

# Teaching and Studying the Vietnam War in Vietnamese Higher Education: Current Status and Insights

**T**his article examines the current landscape of teaching and learning about the Vietnam War in Vietnamese higher education. It proposes several recommendations to enhance the quality of instruction on this topic in Vietnam. The survey results lead me to argue that teaching this topic poses significant challenges in Vietnam. Students who are not history majors perceive the Vietnam War on a superficial level, as this topic is often presented in courses on the history of the Vietnamese Communist Party or in propaganda and training programs. Furthermore, undergraduate students in professional education programs tend to study Vietnam War history without engaging with diverse political viewpoints, instead framing the war as a case of imperialist expansion. Moreover, anti-communist perspectives are disregarded, and the role of the Republic of Vietnam is rarely mentioned outside a highly critical context.

Several factors may explain this situation. First, it arises from the firm political guidance of the Vietnamese Communist Party in shaping Vietnamese education. Second, it stems from teachers' reluctance to present contrasting perspectives due to concerns about potential repercussions for deviating from the officially approved national history. Additionally, students often refrain from expressing their opinions on this topic due to strict laws limiting freedom of speech, which can result in detention. Nonetheless, this presentation proposes several essential reforms to radically improve the teaching of the Vietnam War as a critical period in Vietnamese history. These include the adoption of academic freedom, pedagogical reforms, and the encouragement of open-minded dialogue with faculty and experts in the classroom.

## The Problem

Many nations support the teaching and learning of history as a critical part of their mission to instill a sense of national pride in learners while broadening their perspectives, helping them recognize past mistakes and learn from them to avoid repetition in contemporary contexts. Generally, the correlation between past and present fosters curiosity while providing context and perspective on the events that have shaped nations. Students who engage in historical studies gain a deeper understanding not only of the past but also of current issues, conflicts, and trends.

Of particular value to students studying the history of conflict is the potential to move beyond simplistic narratives of victory and defeat and develop a nuanced understanding of human behavior, enhancing their ability to make informed decisions. This study encourages them to comprehend and critically analyze multiple causations and contextual complexities. The study of history may also broaden their perspectives beyond their immediate environments, connecting local and global histories in ways that challenge entrenched stereotypes and ideological norms. A history teacher, therefore, not only provides students with a wealth of historical knowledge but also introduces multidisciplinary methodologies and approaches, fostering intellectual flexibility and the consideration of multiple orientations.

Despite the virtues of "critical thinking with evidence" or "reasoned argument about the past," which are common definitions of the discipline of history, many nation-states remain wary of too much "thinking outside the box" and structure their curricula accordingly. Regrettably, most autocratic regimes oppose these precepts.

At the college and university level, teaching and learning history warrant formal discussion. While high school students need only a broad understanding of history with a chronological flow of events that provide a shared national perspective, undergraduate students rely on historical studies to develop critical thinking and analytical skills. At more advanced levels, students must acquire the capacity to analyze primary sources, evaluate evidence, and apply methodological approaches rigorously. Teaching history at the undergraduate level also enhances students' research skills and broadens their knowledge of human society, law, politics, and international relations. An interdisciplinary approach, linking history to other fields, is crucial for supporting students in conducting their own professional research and creating original historical analyses.<sup>1</sup>

In Vietnam, historical education is deeply intertwined with national identity and political ideology. Vietnamese pride in its history of successful resistance against foreign invaders reinforces nationalism and patriotism, which in turn influence the design of textbooks and lectures. The Vietnam War, as the most prolonged conflict in modern Vietnamese history, dominates research and teaching. Through the lens of communist ideology, historians interpret the war as a social class struggle aligned with the

revolutionary goals of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP).<sup>2</sup> After 1975, Vietnamese academics applied this ideological perspective to all fields of historical research, embedding political and historical lessons with the principles of Ho Chi Minh's communism and celebrating the VCP's triumph over colonial and imperialist forces.

Upon entering university, undergraduate students in Vietnam are required to take theoretical political courses, including Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, and the VCP's revolutionary doctrine. These courses serve as ideological and methodological foundations, shaping students' academic development. Consequently, students approach all scholarly inquiries through this theoretical lens, viewing alternative perspectives as politically sensitive or even subversive. More specifically, the Vietnam War is formally taught as the "Resistance War Against America for National Salvation." Domestic historical narratives focus on the VCP's legitimacy, the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945, and the party's leadership in achieving victory over French and American forces. As a result, students are rarely exposed to non-communist entities such as the State of Vietnam (SVN) and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). History instructors generally avoid using the term "Vietnam War," instead emphasizing how the United States sought to extricate itself from a conflict framed as a civil war among Vietnamese factions. While students may use the term informally in class discussions, they are discouraged from engaging with it in formal academic writing due to concerns about political sensitivity.<sup>3</sup>

