The Hidden History of Graham Greene’s Vietnam War: Fact, Fiction and *The Quiet American*

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**Abstract**

In the frontispiece of his Vietnam-set novel, *The Quiet American*, published in 1955, Graham Greene insisted that he had written ‘a story and not a piece of history’, yet countless readers in the decades that followed ignored these cautionary words and invested the work with historical authenticity. By writing in the first person, and by including more direct reportage (drawn from his several visits to Indo-China in the 1950s) than can be found in any of his other novels, Greene underestimated the extent to which his readership would confuse fact and fiction. Greene did not intend his novel to function as history, but this is what happened. How, then, does it measure up as history? In addressing this question, most commentators have been concerned to establish the real-life inspiration for Alden Pyle, the quiet American of the book’s title who is secretly (and disastrously) promoting a Third Force in Vietnam equidistant between the French colonialists and the communist-led Viet-Minh. In this article the focus is less on personalities than on whether the Americans were indeed covertly funding and arming a Third Force. In addition, using Greene’s unpublished letters and diaries as well as Foreign Office documents recently released under the UK Freedom of Information Act, it will be seen that the British, too, were involved in Third Force plotting behind French backs and that Greene himself was a party to the kind of convoluted intrigue so often to be found in the plots of his novels.

‘One opens each novel by Mr. Graham Greene with pleasurable eagerness . . . but also with a shade of apprehension: what strange creature will come shambling towards us now from the dark wilderness of unredeemed human frailty?’ So began the review of Graham Greene’s Vietnam-based novel *The Quiet American* in the London *Times* of 8 December 1955.¹ In this instance the creatures were Thomas Fowler, a cynical and opiated British reporter working out of Saigon during the French war in Indo-China, and Alden Pyle, an idealistic and committed Cold Warrior, the quiet American of the title, a member of the Economic Mission attached to the US Legation. Pyle is


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eventually exposed as a CIA agent secretly promoting a Third Force equidistant between the French colonialists and the communist-led Viet-Minh rebels, a revelation which seals his fate. When a large car bomb explodes in the centre of Saigon killing and maiming many innocent bystanders, Fowler recognizes the handiwork of General Thé, the leader of Pyle’s Third Force, and determines to do something before the American’s meddling causes more harm. Bitter, too, because Pyle has wooed his Vietnamese mistress away from him, Fowler contrives to have him assassinated by the Viet-Minh. He was ‘a good chap in his way . . . A quiet American’, Fowler tells Vigot, the detective charged with investigating the murder. ‘A very quiet American’, Vigot agrees.2

When it was published in 1955 The Quiet American’s setting would have been familiar to many of Greene’s readers for whom the climactic battle of the Indo-China war, at Dien Bien Phu in north-west Vietnam, had been played out the year before in their newspapers, in radio news reports and in cinema newsreels. The Viet-Minh victory in May 1954 led to a peace settlement by which Vietnam was temporarily divided between a Viet-Minh north and a loosely French-administered south. Nationwide elections were scheduled for July 1956, after which partition would end, the residual French presence would disappear, and the country would emerge reunited and independent. The elections, as we know, never took place. Disillusioned, France withdrew ahead of schedule in 1955 leaving the United States to construct a separate anti-communist state. The refusal of the North Vietnamese and their supporters in the south to accept this territorial cleavage was the catalyst for the second – American – war. By the time it ended in 1973 more than 58,000 US servicemen had died. The human cost on the Indo-Chinese side (for Laos and Cambodia were not spared) was anywhere between 2 and 3 million.3

All of this lay in the future when Greene’s novel appeared but commentators have often remarked on his prescience, on the way he ‘defined the tragedy taking shape for America long before the Marines arrived’, and how the character of Pyle ‘encapsulated the combination of American arrogance and naiveté that eventuated in the “quagmire” of Vietnam’.4 Here was a writer of fiction functioning simultaneously as a chronicler and interpreter of contemporary history as well as an oracle, the purveyor of ‘a warning signal that was ignored’.5 Greene was uncomfortable with this reputation, insisting that ‘I couldn’t attack a hypothetical

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3 For recent overviews of the conflict see Mark Philip Bradley, Vietnam At War (Oxford, 2009) and Mark Atwood Lawrence, The Vietnam War: A Concise International History (Oxford, 2010).

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future’. He also refuted suggestions that the character of Fowler was a vector for his own views, but the evidence of his journals and letters from 1951–2 (when, as we will see, he spent several months in Vietnam) belies this claim. Through Fowler, Greene was able to condemn the United States’ ability, born of good but flawed intentions, to do great damage in the colonial, post-colonial and developing world. Given this leitmotif it is no surprise that the novel, though well received in Britain, came in for criticism in Cold War America where reviewers bridled at the denigration of the US national character as personified by Pyle. The 1958 Hollywood treatment of his story, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, attempted to remedy this defect, with the CIA vetting and refining the screenplay, but the result was ‘a complete travesty’, Greene complained, ‘a real piece of political dishonesty’ in which the American was ‘very wise’ and the Englishman ‘completely the fool of the Communists’. Yet for all its purported anti-Americanism, by the start of the 1960s The Quiet American was required reading for US journalists working in South Vietnam. ‘Many passages some of us can quote to this day’, New York Times reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner David Halberstam recalled. ‘It was our bible’. Later, as the American war escalated, the novel became ‘a standard text for the anti-war movement’, which embraced it as ‘a prophetic masterpiece about the perils of blind idealism run amok’. Today, such is the degree to which Greene’s tale of Indochine française has entered the popular (western) consciousness, a journalist, ‘most especially an Anglo-American travel writer, will run the risk of disappointing his editor if he visits Saigon and leaves without any reference to quiet Americans’. Beyond its cultural significance, how does The Quiet American fare as history? This may seem an inappropriate question: after all, as Greene himself remarked, he set out to write ‘a story and not a piece of history’. But the fact is that countless readers not only invested the work with historical authenticity but accorded it ‘the status of a paradigm of the conflict’. By choosing to write in the first person, and by including more

