



Britain and the Wars in Vietnam: The Supply of Troops, Arms and Intelligence, 1945–1975 by Gerald Prenderghast.

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015. Pp. viii, 320. ISBN 978-0-7864-9924-3.

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During the years following World War II, Britain fought insurgencies in Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland, but it was the conflict in Vietnam—in which it was *not* directly involved—that caused the most friction between the American and British governments. In *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*, biologist turned journalist Gerald Prenderghast provides a comprehensive overview of various aspects of British involvement in Vietnam from the 1945 deployment of British Indian Army troops to the arms sales of the 1970s. He also touches on wartime relations between the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. The work is part narrative history and part technical study of the Vietnam conflict from the British perspective.

The book's first seven chapters survey the conflict from 1945 to 1973. Chapters 1 and 2 cover the British occupation of French Indo-China at the end of the Second World War. British Indian Army soldiers deployed to an extremely complicated environment. Prenderghast points out that the Allies had sent mixed signals to nationalist forces in Indo-China. The American Office of Strategic Services representatives in Hanoi strongly supported Ho Chi Minh and his self-declared Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At the same time, British forces were specifically tasked with repatriating Allied POWs and preserving the status quo until French forces could reassert control over their colony. The Indian soldiers had to quell a liberation struggle, protect minority communities from reprisals, and rearm the Japanese troops they had just defeated.

Chapters 3–7 take the story up to the withdrawal of US forces in 1973. By the time President Lyndon Johnson's administration escalated the war, it had no illusions about any large-scale British military participation. Johnson's "Many Flags" policy was meant to give the impression of an anti-communist coalition; the president begged the British government for even a platoon of Black Watch bagpipers to suggest its solidarity with the American cause. In a post-Suez political environment, however, no British prime minister was willing to comply with the Americans' requests. Unfortunately, Prenderghast does not draw on the best current scholarship on his subject,¹ which offers less US-centered accounts of the wars in Vietnam.

Chapters 8–9 trace, successively, British governments' views on Vietnam and the realities of British military involvement there. Both rely heavily on secondary literature and reassert that the British avoided entanglements in another expensive military conflict after their bad experiences in Malaya, Kenya, and Suez.

Chapters 10–16 make good use of archival research. Chapters 10–12 examine the (non-) contributions of the three British armed services to the Vietnam conflict. A one-paragraph excursus in chapter

1. E.g., Daniel Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014); James Waite, *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History* (NY: Routledge, 2012); and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012).

10, “Recruitment from the British Army to the U.S. Armed Forces,” exemplifies the clumsy prose style of the entire book:

No records exist in the National Archives indicating that any serving personnel in the British army, Royal Navy or RAF were ever recruited by the United States between 1963 and 1973. However, some individuals may have resigned their posts in the British armed forces in order to join the Americans and subsequently fight in Vietnam. Consequently, there may have been occasions when this happened that are not the subject of a government record, although technically, if those persons remained British citizens, they would have been violating the Foreign Enlistment Act of 1870, which prohibits British subjects from serving with a foreign power not at war with Great Britain. (116)

That is, the British military assisted US forces only very peripherally, allowing American aircraft to stop over at UK airfields and authorizing American ships to replenish stores at Royal Navy facilities in Hong Kong.

The remaining chapters (17 and 18) demonstrate point-by-point that British personnel were never directly involved in the Vietnam conflicts, while detailing British arms deals with and logistical support of the United States from the 1950s through the 1970s. The Australian and New Zealand armies figure in the narrative as well, though without reference to the considerable scholarship on the ANZAC experience in Vietnam.² The historic British defense relationship with its former colonies and connections with their militaries meant that some ANZAC soldiers who served in Vietnam were originally from the United Kingdom. Prenderghast insinuates that some British citizens who joined ANZAC forces did so specifically to fight in Vietnam; this interesting idea might shed light on the perception of the conflict in the United Kingdom, but needs further research. There are stories of British ex-soldiers traveling to either Australia or the United States in order to join the fight against communism: Rick Rescorla is the best known example.³ More accounts of these men would have added depth to a text narrowly focused on the numbers involved in the conflict.

Despite conspiracy theories about back-room deals and covert British deployment of special forces support, Prenderghast’s research reveals no such direct British assistance to the French or Americans during their wars in Vietnam. Chapter 13, “Civilians, Conscripts, Mercenaries and R&R,” promises an overview of the various categories of British private citizens who may have participated in the conflict. The short section on mercenaries verifies British claims that—rumors notwithstanding—no UK mercenaries fought in Vietnam. A single page simply states that British R&R facilities were open to US forces during the war. Training support was provided by the British Army’s Jungle Warfare School in Malaysia, where British counterinsurgency lessons were taught to a few US military personnel.

Gerald Prenderghast makes no particular argument based on historical evidence in *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*; rather he simply presents a disinterested by-the-numbers account of the facts at hand. One wishes he had put his careful research to better use by investigating more broadly the effects of Vietnam on Great Britain’s relations with its historic allies.

2. E.g., Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney: U New South Wales Pr, 2014), and Mark Dapin, *The Nashos’ War: Australia’s National Servicemen and Vietnam* (NY: Penguin, 2014).

3. See, e.g., James B. Stewart, *Heart of a Soldier: A Story of Love, Heroism, and September 11th*, rev. ed. (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003), and Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young: Ia Drang, the Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (NY: Random House, 1992).