Researchers and lecturers likewise struggle to approach the topic with impartiality, as their formal communist education has conditioned them to view the losing side as collaborators with foreign invaders. Furthermore, following the fall of Saigon, many publications related to the RVN were censored, archived confidentially, or destroyed, severely limiting their role in Vietnam's historiography. The few available domestic publications regarding the war primarily originate from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's Military Ministry. These sources align with the party's directives and emphasize the communist perspective on the war. Meanwhile, Western sources and materials from the Vietnamese diaspora, including works by former RVN officials and scholars, remain largely inaccessible or dismissed as politically unreliable.

Also, as a consequence of the fall of Saigon, a multitude of publications over the RVN were either suppressed, confidentially archived, or burned, which led to the role of the RVN in Vietnam's historiography being extremely limited.<sup>4</sup> There was an important volume of publications from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV)'s Military Ministry, such as *Mấy vấn đề về tổng kết chiến tranh và viết lịch sử quân sự* by General Hoang Van Thai; *Cách mạng dân tộc dân chủ nhân dân Việt Nam-tác phẩm chọn lọc (2 tập)* by the VCP General Secretary-Truong Chinh; and *Lịch sử cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp 1954-1975 (9 tập)* by the Military History Academy, which contains several of the Party's directives relating to the Communist crusade against the RVN and the United States. There are other reliable sources that researchers, lecturers, and students

can refer to and read.<sup>5</sup> Non history major students were eventually able to approach the Vietnam War in two required courses. One, *Ho Chi Minh Ideology*, featured his charismatic rendering of historical facts of the Vietnamese revolution and his legacy for Vietnam today. The second course was *The History of Vietnam Communist Party*, which chronologically traced the evolution of how the VCP waged the war, fought against their enemies, and gained their victory, although a modicum of in-depth analysis on current the Party leadership is also introduced.<sup>6</sup>

From my own experience and observation as a graduate student, these courses lacked debate and featured poor presentation by monotonous lecturers who failed to convey the complexities of the war to students. As a result, the courses were only taken because they were compulsory. As for undergraduate history major students, they have the chance to take additional in-depth courses on the Vietnam War, yet the majority of those courses are devoted to the Revolutionary War of Vietnam or Anti-American Resistance and National Salvation (1954-1975). The phrase “Vietnam War” is rarely used to describe the war between rival Vietnamese ideologies.<sup>7</sup> In these courses, students have a larger space of debate, but all contradictory perspectives are corrected by lecturers so as not to undermine the building of Socialism. While students are allowed to explore US foreign policy, and the VCP diplomatic and militant activities, the RVN receives scant attention from both students and lecturers in class. The one-dimensional view adopted is that the DRV agency overthrew the RVN, cleared out foreign forces, and achieved national reunification. The openness of archival sources housed at the National Archives Center II, in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, now offers new insightful research. However, history students must not challenge mainstream perspectives.

There is no serious research project that suggests alternate pedagogical methods that may add depth to students’ lessons. Recent debates around the way history is taught in high schools have not provided insight into how high school students perceive the importance of history at the undergraduate level. Lectures may eventually improve their presentations, but there is little evidence that newer pedagogical methods will emerge that improve the reception of lessons for history students. A radical reform of pedagogical methods is always possible, but without the stimulus of academic freedom, there is little chance of expanding students’ horizons and critical thinking in researching and writing history because Vietnamese higher education is a politically oriented education. That does mean Vietnamese educators have to remain silent. In addition to looking into the facts, this article also wants to give new ideas about how new teaching methods can improve the quality of teaching and learning about the Vietnam War in the current higher education curriculum in Vietnam. The aim of this approach is to enthrall students and motivate those at a higher level to undertake additional research.

## Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative design. I survey the perceptions of 28 history major graduates from universities in three regions of Vietnam: the north, central, and south. I collected data using a survey form, which inquired about their fields of study, their memories of undergraduate courses on the Vietnam War, and their opinions. I select these participants due to my personal teaching networks, and they are currently focusing on history teaching and researching history. Since they did not experience the wartime period, they may offer political objectivity in their responses. In this case study, I focused solely on the Vietnam War, a critical topic for professional training in the Departments of History across Vietnam. This issue often sparks heated discussions, particularly regarding the portrayal of Communists as victors, while the opposing sides, including the United States, the RVN, and other anti-communist states, are often disparaged. The participants completed a well-prepared survey form and provided feedback on suggested pedagogical reforms. While analyzing the collected data, I aim to align my findings with current literature and the domestic political context of Vietnam. This allows for a thorough examination of the current status and provides insightful implications for updating outdated pedagogical methods. The goal is to foster a shared vision of academic freedom between lecturers and undergraduate students, which could positively impact the objectives and reputation of higher education in Vietnam's history training.