6 Marie-Françoise Allain, The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene (1983) [hereafter Allain, Other Man], p. 81.
7 I am grateful to Canterbury Christ Church University for providing me with study leave and financial resources to consult the Greene letters and journals at Georgetown University’s Lauinger Library and at the Burns Library at Boston College. My thanks to the staff of both libraries, and also to Vanessa Ford for inspiring this project.
12 Hitchins, ‘I’ll Be Damned’.
13 TQA foreword.
direct reportage than can be found in any other of his novels, Greene underestimated the desire of his readers 'to make fiction fact', to have 'fiction serving as history', and to accept the story as 'real fiction'.\(^{15}\) However, this being so, it is curious that The Quiet American's historical veracity has never been fully tested, while those who have essayed a brief evaluation have been unimpressed. Michael Sheldon, a Greene biographer, accepts that the 'wartime atmosphere . . . is brilliantly conveyed', but dismisses the treatment of political and military matters as 'superficial', while Seymour Topping, an American journalist in Vietnam in the early 1950s, has urged readers in search of 'a faithful historical account of the French Indochina War' to 'look elsewhere'.\(^{16}\) Another curiosity is that in a novel as historically informed as The Quiet American so many commentators should have concluded that there was only one question worth asking: who was the real-life model for Alden Pyle? Over the years, Edward Geary Lansdale, CIA agent and all-round 'Cold War celebrity', emerged as the favourite even though Greene always rejected the Lansdale-Pyle thesis.\(^{17}\) In the mid-1990s Greene's official biographer, Norman Sherry, demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that Pyle's views were a composite of attitudes the writer encountered in several Americans during his time in Vietnam in 1951–2. Lansdale, who did not arrive on the scene until 1954, was not in their number. As for the rest, Leo Hochstetter, of the US Special Technical and Economic Mission (STEM), seems to have been the single greatest inspiration for Pyle's political outlook, though not his appearance or manner.\(^{18}\)

In this article a different issue will be emphasized, namely the extent to which the Americans, and more unexpectedly the British, were secretly working behind French backs to promote a Third Force solution in Vietnam. As will be seen, the real-life drama which informed the novel, and in which Greene himself played a pivotal role, is just as compelling as the fictional doings of Fowler, Pyle and General Thé.

I

By 1950 Graham Greene's literary fame was already established thanks to a string of popular yet critically acclaimed novels, among them

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Brighton Rock (1938), The Power and the Glory (1940), The Confidential Agent (1943) and The Heart of the Matter (1948). He was also a seasoned traveller, as the locations of some of his novels testify, but he had little experience of South-East Asia until he accepted an offer from his brother, Hugh Carleton Greene, to join him in Malaya where he was head of UK Information Services during the early phase of the Malayan Emergency. Desirous of adventure and wishing to escape an unhappy love affair (his mistress, Catherine Walston, had opted to remain with her husband) Greene arrived in Malaya in November 1950. In the event Kuala Lumpur ‘bored & depressed’ him, the Emergency provided only a frisson of the excitement he craved, and early on Hugh was summoned to Singapore, ‘so that I haven’t even got him to drink with’. Forays with the Gurkhas in the bandit country of Pahang brought him closer to the action (‘I saw my first body – it was a nasty sight & I’m a bit off meals’), but it was with undisguised relief that he bade farewell to Malaya after two months.19

Greene decided to return to England via Indo-China in order to visit an old friend, Trevor Wilson, who was British consul in Hanoi.20 Arriving in Saigon, the capital of Cochin-China (southern Vietnam), on 25 January 1951, he seized delightedly on the contrast with Malaya. ‘This is the country’, he declared, ‘What a sod place Malaya seems though this one is in greater danger’.21 Then again, it was the danger that was a large part of the attraction. As Sherry has shown, throughout his adult life Greene exhibited an ‘obsessive need to flee from the creeping boredom of everyday life’, for with boredom came depression and thoughts of suicide. Alcohol, drugs and women were all used (and abused) in an effort to keep life interesting, but at low points, as in Malaya, a ‘desire for annihilation’ would take hold.22 The Emergency had been low-risk but in Vietnam Greene was thrilled to discover two wars, each deadly in its own way. In the north, in Tonkin, was the big war, the scene of set-piece battles, while in Cochin-China the war was smaller in scale but still lethal. ‘The targets were always human, the objective to provoke maximum fear’, recalled one French resident of Saigon, while visiting New York Times reporter Cy Sulzberger wrote of ‘a tranquil city of assassination’. 23 Greene described a similar scene. ‘The situation is fantastic’, he told Hugh. ‘One lunches and dines behind iron grills or wire netting to keep out the grenades. Good food, good wine, & tremendous friendliness’. In his diary he put it more pithily: ‘Gaiety in spite of grenades’.24

21 Greene to Hugh Greene, 26 Jan. 1951, Hugh Greene Papers (HGP), Georgetown University, 2/17, original emphasis, and Greene to Walston, 27 Jan. 1951, GWP 11/13.
22 Sherry, Greene, pp. xiii–xxvii, 279, 368–9, 385.
24 Greene to Hugh Greene, 26 Jan. 1951, HGP 2/17; Greene journal, 25 Jan. 1951, Greene Papers Part II (GPII), Georgetown University, 1/1.
On his second evening Greene was invited to dine informally with General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, who was both French high commissioner and commander-in-chief of the French Expeditionary Corps (FEC), a ‘fascinating character’ who ‘has stopped the rot here’. The war which broke out in 1946 initially possessed a colonial character, with the French attempting to reassert their imperial primacy in the face of determined resistance from the communist-led nationalists of the Viet-Minh who, in September 1945, had established the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). By 1951, however, with the United States supplying France with military assistance and the Chinese communists providing similar aid to the Viet-Minh, the original colonial struggle had acquired a Cold War complexion. Meanwhile the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), commanded by General Vo Nguyen Giap, had developed into a formidable fighting force; in autumn 1950, as Greene headed for Malaya, the PAVN meted out to France its ‘greatest colonial defeat since Montcalm died at Quebec’ by wresting control of northern Tonkin. Boosted by this success, in December Giap launched a major offensive against the Red River Delta, the hub of the French position in the north. With Hanoi imperilled, the French High Command ordered the evacuation of French civilians, a precursor it seemed to the complete abandonment of the north and with it any prospect of winning the war.

It was at this point that de Lattre took command.

