Military Affairs (259-625), Security (626-763), Politics (764-1357), Legal Affairs (1358-1462), Inspection reports (1463-1554), Foreign Affairs (1555-2184), Economics (2185-3347), Culture and Society (3348-4110), Groups (4111-4747), Activities of the President (4748-5287), Organization (5288-7273), Awards and Competitions, (7274-7410) and Administration (7411-7634).

subsequent elections for the RVN national assembly; police and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) intelligence reports on topics pertaining to internal RVN politics, including the activities of sectarian groups and the Buddhist protest movement of 1963; various reports on the security situation in South Vietnam, including materials regarding the expanding Communist insurgency and the RVN's efforts to combat it; numerous documents pertaining to the Diệm government's relations with the United States, including its interactions with US government agencies and American non-governmental organizations who maintained offices in South Vietnam; and many other materials.

The Thiệu-era series, though less voluminous than the 1955-1963 series, contains a similarly impressive array of documents. There are materials here on the 1967 and 1971 South Vietnamese Presidential elections, as well as documents pertaining to various RVN National Assembly elections. There are many folders on RVN military operations during the war, including documents pertaining to the Tết Offensive of 1968, the 1970 invasion of Cambodia, the ARVN's 1971 thrust into Laos (Operation Lam Son 719), the DRV's "Easter Offensive" of 1972 and the final North Vietnamese offensive of 1975 (the Hồ Chí Minh campaign). As with the first series, there are numerous reports on internal politics and security that were produced by various RVN intelligence agencies (both military and civilian). There are also many documents on RVN foreign relations, including some materials on key meetings with US leaders (such as the Honolulu conference of 1968), documents relating to the multiparty peace talks which took place in Paris between 1968 and 1973, telegrams to and from RVN embassies world-wide, and some of Thiệu's hand-written notes from meetings with American officials such as Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig.

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the documents in the Office of the President Collection are in Vietnamese. While many RVN officials spoke and wrote French fluently, most RVN documents and official correspondence were drafted in Vietnamese, if only because of the government's desire to emphasize its independent status. Researchers will occasionally find materials written in English or French scattered throughout the collection—especially in folders containing correspondence with American agencies and groups—but these comprise a small percentage of the total.

*The Office of the Prime Minister Collection (Phòng Phủ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ).* The reindexing of this collection, the second to be included in the Archives' reorganization project, was completed in the summer of 2004. This series is similar to the Office of the President collection in that it contains documents that were produced in many different corners of the RVN bureaucracy. Unlike the Presidential files, however, this collection is organized in a single series that covers the entire republican era. The twenty-volume finding aid lists 31,782 folders, organized into eleven sections.<sup>13</sup> Again, researchers can find a useful overview of the collection in the preface at the front of Volume I.

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<sup>13</sup> The eleven sections are: Basic issues (folders 1-1,173); Administration (1,174-2,984); Activities of the Prime Minister (2,985-3,831); Organization (3,832-13,293); Awards and Commendations (13,294-14,570); Internal Safety—Military Affairs—Security—Politics (14,571-18,910); Inspections (18,911-19,641); Judicial documents (19,642-20,105); Foreign Affairs (20,106-21,037); Economics and Finance (21,038-29,090); Society and Culture (29,091-31,712).

The chronological distribution of materials within the Office of the Prime Minister collection reflects the shifting status of the position between 1954 and 1975. For organizational purposes, archivists have designated Ngô Đình Diệm as the first prime minister of the republican period (though technically he was the last prime minister of the State of Vietnam). The collection thus contains a substantial number of documents dating from Diệm's premiership, which ran from 7 July 1954 until 26 October 1955. According to Presidential Order Number 1, issued on the latter date, Diệm's assumption of the RVN Presidency was defined as inclusive all of the powers and responsibilities of the Prime Minister as well as those of Chief of State. As a result, this collection contains very few documents produced between October 1955 and Diệm's assassination in 1963. In November 1963, the Premiership was reconstituted as a separate office, a status it maintained even after Nguyễn Văn Thiệu became the RVN's second President in 1967. Thus, the bulk of the documents in this collection date from the period 1963-1975, and the materials from 1963-1967 are particularly extensive.