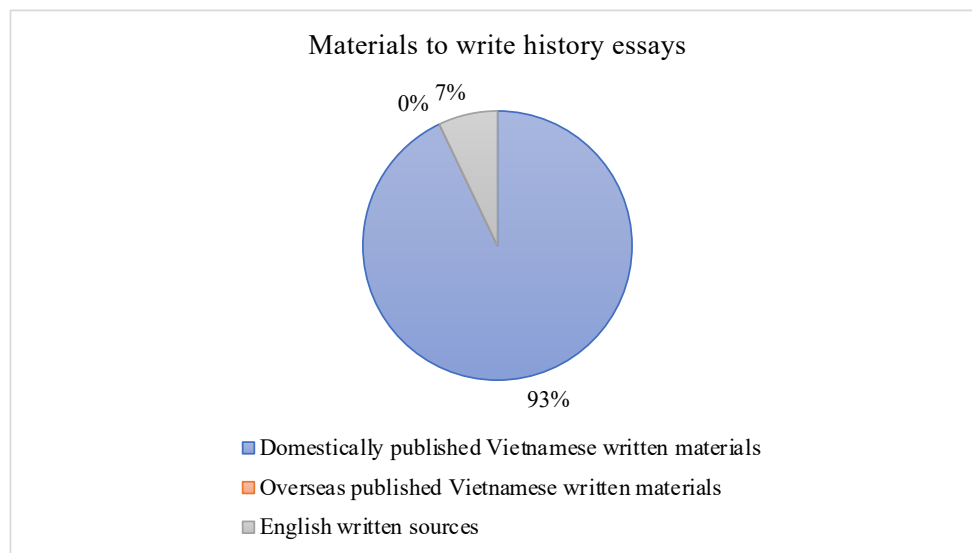
## Current Status

Universal education plays a key role in imparting knowledge of national history to students, enabling them to understand important historical watershed moments, their outcomes, and how they relate to the current historical and political context of Vietnam. Vietnamese history textbooks at the high school level are organized chronologically, covering significant historical events from the formation of the early stages of the Vietnamese people to the recent historical context of Vietnam. Unlike other approaches in international academia, the Vietnam War, as interpreted by domestic Vietnamese historians, is formally taught within the context of the Anti-American Resistance of the Vietnamese people in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the highest level of the universal education hierarchy. Following the Geneva Accord, the Vietnamese began their struggle against Ngo Dinh Diem's intention to establish an anti-communist state in South Vietnam and to prevent deeper United States's involvement in the implementation of the Geneva Accord, while maintaining the remaining Communist forces in South Vietnam during military regroupments from 1954 to 1956. Subsequently, information about the Vietnam War is presented to students, including general details about the United States's military strategies to combat communism, namely the Unilateral War of Eisenhower (1954-1960), the "Special" War of John F. Kennedy (1961-1965), the Limited War of

Lyndon Johnson (1965-1968), and the Vietnamization strategy of Richard Nixon (1969-1973). A series of statistics showcasing the successes of the Communists is highlighted as a point of pride against their opponents; however, their losses, limitations, and adversities are notably absent from the lessons. The textbook is dense with text and lacks vivid illustrations, graphs, and engaging historical narratives.<sup>8</sup> Teachers play a central role in moderating the class, while students contribute very little in terms of perspectives, debates, and personal reflections on the historical lessons they have learned.

Undergraduate students who major in history and choose the Vietnam War as their area of interest may find the subject fascinating. This is because the period was close to Vietnamese contemporaries and had an abundance of Vietnamese source materials available, allowing students to explore the Vietnam War in depth. However, the Vietnam War is often associated with the VCP's direction. History students typically review the war in the history of the VCP course and then study it in the broader context of Vietnamese contemporary history (1945–present). In some courses, they delve into the war's strategies, the Communist Party's anti-American crusade, and the implications of that experience on current defense policy.

Students collect information from written books published by the Vietnam Ministry of Defense, the National Political Publishing House, and other “reliable” publishers. However, despite the availability of source materials, the acceptance of multiple perspectives remains low. Fearing criticism or the label of a “straying” political orientation, students often hesitate to express diverse views in class. As a result, lecturers tend to emphasize Marxism-Leninism theory and approach, often at the expense of other perspectives.