Dashing and debonair, the 61-year-old general came to Indo-China with a reputation for firm leadership, strategic brilliance, temper tantrums and great personal charm. He promptly fired the senior officers associated with the recent defeats, outlawed all talk of abandoning Tonkin, and assured his troops that ‘from now on you will be commanded’. De Lattre ‘electrified’ the FEC, American journalists reported, an impression underscored by Malcolm MacDonald, the British commissioner-general in South-East Asia, who remembered how ‘de Lattre’s name was like a trumpet summoning his soldiers to turn defeat into victory’. After successfully repulsing the threat to Hanoi, de Lattre went on to lead the French to victory in three more battles in the first half of 1951 (at Vinh Yen in January, Mao Khe in March, and on the Day River in June). French superiority in aviation and artillery and the use of US-supplied napalm inflicted serious damage on Giap’s forces,

25 Greene to Walston, 26 Jan. 1951, GWP 11/12.
26 Bernard Fall, Street Without Joy (Mechanicsburg, 1994) [hereafter Fall, Street Without Joy], p. 33.
30 Topping, Front Lines, p. 147; MacDonald to Graves, 25 Nov. 1952, TNA/FO959/126.
but de Lattre, whose first weeks in Indo-China ‘remain a classic example of the personal impact the command of a great general can bring to a deteriorating situation’, also played his part.31

The security of the Red River delta, with its population of 6 million, its rice surplus so coveted by the Viet-Minh, and the Hanoi–Haiphong complex, was the High Command’s priority. During 1951 the so-called de Lattre line began to take shape, a ‘concrete curtain’ of 1,200 blockhouses fanning out from the Gulf of Tonkin to ring the delta; conceived as a deterrent to conventional PAVN assaults, the line would later prove to be a porous barrier to Viet-Minh guerrilla infiltration.32

In his political role de Lattre reassured the Vietnamese that their independence was safe in his hands. Two years before, in 1949, the French had persuaded the ex-emperor of Annam, Bao Dai, to become chief of state of a newly created Associated State of Vietnam (ASV). The ASV was given its independence but only within the framework of the French Union, a restriction which allowed the French to relinquish responsibility for much of the internal administration of the country while retaining control over foreign, defence and commercial policy. De Lattre spoke of perfecting Vietnam’s freedom when the security situation allowed, but to many nationalists, and not just those involved with the Viet-Minh, the ‘Bao Dai solution’ resembled a colonial con trick.33

This, then, is the background to Greene’s first meeting with de Lattre in Saigon on 26 January 1951. Anxious to win greater US support for the war, and knowing that his famous guest was working for the influential Life magazine, the Frenchman was exaggeratedly attentive to Greene’s needs, even promising him a seat on his personal aircraft when he returned to Hanoi.34 Greene was grateful, for much as he liked Saigon, he knew that the war would be won or lost in the north where the battle ‘was truly classical, the kind that historians or war correspondents used to describe before the era of the camera’.35 He flew with de Lattre to Hanoi on 30 January, arriving just before noon. The general immediately put a small plane and pilot at his disposal and encouraged him to fly over the delta defences. That afternoon, accompanied by Trevor Wilson, Greene set off but in an entirely different direction – to Phat Diem, sixty miles south of Hanoi.36

34 Greene journal, 26 Jan. 1951, GGPII 1/1; Greene, Ways of Escape, p. 156.
36 Greene journal, 31 Jan. 1951, GGPII 1/1.

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A largely autonomous city-state abutting the Gulf of Tonkin, Phat Diem was controlled by a Catholic Prince-Bishop, Le Huu Tu. Together with Pham Ngoc Chi, bishop of the adjoining diocese of Bui Chu, Tu exerted spiritual authority over 500,000 Catholics and wielded temporal power over much of the area’s remaining (mostly Buddhist) population. In 1945 the Catholic Church in Vietnam had backed the DRV but as the Viet-Minh’s communist outlook became more pronounced the church shifted to a position of neutrality in the Franco-Viet-Minh conflict. The unequivocal support of Vietnam’s Catholics would have done much to strengthen the fledgling ASV, but at the time of Greene’s first visit the northern bishops not only questioned Bao Dai’s nationalist credentials (in contrast to the Vatican which approved of his regime) but resisted central government interference in the administration of their respective sees. Tu maintained an equally ambivalent attitude to the DRV. Notwithstanding the godlessness of the communists, many Catholics still identified with Ho Chi Minh’s patriotism, while Phat Diem’s vulnerability on the edge of Viet-Minh-controlled Thanh Hoa province obliged the bishop to employ a combination of diplomacy and trade with the rebels (especially in rice, abundant in his territory) to keep the war at a distance. If all else failed he had his own army; housed in barracks in the cathedral precincts in Phat Diem, these troops, around 3,000 officers and men, had their own factories for making rudimentary grenades, mortar bombs and grenade throwers. This was just as well, because a concomitant of Tu’s pronounced nationalism was a refusal to allow the French base rights in his diocese.

The Catholic Greene was captivated by Phat Diem, as was his friend and co-religionist Wilson. Tu personally showed his visitors round, pointing with pride to his defensive preparations and avowing that his ‘number-one enemy is the French after which come the Communists’, an outlook which ensured that he was mistrusted equally by both sides, the French declaring him ‘half Viet-Minh’ and the Viet-Minh labelling him a ‘French tool’. On this first occasion Greene spent just thirty-six hours in Tu’s ‘medieval Episcopal principality’ before returning to Hanoi on 1 February. That evening, when he again dined with de Lattre, he discovered that his unscheduled excursion had vexed this host: ‘Slightly picked on’ and peppered with ‘Godless anecdotes’, he wrote in his diary. At the time he attached little importance to the Frenchman’s jibes, but looking

37 The Times, 22 March 1951.
41 Greene journal, 1 Feb. 1951, GGPPI-1/1.
back he came to see the dinner as the moment when 'our relations began to cool', an 'inconvenience to me' but a 'disaster' for Wilson.\(^{42}\)

II

The nature of this disaster would not reveal itself until mid-1951. For now, after spending a fortnight in Vietnam, Greene returned home. 'It was quite by chance that I fell in love with Indo-China', he wrote later, though 'nothing was further from my thoughts on my first visit that I would one day set a novel there'.\(^{43}\) Determined to return as soon as possible, he secured a commission from *Life* for an article on the war and was back the following October, this time for a ten-week stay and bent on visiting 'the battle-fronts'.\(^{44}\) In the interval between his visits the political and military landscape had altered significantly, with Phat Diem the centre of some of the more dramatic developments. In February the Indo-Chinese Communist Party, dissolved in 1945, was reconstituted as the Vietnam Workers’ Party, a move which appeared to herald the complete communization of the hitherto politically plural (if communist-directed) Viet-Minh.\(^{45}\) The following month the ultra-nationalist Governor of Tonkin, Nguyen Huu Tri, who had never been reconciled to the ASV, was dismissed from his post. These ostensibly unconnected events fused in April when the bishops of Phat Diem and Bui Chu publicly declared their support for Bao Dai. Until this point they had refused to deal with Tri, whom they accused of anti-Catholic prejudice, but his removal from office, together with the Viet-Minh’s increasing anti-clericalism, persuaded them to abandon their neutrality and throw in their lot with the ASV. But Tu's loyalty came at a price. The French not only agreed to provide financial subsidies to develop his armed forces but he was allowed to retain command of his army, maintain his veto on French bases, and generally 'pursue an individualistic and tortuous policy of his own'.\(^{46}\)

When Greene left Vietnam in February he had been optimistic that the faith of the Catholics would always trump the atheistic ideology which inspired the Viet-Minh’s communist leaders, and besides, Bishop Tu had his army as an insurance policy. This prediction, given public expression in an article in *Life*, soon proved to be 'an embarrassment' when, at the end of May, the PAVN suddenly attacked Phat Diem as part of a wider offensive in the southern delta.\(^{47}\) Having come out for Bao Dai, the

\(^{42}\) Greene, *Ways of Escape*, p. 156.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 154.