The finding aid for this collection shows that it contains documents on a wide variety of subjects. There are records of government cabinet meetings from various periods of RVN history, as well as the minutes of the "Government Council" which was set up in the wake of Diệm's ouster in 1963. Also available are various official directives and correspondence issued by the Prime Ministers' office, including several folders of telegrams labeled "secret" (*mật*). Many of the documents pertain to the official travels of various prime ministers, including both internal and international tours. The "organization" section of this collection contains a cluster of more than 2500 personnel files; each file contains information on an individual who worked for the RVN state in some capacity. Like the Office of the President collection, the Prime Ministerial collection contains extensive materials on military and security affairs; these materials cover events from the sect crisis of 1955 to the final Communist offensive of 1975, and deal both with the ongoing war against the NLF/DRV and internal RVN politics. The "Inspections" section contains many reports by the Inspector General for Administration and Finance; these will likely be relevant to any future research into the notorious corruption that plagued the RVN during its latter years. There are numerous documents pertaining to RVN foreign affairs; these include not only materials relevant to US-RVN relations, but also those dealing with various aspects of South Vietnam's relations with other countries in Asia. There is information here about RVN policies and decisions concerning education, cultural affairs, health, youth and sports, information, labor and social programs. In general, there seems to be substantial overlap in many areas with the Office of the President collection. Depending on the topic and chronological scope of their inquiries, researchers may find it useful to consult both collections.

*Records of RVN Ministries and Agencies.* According to Director Hoài, Archives II holds many more collections of RVN government documents in addition to the Presidential and Prime Ministerial Office files. These additional collections apparently include the records of all of the various ministries and agencies of the republican regime. A portion of these ministerial and agency records are currently available to researchers, even though they have yet to be included in the ongoing re-indexing project. For example, some researchers have made use of a collection of materials produced by the Ministry of Communication and Public Works (*Bộ Giáo Thông và Công Chánh*). Since this Ministry was established during the colonial period, the materials it contains date back to the pre-World War II-era; however, many of the documents date from the 1954-1975 period. Another collection that spans the late colonial and early republican periods is

the records of the Office of the South Vietnamese Regional Delegate (*Tòa Đại Biểu Chính Phủ Nam Việt*). During the Bảo Đại era, the Vietnamese officials who held this office functioned as de facto governors of the SVN-controlled parts of Cochinchina, and they wielded great power at the provincial and local level. After he came to power in 1954, Diệm substantially reduced the power of the Regional Delegates. However, the office continued to function for some time after 1954, and approximately 10% of the material in this collection dates from the first few years of the republican period.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, many of the ministerial records likely to be of greatest interest to historians of the Vietnam War—such as the records of the RVN Defense and Interior Ministries—are not yet open to researchers. Director Hoài indicates that the Archive plans to include all of the various RVN collections it holds in its ongoing reindexing project. (The next such collection that is slated to become available contains materials pertaining to the American aid mission in South Vietnam; that collection is expected to be opened to researchers sometime in 2007.) Archive officials have declined to speculate about how long the entire reindexing process will take, but the relatively short time in which the Office of the President and the Office of the Prime Minister collections were completed is encouraging. Scholars can thus expect the coming years to bring numerous additional releases of documents—and hopefully new insights into the structure and function of the RVN state.

*Research Procedures at National Archives II.* Conducting research in Vietnam requires patience, planning, good humor, and perseverance. To gain access to the Archives, researchers must arrive in Saigon with a student or research visa. Such a visa can only be obtained via sponsorship by a Vietnamese academic or research institution. Researchers must therefore locate a willing sponsor in advance of their research visit, and then work with the sponsoring institution to get the visa processed and issued via a Vietnamese embassy or consulate.<sup>15</sup>

After arriving in Vietnam but before visiting the archive for the first time, researchers should ask their sponsor to write a letter of introduction (*giấy giới thiệu*) to the Archive director. This standard-issue document is a formality, but it must be observed. Each foreign researcher will be expected to produce this letter during his/her first visit to the archive, along with a passport and two passport-sized photos. The photos will be used to produce a special reading card (*thẻ đọc giả*) that the researcher can use to gain entrance to the archive during the period in which they have been authorized to conduct research. Researchers must pay a nominal fee to receive their cards (currently about 15,000 đồng, or a little less than one US dollar).

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to the materials from the SVN and early RVN periods, the Office of the Regional Delegate series also contains a substantial volume of materials produced by the wartime Vichy colonial regime headed by Admiral Decoux. David Biggs has mined both the Communication/Public Works records and the Office of the Regional Delegate collection in his research on the history of canal building in the Mekong Delta; see his *Between the Rivers and Tides: A Hydraulic History of the Mekong Delta, 1820-1975* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2004). The authors thank Professor Biggs for providing an overview of the organization and contents of these collections.

<sup>15</sup> The authors have heard from researchers who have recently gained access to the collections at Archives II while visiting Vietnam on a tourist visa. In these cases, the researchers have still needed to present a letter of introduction from a Vietnamese institution. It is unclear if these cases represent an official relaxation of the requirements, or merely a lapse in diligence on the part of the archive staff.



Once the necessary permissions have been secured, the researcher can consult the Archives finding aids and begin making requests for particular folders of documents. All such requests are made by filling out a special form, copies of which are available in the reading room of the Archives. In addition to listing the number and title of the folders in question, the researcher is also asked to provide a short description of his/her research topic. Once the form has been submitted, it is faxed to the Hanoi office of the State Records and Archives Department (an agency within the Ministry of Home Affairs), where each request is reviewed and approved or rejected on a folder-by-folder basis. Depending on how quickly the bureaucratic wheels are turning at a given moment, researchers can expect to receive a response within about a week.