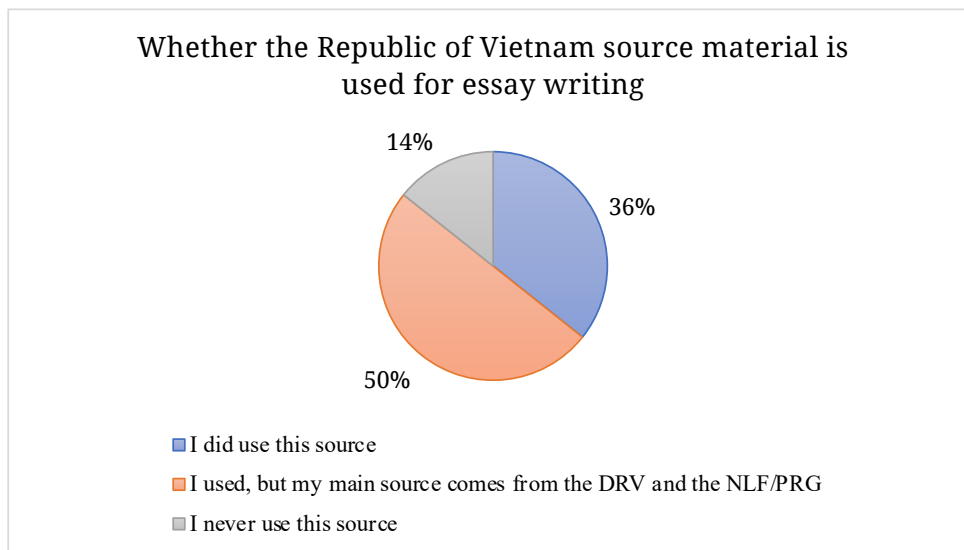


**Figure 1:** The percentage of material uses of Vietnamese major history students at tertiary Vietnamese education (Source: The author's survey conducted in 2024)



Writing a history essay becomes a required assignment for almost all history courses, as lecturers assume that students are capable of developing their writing skills and critical thinking skills, which are reflected in their findings. Unfortunately, the Vietnam War lecturers failed to instruct students to pick up trustworthy documents to frame their essays and buttress students' arguments in their essay completion. When asked about typical sources for writing an essay, my informants reported that they relied heavily on domestically published Vietnamese written materials throughout their process, with 92.9% agreement. History students are hesitant to use English-written sources, partly due to political restrictions and partly because of relatively low English proficiency. A few English-written books have been translated into Vietnamese, but most of them were seriously 'blue-penciled' before their arrival to Vietnamese readers and researchers. The perspectives presented in these books highlight American mistakes and the weaknesses of the RVN in pursuing this conflict.

Additionally, many domestically published books and documents were published by national political publishers or by military units, which resulted in historical findings and stories being presented from a Communist Party perspective. Lecturers tend to avoid presenting multiple perspectives, resulting in their undergraduate students struggling to engage with the Vietnam War history from the US perspective or that of anti-communist historians who participated in or studied the war from their perspective. Few domestic researchers and history students have engaged with a significant volume of overseas Vietnamese written publications, which were compiled by former RVN officers, politicians, and soldiers. These sources, put together by the first generation of Vietnamese people who fled the Vietnam War, give us important information about the war from the RVN's point of view. They show the RVN's losses and the military and political problems it faced, as well as evidence that Vietnamese historians have ignored or called "sophism." Given this ongoing issue with pedagogy, the Vietnam War researchers and lecturers have missed an opportunity to provide their students with thought-provoking insights, having assumed that students would be attuned to potential political changes that could threaten the VCP's leadership.



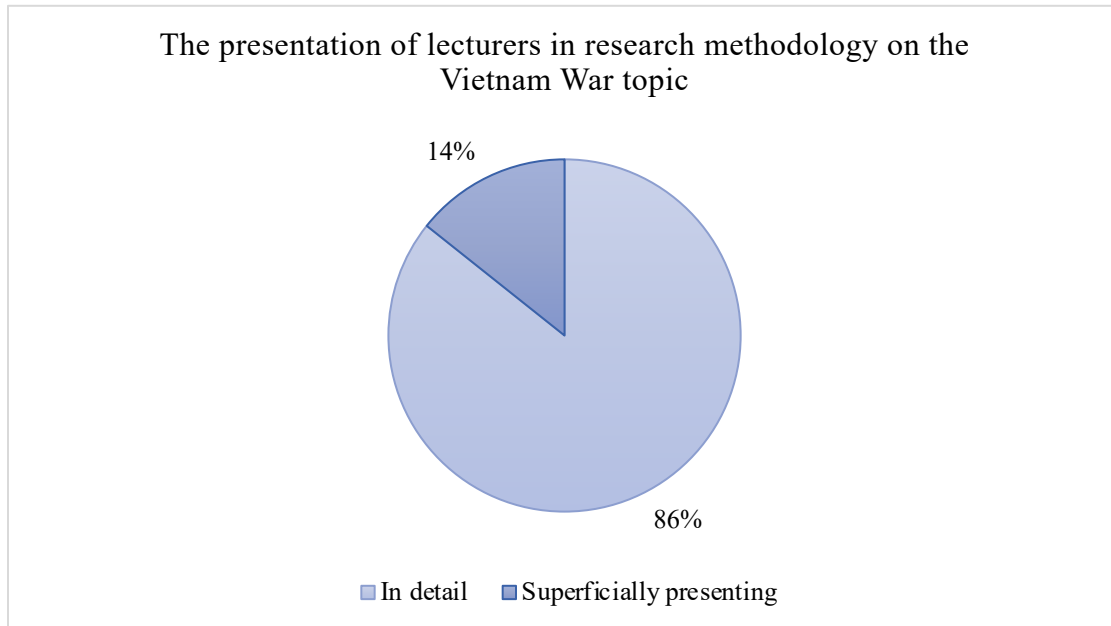
**Figure 2:** The percentage of the Republic of Vietnam material used by Vietnamese History students at the college/university level in the Vietnamese education (Source: The author's survey conducted in 2024)