\(^{44}\) Greene to de Lattre, 27 Sept. 1951, Boston College, Greene Correspondence (GGC), 15/5.


bishops ‘thrust the whole of Catholic Tonkin into the war on the French side’, but after a month of fierce fighting in which Giap’s forces again sustained heavy casualties the French turned back the offensive. However, de Lattre’s satisfaction with this outcome was diminished due to events at Phat Diem where Tu’s army had put up such a poor show that it had to be rescued by French paratroopers at a cost in French blood. Afterwards an angry de Lattre accused Tu of withholding information about PAVN troop movements in the build-up to the battle, railed against his damaging veto on French bases, and insisted on the disbanding of the Catholic militia and its integration into the ASV armed forces. Grief for his son, Lieutenant Bernard de Lattre, killed in the fighting near Phat Diem, intensified his anti-Catholic animus and he spoke ‘with great bitterness of the ingratitude of those for whom the French were laying down their lives’. The PAVN offensive, and by extension Bernard’s death, owed much, he felt, to the ‘treacherous’ actions of the bishops.

The interval between Greene’s visits was also notable for the rise to prominence of Trinh Minh Thé, a shadowy presence in The Quiet American but also, as Greene noted, ‘real enough’. At twenty-nine, Thé was chief of staff of the army of the Cao Dai, a southern religious sect which Greene had encountered at the start of the year. ‘They have a Pope, female cardinals, & their saints are Christ, Buddha, Mahomed, Victor Hugo & Auguste Comte’, he wrote to Hugh. ‘They number 2,000,000 & have a private army which at the moment is on the side of the French’.

The Cao Dai Holy See was in Tay Ninh, 60 miles north-west of Saigon, where Pham Cong Tac, the Caodaist pope, indeed surrounded himself with cardinals of both sexes, as well as sundry archbishops, bishops and priests. As for the sect’s eclectic pantheon of saints, this reflected its blend of Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity. ‘We succeeded’, Tac maintained, ‘because we . . . perfected a first-rate religion. After all, what other can compete with ours, since we have picked the best points out of each and put them all together’. The US diplomat Howard Simpson likened Caodaist rites to ‘an illustration from a “lost planet” work of science fiction’, but behind the picturesque façade lay a religion of significance. Within a year of its founding in 1926 Caodaism had more converts in the south than Catholicism had managed in 300 years, and by

48 Lucien Bodard, The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam (1967) [hereafter Bodard, Quicksand War], p. 214.
50 TQA, foreword.
51 Greene to Hugh Greene, 26 Jan. 1951, HGP 2/17.
52 Bodard, Quicksand War, p. 31.
1945 perhaps as many as one-fifth of Cochin-China’s 4.5 million people were followers. The Cao Dai army functioned both as the Holy See’s defensive shield and, after the Franco-Viet-Minh war broke out, as an informal arm of the FEC. In return for French subsidies, Caodaist forces – numbering around 15,000, with 20,000 reservists, in 1950 – policed those extensive areas of Cochin-China where the faith flourished, and together with the Buddhist-inspired Hoa Hao sect, provided the principal source of popular resistance to the communists in the south. The Viet-Minh, however, denounced the Caodaists as French mercenaries, accused the pope of placing autonomy for the Cao Dai zone above freedom for Vietnam as a whole, and waged intermittent war against the sect.

In June 1951, Colonel Thé – he would later promote himself to general – suddenly deserted the Holy See and disappeared into the maquis near the Cambodian border with 2,500 troops and a stockpile of weapons. His motives were revealed in a radio broadcast in which he accused the French of pursuing ‘camouflaged colonialism’ with the ‘evil intention of enslaving us’ and announced that his policy was henceforward ‘non-cooperation’ with either the colonial regime or its ASV puppets. Thé went on to establish a political organization, the National Resistance Front (NRF), recast his troops as the front’s military wing, the Lien Minh, and set up a radio station, the Voice of the National Resistance Front, to broadcast denunciations of the French, the ASV and the Viet-Minh ‘with fine impartiality’. The NRF’s declared goal was ‘peace and human justice’ but the Lien Minh had few qualms about employing violent means to this end: on 31 July 1951 the commander of French forces in southern Vietnam and the ASV regional governor were both killed by a Lien-Minh suicide bomber. More acts of terrorism followed, including a massive car bombing in Saigon in January 1952, perplexing seasoned observers of the war and attracting the attention of a visiting British novelist.

In *The Quiet American* it is the violent actions of Thé which enable Greene via Fowler to arraign the United States for its naïveté in mistaking a terrorist for a legitimate Third Force candidate. But Greene did not always hide behind Fowler. In *Paris Match* in 1952 he described Thé as the ‘chief of a Third Force who makes war on everyone and places high-explosive bombs in the very centre of Saigon to kill innocent civil-

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ians'. Two years later, in The Sunday Times, he wrote of 'a time when certain Americans, dreaming of a third force, showed an interest in Thé. US policymakers undoubtedly worried that the ASV's stunted independence would be insufficient to win over a majority of non-communist nationalists to the anti-Viet-Minh cause, and that whatever military gains France might achieve would be cancelled out by the defects of a political programme based on an aversion to 'coddling or concessions'. Therefore, even as it recognized the ASV in 1950, the Truman administration was looking for a Vietnamese leader 'untainted by either connections to the colonial past or to the international communist movement' to fill the political void should the French abandon Vietnam. Bao Dai, 'a French-inspired and French dominated political zero' in the view of the State Department, hardly fitted the bill. But what of the NRF and the Lien-Minh? We know that the United States worked closely with Thé in 1954–5, when he was seen as a prop of support for another Third Force figure, Ngo Dinh Diem, but were the Americans also working with Thé in 1951–2 as Greene claimed?