Archives II does allow researchers to request photocopies of those documents to which they have been granted access. However, these requests are also subject to approval by officials in Hanoi, and the fact that the researcher has been granted permission to read the document in question does not necessarily mean that permission for photocopying will be forthcoming. All photocopy requests must be submitted on a form that is similar to the one used to gain access to particular folders. There is a fee of 2000 Đồng for each photocopy form submitted; if the request is approved, researchers are charged for the copies at a rate of 15,000 Đồng/4 pages (approximately 25 US cents per page). Researchers should be aware that they are allowed to photocopy no more than one-third of the total number of pages in any document folder. For example, if a folder contains thirty pages, researchers may copy no more than ten of those pages. The turnaround time for a photocopy request (from submission of the request to delivery of the copies) is invariably a week or longer.

In the authors' experience, the staff of Archives II is generally helpful and accommodating in their dealings with foreign researchers. However, visitors to Archives II should be aware that policies and procedures can and do change, usually without notice, in response to directives from Hanoi. In addition, the liberality which higher officials display when acting on folder and photocopy requests often seems to ebb and flow with the Vietnamese political winds. The Archives II staff is therefore frequently in the unenviable position of having to deliver bad news to researchers about delays and setbacks. Researchers who acknowledge this will invariably have more pleasant and productive dealings with the staff—not to mention lower blood pressure levels.

### **III. The General Sciences Library (69 Lý Tự Trọng Street, Dist. 1, HCMC)**

Website: <http://www.gslhcm.org.vn><sup>16</sup>  
Hours: 7:30-11:30am, 1:00-5:00pm, Tuesday-Saturday  
Phone: 84(8).822.5055  
Fax: 84(8).829.9318  
Email: [gsl.hcmc@hcm.vnn.vn](mailto:gsl.hcmc@hcm.vnn.vn)

For historians of South Vietnam, the General Sciences Library (*Thư Viện Khoa Học Tổng Học*) of Ho Chi Minh City is an invaluable resource. The library's name is somewhat misleading, insofar as it suggests that it is dedicated exclusively to the collection of technical and scientific materials.

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<sup>16</sup> The website of the General Sciences Library is typically accessible only during the hours that the library is open—that is, starting after midnight in Europe, or in the early evening hours in North America.

In fact, the GSL is the former National Library of the RVN, and its holdings contain an astonishing variety of books, journals, magazines, newspapers and other items published in South Vietnam between 1954 and 1975. These materials constitute the single largest collection of RVN-era publications in the world, and they include many texts that are difficult or impossible to find anywhere else. For scholars with a serious interest in RVN politics, economics, society and culture, the GSL is indispensable.

The GSL traces its institutional heritage to the colonial period. In 1902, French authorities established the Library of Cochinchina (*Bibliothèque de la Cochinchine*) in Saigon. In 1917, in keeping with French efforts to emphasize Cochinchina's distinct legal identity vis-à-vis the rest of Indochina, the library was designated the "National Library of Southern Vietnam" (*Bibliothèque Nationale du Sud-Viêt Nam*).<sup>17</sup> During this period, the library was located on Rue la Grandière (present-day Lý Tự Trọng street), near the corner with Rue Catinat (now Đồng Khởi street). The library was still at this location in 1957, when the Diệm government declared that it would henceforth be known as National Library of Vietnam (*Thư Viện Quốc Gia Việt Nam*).<sup>18</sup> As the capstone of the RVN library system, the National Library expanded its holdings to incorporate many materials that had previously been stored in other libraries; these included materials that State of Vietnam archivists had taken from library collections in Hanoi prior to the handover of that city to the Việt Minh in 1955. Since the old library building was too small to accommodate all of the new materials, plans were drawn up during the late 1950s for a new facility located two blocks away at the present site of the GSL. Construction was delayed until the 1960s, and the move to the new building was not completed until 1971. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the library was given its current name, a change that reflected its reduced status within post-war Vietnam's national library system.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, however, the GSL retained virtually all of its colonial- and republican-period collections, thus ensuring its continued relevance to scholarly research on the pre-1975 period.