Surprisingly, when inquired about further information on a particular source for writing an essay, undergraduate students are flexible enough to benefit from the diversity of documents. Students accessed the archives and extracted RVN documents to cite in their essays, with 35.7% of informants doing so. Meanwhile, 14.3% of informants claimed that they never utilized the RVN source materials to draft their assignments. Among those who used these sources (or perhaps just looked at them), 50% relied on Communist sources. As a result, the majority of students affirmed that they utilized the RVN sources; their writing on the RVN remained narrow, even though the source materials revealed the RVN's active and resourceful role in its nation-building plans and its efforts to make decisions independently of the United States' influence on the decision-making process. While the use of primary sources is highly encouraged in writing essays, Vietnamese lecturers never instruct students on how to effectively engage with a substantial volume of RVN source material or how to incorporate academic freedom into their essays. As a result, Vietnamese history students face challenges in exploring the novelty of this research topic.

Moreover, the research methodology employed by both lecturers and students regarding the Vietnam War was poorly executed, particularly given the need for versatile methods and approaches. In Vietnam, all major history students are trained to adopt two key methods of Marxist historical studies: the historical method and the logical method, even though most students do not have a sufficient understanding of how to use them. Fundamentally, the historical method includes four principles of usage: chronological order, comprehensiveness, attention to detail, and consideration of



peculiarity. Meanwhile, the logical method assists Vietnamese students in seeking out the essence and rules underlying the sequence of historical events; however, in practice, this often takes the form of a cause-and-effect approach.<sup>9</sup> In the research essay, history students present two methods in an ambiguous way.

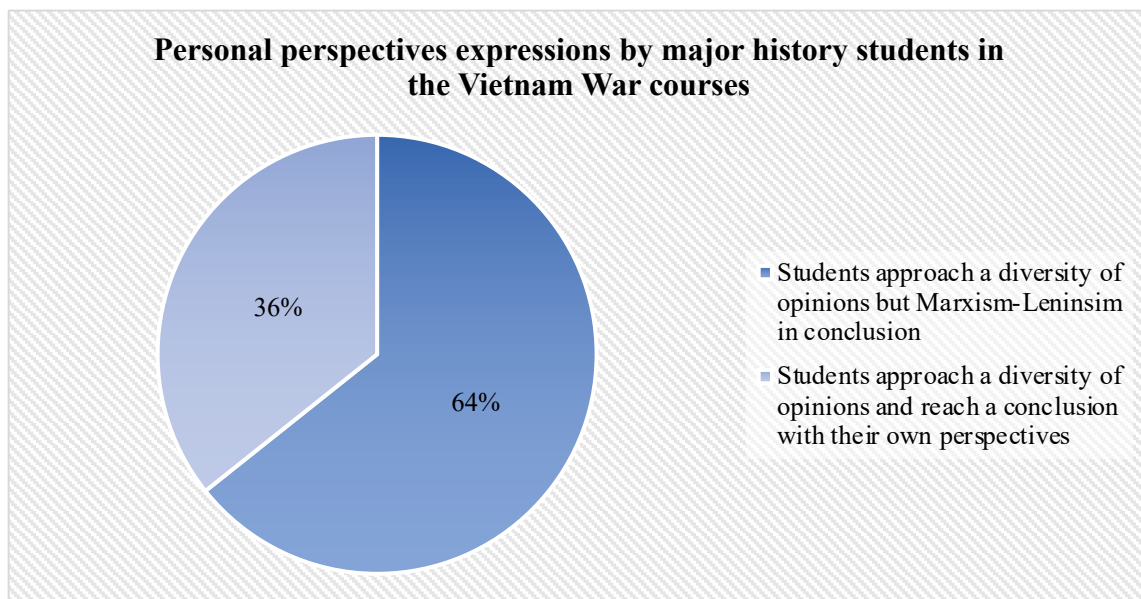


**Figure 3:** The percentage of methodological presentations of Vietnamese lecturers on the Vietnam War topic (Source: The author's survey conducted in 2024)