Thé certainly craved US support. Shortly after his desertion he approached the American legation in Saigon with a request for non-military aid, particularly medical supplies, but Donald Heath, the American minister, warned against 'any policy excursion of this kind' and advised State that the United States should continue to work 'within framework of loyal and trusted cooperation' with the French. However, the French themselves were already uneasy that les Amériques, under cover of their military and economic assistance programmes, were poised to supplant them as the dominant external influence in Indo-China and took little persuading that the United States was covertly backing Thé. The relationship between the French High Command and the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), the conduit through which military aid was distributed in Indo-China, was a troubled one at times, but the French attitude to the Special Technical Economic Mission (STEM), which operated under the auspices of the US Economic Coop-

60 Greene, 'Crown of Thorns', p. 130. Greene used the Saigon bombing as the backdrop to The Quiet American’s dramatic climax.
62 ECA Saigon telegram 141 to State, 22 July 1950, US National Archives, College Park, Maryland (USNA), RG469/Vietnam Mission Subject Files (VMSF) Box 3; Mark Atwood Lawrence, Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam (Los Angeles, 2005), pp. 216–20.
66 Sherry, Greene, p. 405.
67 ECA Saigon telegrams 141 and 220 to State, 22 July and 15 Aug. 1950, USNA/RG469/VMSF Box 3; Simpson, Barbed Wire, p. 32; Sherry, Greene, pp. 432, 478.
eration Administration (ECA), was consistently fraught. STEM projects in public works, health, agriculture and education were handled on a bilateral US–ASV basis, much to de Lattre’s displeasure. Worse still from a French viewpoint, STEM administrators were often sympathetic to the principle of Vietnamese freedom. According to Bodard, they waged a ‘secret war’, travelling ‘all through Indochina telling the crowds, “The French are your exploiters, but the Americans are your friends”’. Nothing diminished their zeal. Officially US policy was to ‘supplement but not to supplant’ the French effort, but de Lattre was often ‘vitiolic’ about STEM’s anti-colonial ‘missionaries’ and denounced Robert Blum, ECA director, as ‘the most dangerous man in Indochina’.

Pyle, we should note, belongs to STEM, which in turn provides him with cover for his covert activities. But is there any evidence that the CIA, or other US agencies, regarded Thé as credible Third Force material and furnished the Lien-Minh with arms in the early 1950s? Members of STEM, including Leo Hochstetter, whom Sherry identified as the prime source for Pyle’s views, certainly saw ‘a good deal of the Caodaists’. Hochstetter argued that the Caodaists were ‘friendly to the United States and an asset to the economic development and military security of Vietnam’. The sect’s army numbered 20,000, he calculated, but there were ‘three times as many available for service if arms and training are provided for them’. Against this, Edmund Gullion of the US legation maintained that the idea of ‘an independent force springing out of the rice paddies was not something that we were really concerned with’, while Rufus Phillips, another legation official, insisted that the January 1952 Saigon bombing occurred ‘long before there was any American contact with or support for Thé’. It would seem from this that the case for US–Thé collusion is unproven. As one (unnamed) CIA veteran confided to Sherry, ‘no single agency official was – at that time – in contact with Colonel Thé . . . And I would know’.

Intriguingly, British documents from the period, recently released under the UK Freedom of Information Act, suggest that these denials may be too definite. In February 1952, the British Consul-General,
Hubert Graves, reported to London that ‘[o]ne reason’ for Thé’s popularity ‘may be the support which, it is strongly rumoured, he received from certain American elements’. Graves went on:

At the time of the bomb outrages in Saigon in January, it was realised that the explosives and clock-work devices used were much too ingenious to have been produced by the Cao Dai-ists themselves . . . It is known that members of American official missions in Saigon make frequent visits to the Tayninh area and it is unfortunately now widely stated in Saigon that the Americans are behind General Thé. Veiled references made by the French to the irresponsible support by the Americans of nationalist groups have, in private conversations with members of my staff, now become direct accusations that the Americans are providing support to General Thé and his men. Incredible as it may seem, I am afraid that there may be a modicum of truth in all this. Members of the American Legation have admitted that their dealings with the sects are bedevilled by their desire to be in a position to use them as the nucleus for guerrilla activity in the event of Indochina being over-run and it has been suggested that the training and equipment which is being provided for such an eventuality has been put by General Thé to premature use.

The Foreign Office, which was itself in receipt of other intelligence suggesting that the Americans were ‘encouraging the formation of a separate Cao-Daist army’, agreed that the bombing was probably the unhappy consequence of US meddling. ‘I fear that there is nothing we can do about the foolishness of US Special Operations’, minuted the Head of the South-East Asia Department, other than a ‘friendly’ word to the relevant US authorities. Alas, there is no available record of whether the British ever confronted the Americans over Thé.74

That the United States was interested in a Third Force will come as no surprise to readers familiar with the Vietnam story, but what has not been previously acknowledged is the extent to which the British were also actively seeking alternatives to Bao Dai. For the UK, Indo-China was a geo-strategic nodal point, the place where vital national interests and international responsibilities converged: on the one hand the preservation of a non-communist Vietnam as a barrier to the spread of communism to the rest of South-East Asia was a general western Cold War objective; on the other, Tonkin was the forward defence of Malaya whose value to an ailing UK economy was considerable (in 1950 the colony’s dollar earnings, principally from rubber and tin, were $350 million out of total sterling area earnings of $1,285 million).75 The French, in short, had to hold the line. But would they? At the military level, a combination of American aid and de Lattre’s leadership had helped recover some of the ground lost to the Viet-Minh in 1950, but it was evident to London policymakers that ‘the French are not going to make a success of things

74 Saigon despatch 30, 29 Feb. 1952 and related minutes, TNA/FO371/101056/25G.
in Vietnam by . . . leaving the political side more or less to take care of itself. Few in the Foreign Office believed that Bao Dai had either the desire or the ability to unite all non-communist nationalists and yet, ironically, if the ASV leader was the problem, he was also the solution, the ‘only non-Communist figure’ the FO could see ‘on whom Vietnamese nationalism might crystallize’. The Secret Intelligence Service, however, with an eye on Phat Diem, evidently took a different view, and in due course both Greene and Wilson would be parties to efforts to substitute a Catholic solution for the Bao Dai solution.

III

Greene had monitored the shifts in the Vietnamese politico-military kaleidoscope in mid-1951 at a distance. ‘I seem to have missed the bus in the last few weeks when Ho Chi Minh put on a big offensive’, he wrote to Hugh at the end of June. ‘My nice Bishop was completely surrounded in his diocese and had to be rescued by parachute troops. It would have been fun to have been with him and seen him in a crisis’. Greene had intended to go back to Vietnam later in the summer to start work on his Life commission but events delayed him. ‘De Lattre has become half crazy & wildly anti-Catholic since the death of his son’, he wrote to Hugh again in August. The general now looked on Catholics as potential quislings, none more so than Trevor Wilson, whose return to Hanoi at the end of his annual leave had been blocked by the French authorities, who accused him of secretly encouraging the northern bishops to adopt anti-French attitudes. As a high-profile Catholic, Greene worried that his presence in Saigon would be ‘embarrassing’ to the British legation at a time of Anglo-French tension, while Wilson’s absence meant ‘I should have no facilities’ in Hanoi. Life, however, wanted an early return on its investment – he had been paid $4,000 – and by October he was back in Saigon, ‘very happy & at home’.