The GSL's collection of RVN-era periodicals is extraordinary. The library has partial or complete runs of hundreds of pre-1975 newspapers; these include both Vietnamese-language (*quốc ngữ*) papers and others published in Chinese, French and English. The 295 *quốc ngữ* dailies listed in the library's finding aids run the gamut from long-running papers with large circulations to short-lived and obscure titles. In addition to the dailies, the library holds at least 1500 other *quốc ngữ* newspapers and magazines which appeared on a weekly, biweekly or monthly basis. These publications cover topics ranging from economics and architecture to film and travel; library visitors can browse everything from *Chấn Hưng Kinh Tế* (a popular weekly devoted to economic issues which began publication in 1957) to an almost complete run of *Minh Tân* (the journal of the Vietnamese Confucian Studies Association, also launched in 1957). The GSL's holdings of these materials overlap substantially with the collections of periodicals held at Cornell University library and other research libraries outside of Vietnam. However, the GSL's

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<sup>17</sup> "La Bibliothèque Nationale de Saigon," *Vietnam Presse*, 13 December 1955.

<sup>18</sup> Việt-Nam Cộng-Hoà, *Niên Giám Hành Chánh 1957* [Administrative Yearbook, 1957] (Saigon: National Institute of Administration, 1957), 162.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Director of the GSL, Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Bắc, a proposal to change the name of the library to "The Library of Hồ Chí Minh City" is currently pending a decision by local authorities. Such a change would be fitting acknowledgement of the revitalization of the library that has taken place during Bắc's tenure.

collections are often more complete; this is particularly true of publications produced early in the RVN period.

The GSL's periodical collection is complemented by an equally impressive collection of books and pamphlets from the 1954-1975 period. Despite enduring various forms of censorship and repression, South Vietnamese authors and publishers were remarkably prolific during the RVN era. (Freedom of the press in South Vietnam prior to 1975, though hardly unfettered, was invariably much greater than in North Vietnam.) The GSL's collection includes not only the best-selling titles produced by mainstream publishing houses but also many hard-to-find volumes. In addition, the library has preserved many RVN government publications, including propaganda pamphlets, statistical yearbooks and educational materials. Finally, the GSL holds an assortment of pre-1975 undergraduate and graduate theses produced by South Vietnamese students at Saigon University and elsewhere. Many of these were based on original research into various aspects of South Vietnamese politics, society and culture, and they often make for fascinating reading.

The General Sciences Library is also an important depository of more recent publications on Vietnamese history. Mark Bradley's 1993 observation about the indispensability of the GSL's holdings for researchers interested in assessing contemporary Vietnamese scholarship on the pre-1975 period is still valid today.<sup>20</sup> In addition to its extensive collection of books on various subjects in modern Vietnamese history, the GSL also has up-to-date collections of a broad range of Vietnamese academic and technical journals.

Foreign scholars who wish to conduct research at the GSL should contact the library in advance by email, fax or letter. As with all other official institutions in Vietnam, the GSL requires each foreign researcher to present a signed letter of introduction from his/her Vietnamese sponsor upon arriving at the library for the first time. If everything is in order, researchers will be allowed to begin requesting and reading materials on the same day that the letter is presented.

Foreign visitors to the GSL will work in a special document reading room (*phòng đọc tài liệu đặc biệt*), located next to the circulation desk in the main reading room on the first floor. The employees who work in the special document room are extremely knowledgeable and well trained, and they are particularly good at helping researchers navigate the various catalogs and indices, which detail the library's holdings. (The GSL is currently in the midst of a long-term project to create an electronic catalog, which will significantly simplify the process of searching for materials; in the meantime, researchers are still obliged to use an assortment of printed finding aids and card catalogs.) All requests for materials must be submitted to the staff, who will then arrange for the items to be delivered to the special document room. Materials are usually delivered on the same day they are requested. The staff will be happy to hold materials overnight in the special document room if a researcher has not finished them by the end of the day. Researchers are not permitted to take any library items out of the special reading room, nor are they allowed to browse the library stacks.

Researchers who wish to make digital copies of texts that they are reading should consult the research room staff. The library has digital photography and scanning equipment, and the staff

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Bradley and Robert K. Brigham, "Vietnamese Archives and Scholarship on the Cold War: Two Reports" (Cold War International History Project Working Paper #7, September 1993).

will make reproductions upon request. As of this writing, the fee charged for this service is 6600 Đồng (about 40 US cents) per page copied, plus a 10,000 Đồng charge for each CD-ROM used to store the resulting files.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The historiographical trend towards the internationalization of the study of the Vietnam War is now well established, and the coming years should bring additional breakthroughs. Although scholars are continuing to ask and answer important questions about the American role in the war, they are also broadening the scope of their inquiries to give greater attention to non-American actors and sources. The prospects for research on South Vietnam's republican era seem particularly promising. As noted above, the National Archives intends to make more RVN official documents available to scholars soon. In addition, the holdings of the National Archives and the GSL are just the tip of the documentary iceberg. There are many more collections and archives held elsewhere in Vietnam that are relevant to the study of South Vietnam during the 1954-1975 period. It thus seems reasonable to expect that revisionist studies of the republican era will figure prominently in future contributions to "the New Vietnam War History."

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