I confirm that history lecturers refer to research methodology in lessons on the Vietnam War. In fact, 85.7% of informants reported that their lecturers presented research methodology in detail when studying the war. However, history students rarely explain the application of these methods, along with their advantages and disadvantages, in the context of the Vietnam War. This is concerning, as 14.3% of informants stated that their lecturers skipped over research methodology, making it challenging for students to address research questions and complete assignments. The lack of attention to research methodology highlights a significant concern about how history students verify their assumptions on the war and consider multiple perspectives. While the availability of source materials is promising for exploring understudied topics of the Vietnam War, the lack of attention to research methodology remains a major obstacle. Unfortunately, students often rely heavily on propagandistic information available on television and the Internet. When conducting research, history students tend to shy away from primary documents at the archives and are not trained to extract information from these sources. Instead, they receive extensive training in analyzing information from secondhand accounts of events, like journal articles and biographies.

To re-enact history in detail, a variety of sources—especially primary sources—are necessary to verify historical events and renew historical perceptions. However, History students are not trained to utilize these methodologies, making it challenging for them to identify novel research topics and contribute meaningfully to historical studies.

The Vietnam War can be a very sensitive topic for teachers and history students in Vietnam. While some Vietnamese scholars are open-minded about the political role of the RVN, most domestic historians still view the war as a devastating and traumatic experience for the Vietnamese people, resulting in widespread destruction, loss of life, and displacement for all belligerents. The SRV views any entity it associates with national division and a divided society with hostility.<sup>10</sup> In support of its sole legitimacy, lecturers and students in historical studies classes are expected to discuss the RVN, if at all, through the lens of their own domestic perspective and the theories of Marxism and Leninism. The polarization resulting from the long war between the DRV and the RVN has challenged the ability of Vietnamese historians to pursue a balanced and nuanced perspective on the conflict. As a result, historians have often devalued the idea of engaging in formal discussions with their students on such a sensitive topic.



**Figure 4:** Personal perspectives by Vietnamese history students in the Vietnam War courses. (Source: The author's survey conducted in 2024)

When asked about personal perspectives expressed in the Vietnam War courses, history students supposed that they had read a wide range of documents in several languages and met approbation with external perspectives on the Vietnam War. They cited a lot of previous findings and presented the Vietnam War scholars' ideas in their Vietnam War courses. Nevertheless, students are obligated to conclude their findings with Marxism-Leninism perspectives. This situation stems from a long-term education

by Communists, who believed that they had carried out a just war. Besides, young intellectuals who are students with open-mindedness are targeted by the Vietnamese police in light of strict controls over the media and campus, including online platforms, newspapers, and television. Students who voice dissenting opinions may face consequences, such as labeling them as “anti-government” or “anti-state.” This can lead to social isolation, loss of academic opportunities, or even arrest and imprisonment for them. Vietnamese students do not have a strong understanding of their rights and freedoms and are naturally susceptible to government positions and less likely to question their authority and lecturers on such complex political and historical inquiries of the Vietnam War.

Monitoring students’ behaviors and activities is crucial for Communists’ higher education in generating students as future leaders and potential members of the ruling party. As such, history students sometimes perceive the trustworthiness of source materials and hidden historical truth but still keep silent in their views. Otherwise, they have to spark controversy but never win over the dominant perspectives of other students and scholars. However, I still see at least 35.7% of students who responded; they still have some flexibility to present their perspectives, but these respondents preserved their opinions in an open setting not subject to the Marxism-Leninism approach. This implies that lecturers are likely to acknowledge students’ perspectives but refrain from praising them, as this could be interpreted as endorsing a student who holds divergent opinions. Also, in Vietnamese culture, conformity and respect for authority are highly valued. Students may feel pressure from their peers, teachers, and families to avoid expressing dissenting opinions in order to avoid social ostracism.