On his first visit de Lattre ‘received me extremely cordially’, Greene recalled, and he was ‘quite certain’ he ‘would give me every facility if I returned’. In fact when he next met the general, in Hanoi on 30 October, he was immediately struck by his dyspeptic demeanour, which he attributed to grief for Bernard, hostility to all things Catholic and a touch of Anglophobia. But there were also Wilson’s machinations. ‘That I should

76 USNA RG59, Box 3670 (751G.00/5–451), Saigon telegram 1943, 4 May 1951; FO474/5, Graves to Murray, 6 Oct. 1951.
78 Greene to Hugh Greene, 26 June and 13 Aug. 1951, HGP 2/19, 21; FO minutes 10–11 July 1951, TNA/FO371/92454/16G, Graves despatch 95, 29 June 1951, TNA/FO959/107; Sherry, Greene, p. 384.
turn up again in the north was a confirmation of his suspicions’, Greene wrote of de Lattre. ‘He was sincerely convinced that in some obscure way, connected with the Catholicism of W and myself and our interest in Phat-Diem, we had been partly responsible for his son’s death’. As a result ‘Trevor was thrown out of Indo-China and the Foreign Office lost a remarkable Consul and the French a great friend of their country’. There was, however, a good deal more to the Wilson affair than Greene ever publicly acknowledged, but before going into the matter further it is necessary to establish the key role that espionage played in the Wilson–Greene relationship.

For Greene, spying was something of a family business. His uncle, Sir William Graham Greene, helped establish the Naval Intelligence Department; his eldest brother, Herbert, was a double agent in the 1930s; and it was his sister, Elisabeth, who recruited him to SIS Section V (counter-intelligence) early in the Second World War. In 1941 he was sent to Sierra Leone to monitor the neighbouring Vichy French colonies and shipping using Freetown’s Fourah Bay, experiences which found their way into his 1948 novel The Heart of the Matter. He returned to England in 1943 and resigned from the service the following year. Although he later claimed that he had no further contact with the old firm, as he referred to MI6, in fact he retained informal links to the intelligence community right through to the 1980s, passing on information gleaned during his many foreign trips, often in return for financial remuneration. As for Trevor Wilson, he gave up a career in banking to enlist in the Territorial Army in 1939, moved to the Army Intelligence Corps in 1941, and finally arrived at SIS Section V in 1942. Malcolm Muggeridge, a Section V veteran, remembered Wilson as ‘about the ablest Intelligence officer I met in the war, with an instinctive flair for the work, including all the deceits and double-crosses involved’. In 1943 Wilson was brought back to Section V’s London headquarters from Algiers where he had been running counter-espionage operations and his friendship with Greene dates from this time. After Greene resigned in May 1944 Wilson went on to join Mountbatten’s South-East Asia Command (SEAC) as an intelligence officer.

It was SEAC that brought Wilson and Vietnam together. The end of the war in Asia and the Pacific in August 1945 triggered the Viet-Minh revolution, which climaxed on 2 September when Ho Chi Minh announced the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Independence, though, was short lived. Within a fortnight contingents of the 20th Indian Division began to arrive in Saigon under the command of Major-


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General Douglas Gracey with orders from SEAC to take the surrender of the Japanese forces which had occupied southern Vietnam for the previous four years. Refusing to acknowledge the authority of the DRV or any other Vietnamese revolutionary body, Gracey sided with the formerly Vichyite colonial administration and by the end of the year, thanks in good measure to British support, the French were poised to resume control of Cochin-China.84 Meanwhile the Nationalist Chinese had arrived in force in Tonkin to receive the surrender of the Japanese in the north and Gracey decided to send a liaison team to the Hanoi headquarters of his Chinese counterpart, General Lu Han. The officer chosen to lead the mission was Lieutenant-Colonel Trevor Wilson. Over the next six months Wilson worked with the Chinese to prepare the way for a formal return of Tonkin to French control. He also met weekly with Ho Chi Minh and got to know the DRV president 'as well as anyone could'. The French for their part were grateful for the way he represented their interests and he was later decorated by de Gaulle. Wilson was demobilized in July 1946 but immediately joined the diplomatic service and returned to Hanoi as consul. Five years on, when Greene arrived in Indo-China, he was still there.85

As we saw earlier, Greene’s publicly vouchsafed reason for visiting Vietnam in the first place was to see his old friend, but Yvonne Cloetta, the lover with whom he shared the last three decades of his life, has claimed to ‘know that Trevor Wilson . . . persuaded him to go there, either directly or via his sister Elisabeth. You see, you can never get away from the world of espionage’.86 The chief of French counter-espionage also questioned Greene’s motives at the time and warned de Lattre that the writer was probably still on MI6’s books. On that occasion the general let the matter ride, but by the time of Greene’s second visit he was a changed man. ‘All these English, they’re too much!’ he complained. ‘It isn’t sufficient to have a consul who is in the Secret Service, they even send me their novelists as agents and Catholic novelists into the bargain’.87 Whether de Lattre’s charge against Greene is merited will be considered shortly, but in the case of the consul he was quite right: Wilson was an undeclared ‘stringer’ for the regional SIS chief in Singapore, James Fulton.88 Having said this, Wilson was not the spy he once was. Always a heavy drinker, by the early 1950s he was exhibiting signs of incipient alcoholism and had developed an unfortunate habit when in his cups of openly espousing views more in sympathy with the Viet-Minh

87 Lucien Bodard, La guerre d’Indochina IV: L’aventure (Paris, 1967) [hereafter Bodard, L’aventure], pp. 496–7.

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than Bao Dai. Bodard remembered ‘a John Bull boozer – a living wine
skin’ who was fond of telling the French to their faces that the ‘whole
people is Vietminh . . . you’re going to be defeated!’ Such outbursts ren-
dered de Lattre ‘apoplectic’, attracted the attention of the Sûreté, and
militated against Wilson’s effectiveness as an agent. Yet undiplomatic
diplomat that he was, he was only publicly stating sincerely held private
views.

