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Michael G. Vann and Liz Clarke. *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam*. Graphic History Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 288 pp. \$24.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780190602697.

Review by Michitake Aso, University at Albany, State University of New York.

In April 1902, the municipal government of Hanoi, the capital of French Indochina, started to offer a bounty on dead rats. These animals had become a problem because of their newly discovered role in transmitting plague. While few cases of plague had been recorded in Hanoi, the Third Plague Pandemic was unfolding in port cities around the world. Colonial officials worried that plague, or the fear of it, would ruin an international exposition planned for later that year. Initially, the bounty on rats brought in a satisfying number of tails (piles of dead rats were deemed unseemly for government buildings). As the number of rat tails became unwieldy, and expensive, the authorities decreased the bounty. Still, tails continued to pour in. To their dismay, French officials discovered that some enterprising Vietnamese were importing rodent tails from the countryside and even breeding rats for their tails. This put a halt to the great Hanoi rat hunt.

*The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt* (hereafter referred to as *Rat Hunt*), written by Mike Vann and illustrated by Liz Clarke, brings to life this obscure colonial moment. It makes dense historical concepts accessible for the public. Moreover, it is an excellent book to teach with. It addresses a dilemma faced by historians, especially those at large public universities: how to convey an understanding of, and form critical thinking habits about, the past among students who have been taught to care little for it. As Vann and Clarke's book makes clear, past racial divisions inform the present and mundane things such as sewers, or differences among rats, and influence human affairs. Having taught with graphic histories, including *Rat Hunt*, I know that they are not easy to find. We need more books like this one.

*Rat Hunt* roughly follows the structure of the other graphic histories in the Oxford series and is divided into the following parts: the graphic history, primary sources, historical contexts, making *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt*, and *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt* in the classroom. In addition, the book comes with a useful timeline, maps, and suggestions for further readings.

The graphic history itself includes seven chapters, a prologue, an afterword, and end notes. Chapter one introduces students to colonial Hanoi. The images are appropriate and colorfully illustrate the appearance of the city. Vann economically sketches the role of key figures such as Paul Doumer and details the architectural destruction and casual French racism of the time.

Chapter two explains how and why the French gained control of Hanoi. It offers a wide-ranging geopolitical history of the French empire in Asia, touches on the tea and silver trades, and brings up the opium wars waged by European powers against the Chinese government. It then recounts the French conquest of Indochina. Chapter three shifts to the question of who built Hanoi. Inspired by subaltern histories of empire, this chapter rightly shines a spotlight on those, mostly Vietnamese, who carried out the manual labor. Chapter four induces a sense of dread beginning with a reference to the illusion of control in its title. It recounts the reasons for discontent among the inhabitants of Indochina, including forced labor, harsh prisons, and diseases aggravated, ironically, by French urbanism based on hygienic principles. It uses *ca dao*, or folk poems, and other cultural texts to introduce Vietnamese voices into the text.

Chapter five draws together the international exposition, rats, sewers, and the plague. Originally scheduled to be held in Hanoi during December 1901, financial and logistical difficulties delayed the exposition until late in 1902. In the meantime, outbreaks of plague appeared at ports around the world and French officials worried that the disease would soon arrive in Hanoi. Vann provides background to the Third Plague Pandemic and introduces readers to Alexandre Yersin, a medical researcher and plague expert. Chapter six delves into the primary sources that enabled Vann to write the *Rat Hunt* and reveals the researcher at work. In a significant contribution to the historiography of Hanoi, Vann gives meaning to dry files full of opaque numbers. By connecting the records of the number of rats killed and the struggles over bounties offered for these rats, Vann shows how colonial fears shaped the lives of the French and Vietnamese living in Hanoi. This chapter also covers the idea of a perverse incentive, whereby a reward promotes behavior antithetical to the purpose of the reward. In the case of the rat hunt, bounties encouraged the breeding of rodents, rather than simply their killing. Lastly, Chapter seven covers the aftermath of the great rat hunt. It presents the continuing threat of plague and general discontent with colonial occupation. Shifting to black and white, the chapter finishes with the historic events of World War II and Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Vietnamese independence.

As any fan of Japanese manga knows, the graphic format is not just for kids, and *Rat Hunt* contributes to the reputation of Oxford's graphic histories series. One of the book's real strengths is its scalability, matching Vann's commitment to reach students at many levels. It offers value for students ranging from those in Advanced Placement high school classes to those enrolled in post-secondary institutions. For advanced high school and undergraduate history courses, the book's primary sources and teaching aides provide an exciting, accessible way to approach the past. Meanwhile, graduate seminar participants will enjoy Vann's discussion of the historian's craft. The graphic history format allows Vann to insert himself into the story in a way that is rare in historical monographs. The prologue, afterward, and part four offer valuable insights on how to develop research topics and how to work in the archives.