## Insights

Changing the environment of the Vietnam War debate in Vietnamese academia requires a broad and collective effort. This issue should not be considered solely from the Communist perspective; rather, it should encompass a wide range of viewpoints, including those from the United States, the RVN, and neutral states. In Vietnam, numerous advantages exist for researchers seeking access to Vietnam War sources. The availability of open-access materials in archives, along with primary sources available on the Internet, has created a wealth of information for both students and lecturers to conduct research, write essays, and present their opinions. Domestic historians offer nuanced perspectives beyond those of the Communists and encourage students to examine this conflict from an unbiased viewpoint. Research methodology is provided with a modicum of explanation, and an open forum for discussion is initiated in class. Nonetheless, these positive developments are insufficient to make Vietnam War courses attractive to history students. The recommendations below may be helpful for history teachers and students.

It is imperative that lecturers on the Vietnam War enhance research methods and training for students. At the undergraduate level, history students should learn how to study textual materials and develop their ideas based on the given texts. Source materials play a crucial role in exploring new ideas and verifying the correctness of historical assumptions; however, students may be confused by the diversity of documents from both primary and secondary sources.<sup>11</sup> Teachers of the Vietnam War should equip their students with techniques to extract substantial information from primary texts in comparison with other source materials, enabling them to arrive at informed conclusions. Reappraisal of Vietnam War history requires students to possess a solid understanding of the conflict as well as a comprehensive grasp of multiple perspectives, so that they can define their stance and interpret history effectively. Students should learn from their advisors how to sharpen their historical skills, concepts, and methods. Rather than simply reading extensive Vietnam War documents, students should engage in training and workshops focused on research methods, critical thinking, and writing skills to enhance the quality of their historical research. This could include inviting international experts to share their knowledge and expertise. Currently, public universities that emphasize historical studies are somewhat reluctant to organize a large Vietnam War conference that would attract international experts to share their ideas and findings. Political concerns surrounding the high reputation of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) scholars impede the possibility of hosting a conference with diverse perspectives. Organizers may invest considerable time in formal censorship of submitted abstracts, require further modifications to align with political views, or even reject abstracts due to political sensitivity. These actions generally obstruct academic freedom and hinder students from gaining a comprehensive understanding of the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, Vietnamese educators should consider implementing academic freedom on university campuses. This would provide major history students with greater opportunities to discuss the Vietnam War with constructive historical critique.<sup>12</sup> A culture of open discussion and debate would allow both lecturers and future historians to engage with historical events and interpretations, helping to identify biases and promote a more nuanced understanding of the past.<sup>13</sup> Although the topic of the Vietnam War is politically sensitive, analyzing primary sources—such as documents, photographs, and oral histories—is essential to avoid gaps in historiography. Despite this, academic freedom remains contentious among Vietnamese educators and historians, as it is often neglected out of concern that fostering this freedom may lead to political turmoil and misinformation, as influenced by the VCP's interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, students who are expected to represent the Party's voice may feel discouraged from engaging in open debate about past conflicts and sharing their political views. Alarmingly, many Vietnamese undergraduate students lack awareness of political debate, allowing a singular narrative regarding the war to dominate orthodox

information. Official news agencies often conceal significant facts about various aspects of the war, leaving both students and lecturers hesitant to express their own views and avoid potential repercussions. Although Vietnamese universities are working to strengthen institutional autonomy, progress is hindered by limited financial management and ongoing restrictions on academic freedom. To truly foster a culture of intellectual freedom, universities must consider revising their processes for selecting faculty and developing curricula, enabling undergraduate students to engage in academic discussions and debates more freely. Additionally, Vietnamese universities should encourage collaboration between academics, civil society organizations, and human rights advocates to promote a culture of free speech.

The organization of the class is designed to revive the atmosphere of Vietnam War courses. Currently, Vietnam War lecturers play a central role in their classes. Pedagogical activities include lecturing, essay assignments, and final assessments. Lectures impart knowledge of the Vietnam War from the orthodox perspective of Vietnam and narrate the sequence of events, which can lead to students becoming disengaged with these traditional methods. In each mid-term test, students are assigned specific topics related to the Vietnam War and must prepare content, presentations, and questions. The same structure applies to the final exam, where students rarely have the opportunity to select a theme they find fascinating.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, students often fail to incorporate a range of primary and secondary sources to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the war. Lecturers also struggle to instruct their students on utilizing movies, documentaries, podcasts, and online resources that could engage them and enhance their learning experience. Consequently, students do not have the opportunity to use case studies or stories narrated by their relatives, family, and friends, nor to incorporate these narratives into class discussions.

To improve the situation, Vietnam War lecturers should revamp their classes and promote students' involvement in Vietnam War discussions, allowing academic freedom to indirectly enhance the quality of student presentations and research, making them more engaging with the topic.<sup>16</sup> During the course, students should be encouraged to develop critical thinking skills, enabling them to analyze and evaluate the complexities of the war rather than merely presenting historical facts. In Vietnam, the presence of post-war legacies is rich with stories, including soldiers' accounts, diaries, and letters. Although these sources are often overlooked in Vietnam, they hold historical significance for research and writing. Lecturers and students should begin their interpretations with such oral histories, which can enhance the visibility and credibility of their work. This approach encourages students to empathize with the experiences of Vietnamese people during the war, thereby promoting a deeper understanding of the conflict's human impact.