With the recent release of hitherto classified Foreign Office docu-
ments we can now flesh out the story of Wilson’s downfall. The first sign
that the French were unhappy, not with Wilson specifically but with the
British in general, came in April 1951 when de Lattre refused to give
Frank Gibbs, the outgoing consul-general, a farewell audience, an ‘inex-
cusable’ breach of diplomatic etiquette according to the Foreign
Office. The following month it was Wilson who was in trouble. Keen
to gauge local reactions to the northern Catholic hierarchy’s declaration
of support for the ASV, he accepted a personal invitation from Le Huu
Tu to spend three days in Phat Diem. Tu and Wilson went to mass and
took communion together, attended other religious services and open
air meetings, and participated in devotional processions. There was ‘no
possible doubt’ that Tu had ‘definitely and unmistakenly [sic] taken
together, attended other religious services and open
air meetings, and participated in devotional processions. There was ‘no
possible doubt’ that Tu had ‘definitely and unmistakenly [sic] taken
sides with Bao Dai in the fight against Communism’, Wilson wrote to
Micky Joy, the British chargé d’affaires in Saigon, although lurking at
the back of Tu’s mind was ‘the idea that the French will cheat the
people out of independence once again’. On 16 May, however, de
Lattre summoned Joy to his presence to complain that Wilson was
‘interesting himself too much in local politics . . . He should not meddle
in affairs which did not concern him. He talked too much’. What the
British needed in Hanoi was a consul ‘who would live there quietly and
keep his mouth shut’. The following week the high commissioner
‘expressed himself even more forcibly than before’ about Wilson’s ‘med-
ddling with the Catholics’.

Despite de Lattre’s complaints, the Foreign Office planned to renew
Wilson’s contract and send him back to Hanoi for a further eighteen
months at the end of his summer leave. But by July, with de Lattre’s fury
at its height and the consul on the verge of being declared persona non
grata, a decision was taken to terminate his posting. Officially he was
made redundant but in reality he was fired to placate the French high

89 Bodard, L’aventure, pp. 497–8; Professor Warren Winkelstein (STEM 1951–52), interview with
the author, 12 Oct. 2011; Sherry, Greene, p. 486.
90 Wilson despatch 73, 2 April 1951, TNA/FO371/92405/74.
91 Gibbs despatch 60, 28 April 1951; Gibbs to Scott, 28 April 1951; FO minutes, 8 May 1951; and
Saigon telegram 219, 29 May 1951, TNA/FO371/93454/7–8, 13.
93 Wilson to Joy, 19 May 1951, TNA/FO371/92406/91.
94 Saigon telegram 210, 16 May 1951, and Joy to Scott, 17 May 1951, TNA/FO371/92454/11G.
95 Joy to Scott, FO, 25 May 1951, TNA/FO371/92454/16G.

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commissioner. The irony is that most British policymakers concerned with South-East Asia agreed with Wilson that de Lattre the military genius had become a political liability insofar as his public and patronizing browbeating of ASV ministers was never going to persuade Vietnamese attentistes to take seriously the Bao Dai solution. Moreover, de Lattre's mercurial nature being what it was, the Foreign Office felt that 'Mr Wilson's disgrace might have happened to any British official in his position'. But was this strictly true? Surely it would depend on whether that official was also a secret agent working against French interests. Wilson himself angrily rejected 'the trumped-up case against me' and it may be that the Foreign Office was only dimly aware of his moonlighting for SIS. In October, he wrote directly to de Lattre to ask for his job back, but the general's mind was made up. In a witheringly sarcastic response, he offered merely the hope that Wilson's next position would be better suited to his 'remarkable talents'.

IV

Lucien Bodard later observed that 'the Catholics were the true Third Force in Vietnam', and to judge from their investment in Ngo Dinh Diem from 1954 onwards the Americans thought so too. But from what we know of Wilson's activities in Phat Diem, the British, or at any rate SIS, had reached a similar conclusion as early as 1951. As the Catholic publication *Eglise vivante* observed, Phat Diem had become a 'point of attraction where all the unsatisfied wishes of the powerless nationalists joined forces'. This contemporary claim has been corroborated by recent research: although Vietnamese bishops accounted for only four out of sixteen Catholic bishops in Vietnam in 1950 they were responsible for more than half of Vietnam's estimated 1.2 million faithful and 'embodied a growing desire among many Vietnamese Catholics not only for a Church freed from its missionary past but also for a Church in a nation freed from its colonial past'. The emergence of Vietnamese bishops in the church hierarchy 'was a momentous symbolic and material shift that brought many Vietnamese Catholics to question and contest colonial rule through their faith and their religious community'.

Trevor Wilson, either of his own volition or encouraged by MI6, sought to

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96 Wilson to Greene, 5 May 1951, Trevor-Wilson/Greene Correspondence (TWGC), Burns Library, Boston College, 31/10; Scott to Harvey, 8 June 1951, TNA/FO371/92448/5; Wilson curriculum vitae, Wilson Papers, 9007/235/41/1–1.
97 FO minutes, 10–11 July 1951, TNA/FO371/92454/16G; Murray minute, 16 Aug. 1951, TNA/FO371/92407/125; FO reference for Wilson, 9 May 1952, Wilson Papers, 9007/235/40/1.
98 Stretton minute, 11 July 1951, TNA/FO371/92407/125.
99 Wilson to Graves, 30 July 1951, TNA/FO959/107.
100 de Lattre to Wilson, 14 Oct. 1951, Wilson Papers, 9007/235/34.
101 Bodard, cited in Sherry, Greene, p. 485.
102 Gheddo, *Cross and the Bo-Tree*, p. 41.
exploit this development. ‘I must not say much in an open letter’, he wrote to Greene in March 1951, ‘but events have moved swiftly since your visit, and the first round seems to have been won by the Bishops’, a reference to the way in which both Tu and Chi, despite declaring for Bao Dai, had managed to retain a large measure of autonomy. ‘I find plenty of support from the French for the Catholic solution from quarters where I should have hardly expected it’. To help further the cause he asked Greene to send him ‘as much Catholic literature as possible – in English or French – for Phat Diem and Bui Chu’. In May, Wilson wrote of ‘fresh & interesting evolutions in Phat Diem & Bui Chu’. The ASV Prime Minister, Tran Van Huu, and the new governor of the north, had visited the bishoprics and ‘received a warm, even remarkable, welcome from a crowd of 80,000 Catholics’ so that all in all ‘the Bishops are coming into their own, but, administratively, in accordance with Bao Dai’s wishes.

Yet whatever success Wilson had in promoting the Catholic solution was short lived. In June de Lattre denounced him as a spy, and when, soon after, he was ordered to leave Indo-China, the bishop of Bui Chu wrote to Wilson expressing his great sorrow that ‘your sympathy for us’ had brought about his exile.

De Lattre, of course, believed that Greene was not only Wilson’s co-conspirator but a secret agent in his own right, accusations the novelist denied in a light-hearted essay in The London Magazine in 1954 and more seriously in Ways of Escape in 1980. However, as their private correspondence shows, Greene was certainly aware of what Wilson was up to in Phat Diem. More tellingly, at the start of September 1951, six weeks before his second visit to Vietnam, he was contacted by movie producer and one-time SIS agent Alexander Korda. ‘The “old firm” have asked Korda if I’d do a job for them’, Greene wrote to Catherine. ‘I don’t know what. K’s arranging a meeting . . .’ By then it was clear that Wilson would not be returning to Hanoi and it is tempting to suggest that the ‘job’ MI6 had in mind was connected with Phat Diem. Wilson for his part lobbied the French authorities to be allowed to return to Indo-China, ‘if necessary at my own expense’, to put his affairs in order. Eventually, in November, he was granted a temporary visa. Greene was already in Hanoi by then and to start with he looked forward to seeing his friend again, but as the scale of de Lattre’s anger towards the now ex-consul revealed itself he began to wonder if it was wise to make contact. French surveillance of Greene’s movements, dating from his 30 October dinner with de Lattre, had become stifling, and though he later lampooned Sûreté efforts to keep tabs on him, at the time he was very
distressed that his freedom to operate as a journalist, never mind as an MI6 agent, was so circumscribed.\footnote{Greene to Walston, 10 and 16 Nov. 1951, GWP 12/25, 27; Greene, \textit{Ways of Escape}, pp. 158–9.} ‘I wish to God T[revor] was not following that plan of his’, Greene wrote. ‘I can see . . . that he’s only causing trouble not only to himself but to me & all his friends. Such a lot of trouble too’. As for his research for \textit{Life}, ‘[m]y friendship with Trevor has mucked things up for me here completely. The French imagine all kinds of sinister motives & very politely all doors are closed.’\footnote{Greene to Walston, 21 Nov. 1951, GWP/12/29.} 

On 18 November Greene dined at the High Commissariat. ‘Gen[eral] asked me if I was a member of the Secret Service & associated in it with Trevor’, he wrote in his diary. ‘Felt he didn’t believe my denial . . . Said he had taken my part against the police but was worried by the reports they brought in. Accepted my word but does he? Felt I had not defended T[revor] enough, but the prejudices there are too great.’\footnote{Greene journal, 18 Nov. 1951, GGPII 1/2.} The next day de Lattre boarded an aircraft for France. He would not return. Diagnosed with cancer, he went home for medical treatment but died on 11 January 1952. As he departed Hanoi for the last time, de Lattre insisted to an aide that Greene was a spy. ‘Why should anyone come to this war for four hundred dollars?’, he asked, a reference to Greene’s \textit{Life} fee. The sardonic answer Greene gave his readers in later years was that de Lattre had mislaid a zero: $4,000 was well worth the effort. In 1984, when the story of Wilson’s disgrace was briefly alluded to in the British press, he struck a more serious note when writing to \textit{The Times} of de Lattre’s religious prejudice and his misconceived belief in a plot hatched by ‘three dubious Catholics’, Wilson, Tu and himself.\footnote{Greene, \textit{Ways of Escape}, p. 162; Greene letter, \textit{Times}, 9 Feb. 1984.} Yet Greene’s denials do not fully convince, not when CIA veterans have attested that he took on ‘a short-term operational assignment because Trevor was gone’, when his journal for 1951 records a number of meetings with known members of the old firm, and when Norman Sherry is convinced that he was seeking information on the French and talent-spotting local agents in Tonkin ‘as any good spy would do’.

Finally, we come to the fate of the Catholic solution. When Greene first visited Phat Diem in January 1951 he experienced something of an epiphany. ‘I watched the Viet-Namese Catholic bishop inspect his outposts, the unpaid militia who had helped clear the bishopric and who now held it free from the communist enemy’, he wrote in \textit{Life}.

There were only 2,000 of these men here, and not enough uniforms yet to go round, but I would have felt more confidence fighting in their ranks than in the ranks of the 100,000 armed Malay police . . . [T]heir strength was an idea, and that idea love of their country. Christianity too is a form of patriotism. These Viet-Namese belonged to the City of God . . . ‘You
see,' I wanted to say to my friends in Malaya, 'it can be done.' An idea was fighting an idea.115

By the time of Greene's next visit, in November 1951, Tu and his vaunted army had been humiliated and his romanticized image of the bishop had been shattered. Moreover, he now took issue with Tu’s failure to address the social needs of his people: ‘Always money for Churches’, he noted in his journal, ‘never for hospitals or education’. In Third Force terms, Catholicism and nationalism were all very well, but to compete successfully with the Viet-Minh, to win the battle of ideas, Greene recognized the importance of improving living standards for ordinary people. But the bishop ‘was only interested in building more and more churches’, while ‘the lack of a hospital . . . means little to him’. Greene also increasingly disliked Tu’s cult of personality, which was so effective that many Catholics possessed an ‘absolute belief that Phat-Diem has been preserved by the prayers of the Bishop’ rather than by the blood of the FEC. Fed up with this ‘stupid attitude to the French’, he soon returned to Hanoi.116

This might have been the end of Greene’s Phat-Diem connection were it not for subsequent rumours – well founded, as it turned out – that the city been overrun by the Viet-Minh. Sensing a journalistic scoop he duly made his way back, arriving on 16 December. The scene that greeted him was ‘shocking’: streets resembling ‘London during the blitz’, the ‘canal thick with bodies’, and a ‘mother & child dead in a ditch’. Ever since he first went to Malaya Greene had been desperate to experience war in the raw. Now he had his fill: ‘never have I seen so many corpses’.117 After blundering into the no-man’s-land between the French and Viet-Minh lines, exposing himself to grave danger, the local French commander decided that nosy British novelists were a liability in a war zone and ordered him back to Hanoi.118 With this, Greene’s interest in this particular Catholic solution ended. Henceforward the Americans would have the Third Force field, Catholic or otherwise, to themselves. Still, as we have seen, there was a brief period in 1950–1 when the British were also active in this regard and when Greene found himself caught up in the kind of plot, and involved with a cast of characters – imperious French generals, Catholic warrior-bishops, British secret agents – that would not have been out of place in one of his own novels. Fact, in this case, was just as compelling as fiction.

117 Greene journal, 13–19 Dec. 1951, GGP1I-1/2; Greene, Ways of Escape, p. 159; Greene to Hugh Greene, 8 Jan. 1952, HGPJ/2/22.
118 Allain, Other Man, p. 55.

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