Also, I highlight the importance of syllabus design on the Vietnam War in terms of given sources and appraisal criteria.<sup>17</sup> First, the Vietnam War curriculum should

encompass a broad range of required materials from multiple Vietnamese and English sources to help students engage with comprehensive and nuanced perspectives. The English proficiency of major history students, as examined, is relatively low. Among 28 participants, no student reported having advanced proficiency, while the majority performed at a pre-intermediate level in English. This disadvantage hampers the capacity of history students to read English-language sources and participate in Anglophone workshops or conferences on the Vietnam War. Moreover, the lecturers on the Vietnam War have not extensively engaged with the relevant literature, especially works published in the United States and other developed countries. As a result, their efforts to introduce updated historical sources to students have not borne fruit. Thus, lecturers are encouraged to gather additional updated sources on the Vietnam War and incorporate them into their syllabi. Regarding assessment criteria, lecturers should provide detailed syllabi that allow students to express their perspectives, as long as they substantiate their statements with reliable sources. Lecturers should also regularly assess student understanding through quizzes, assignments, and discussions to ensure that learning objectives are being met while allowing students to reflect on their own biases and assumptions about the war, thereby promoting a more nuanced understanding of the conflict.

## Conclusion

The Vietnam War is a sensitive and highly controversial topic in Vietnam due to its painful emotional impact, significant loss of life, widespread destruction, and long-term social and economic consequences. However, it needs to be addressed in a professional and academic setting. Teaching the war's legacies and reviewing what happened during the conflict may appeal to students if it provides an opportunity for historians to reflect on its history not with a jaundiced eye, but through an open-minded and respectful examination of the nation's past. Teaching the Vietnam War in Vietnamese higher education faces numerous challenges due to political and pedagogical constraints. Without a concerted effort to promote academic freedom, incorporate diverse sources, and encourage critical analysis, students will continue to engage with the subject through a limited ideological framework. This article proposes fundamental reforms to pedagogical methods, syllabus design, and research approaches to foster a more comprehensive and intellectually stimulating study of the Vietnam War in Vietnamese universities.

Based on the responses of 28 major history students regarding their past experiences in Vietnam War courses at the undergraduate level, I highlight key problems in the teaching of the Vietnam War in Vietnam. Both students and lecturers approach the war from the perspective of the Communist side while holding the opposing viewpoints in low regard. Teaching the Vietnam War carries political implications that are not solely driven by the propagandistic aims of the Communist



Party. This ideology emphasizes a uniform implementation of research methodology, syllabus design, and student evaluation. The poor research methodology primarily features the availability of historical and logical methods, lacking unequivocal explanations. As a result, students find it challenging to effectively engage with documents, process historical sources, and establish their historical assumptions. Undergraduate students fail to utilize a variety of Vietnam War sources, which hinders their ability to sharpen their historical analysis skills in reviewing and interpreting the history of the Vietnam War. Throughout the course, students experience limited academic freedom, as they primarily present perspectives that align with the VCP's conclusions. While open discussions occasionally occur, students often hesitate to express dissenting opinions or maintain their perspectives for fear of social repercussions and the risk of political confinement.

It is imperative that lecturers allow students to air their views on war while engaging with a diversity of opinions. Vietnamese undergraduate students, especially those from the south of Vietnam, may have historical generational ties to the RVN, so lecturers should be prepared to embrace different historical perspectives. Students will then be more likely to engage in open-minded discussions and achieve discursive hegemony in sharing their findings and opinions regarding the war. Moreover, Vietnam War lecturers should provide students with detailed guidance on research methodology, as this will enable them to conduct their research using various methods, such as oral history, written source collection, museum collections, and storytelling. The history of Vietnam is, thus, not beyond the capacity of students, and they are capable of grasping the value of a redesigned Vietnam War syllabus that stimulates the growth of open discussion and increases their capacity for critical thinking. The introduction of new sources published outside Vietnam, as well as a stronger command of the English language for history students, is critical to improving the intellectual landscape of Vietnam War teaching in Vietnam. However, achieving these above suggestions may take much longer than we expect unless we create a clear separation between political pressures and the campus learning environment.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne M Wilson and Samuel S. Wineburg, “Peering at history through different lenses: The role of disciplinary perspectives in teaching history” In *Teachers college record* 89, no.4 (1988): 525-539.

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