Likewise, the continuing relevance of *Rat Hunt* can be emphasized. For example, I have used this book in my course on pandemics and history to explore the intersection of Sinophobia, or anti-Chinese racism, and the Third Plague Pandemic. For more theoretically inclined audiences, *Rat Hunt* opens up topics such as the modern state's relationship to human bodies. Vann invokes Michel Foucault and notes that "Doumer's colonial public health initiatives illustrate the modern state's aspirations to control the very bodies of its subjects" (p. 76). Finally, Vann and Clarke's book raises questions of history and heritage as the pulling down of colonial statues in post-World War II Hanoi echoes similar moments in postcolonial nations across the world.

If you're lucky enough to teach with *Rat Hunt*, then I'd like to flag five points. First, to get the most out of this book I recommend assigning it alongside Vann's original micro-history of the rat hunt.<sup>[1]</sup> This article skillfully unpacks the numbers of rats killed and prices paid for said rats, using them to invoke multiple broader themes including imperialism, migration, medicine, urbanism, and even the non-human world. It expresses, as Vann writes at the beginning of *Rat Hunt*, "the ambiguity and nuance many felt toward colonial modernization projects" (p. xiv).

Second, while a graphic version of this micro-history opens up a range of topics for discussion, it does lose some of the subtlety of the original article. For example, the speech of various actors is colored differently: red for Vietnamese, blue for French, and no color for the present. This decision was most likely based on the exigencies of the graphic format, but such images reduce the colonial situation into a dichotomy of the colonizer and the colonized. Following this color scheme for Vietnamese and for French, the map on page 81 presents Hanoi as a colonial dual city. In many ways Hanoi was a dual city, yet it was also fragmented as many Vietnamese elite built houses in the French quarter and French lived throughout the city.<sup>[2]</sup> Some readers may also mistakenly assume that the bold red color on the map highlights where the sewers were constructed, an association accentuated by an inset with red bricks. As Vann recounts in the text, the opposite was true. Because the French quarter was located on less populated land, it was easier to equip with underground pipes than the densely settled Old quarter. Moreover, the few plague cases that did occur happened mostly in the Old quarter and not at houses furnished with sewer hookups. Thus, the map's color pattern muddies *Rat Hunt's* point that colonial fears, rather than plague, spread through the sewer system.

A third aspect of the graphic history genre that merits further reflection is its handling of controversial issues. In academic monographs, it is imperative to be explicit. The graphic format, however, encourages insinuation. On page 25, Alexandre Yersin is called "a little odd" and drawn traveling with a young Vietnamese male and on page 74, Vann notes that Yersin went to Hong Kong with a young male traveling companion. These words and accompanying illustration raise the question of Yersin's sexuality, but only obliquely. (As with the dialogue invented for the graphic novel, the documents necessary to confirm Yersin's sexual preferences do not seem to exist.) In addition, Sokhieng Au has leveled more serious charges at Yersin, namely that work he oversaw in Nha Trang (mentioned on p. 82) introduced plague to the city, resulting in human deaths. Such charges could be fruitfully addressed in a discussion of medical ethics and the colonial spread of disease, but not easily in a graphic history.<sup>[3]</sup> On the other hand, one instance of a controversial topic where the graphic history format serves Vann's purposes well is the representation of colonial and medical violence. On page 92, there appears a gangrenous hand, along with two seemingly disembodied heads, reminiscent of those of captured rebels and bandits displayed by Vietnamese and French. As Vann has signaled, these images raise the visual politics of suffering bodies. These drawings, with their simultaneous intimacy and distance, provide some separation for readers while still evoking the pain of plague victims, in a way that text cannot.

Fourth, as with the issue of insinuation, the creative license of the graphic format frees authors to do things they are discouraged from doing in scholarly articles and monographs. The gutter, or space between panels, enables graphic histories to flow. It also allows authors to collapse space and time, a move reinforced by asides in *Rat Hunt*, such as the reference to the 2016 death of a turtle in Hoan Kiem lake or a reference to the imprisonment of John McCain in the "Hanoi Hilton." Such moves may help students connect the past to the present, but teachers should be wary of creating a timeless Hanoi, one where the ghosts of various eras mingle. This timelessness

can give rise to a teleological narrative in which the present is the inevitable outcome of the past. Similarly, graphic histories grant some creative license with respect to dialogue. As with historical novels, such dialogue should be faithful to what people might have said and can serve a useful purpose of bringing the past alive. In this sense, nothing that Vann writes in *Rat Hunt* is shocking. But students may need to be reminded of which words have been recorded and which have been made up.

Fifth, with a general English-reading audience in mind, *Rat Hunt* is focused on accessibility. Vann does an admirable job of compiling a total of forty-nine documents translated into English. But this focus on accessibility results in some surprising omissions from the bibliography of secondary sources on Hanoi, including those that have been written in Vietnamese and French.

These five issues are minor, and I offer them knowing that the graphic history format is still fit for certain important goals. A good instructor can augment the many strengths of this genre and fruitfully explore the potential pitfalls of its use in the classroom. Moreover, Vann has written for a broad readership, something he has done throughout his career. Such work is often talked about among professional historians but rarely done and it should be praised when it is done well. Vann and Clarke animate the worlds within Hanoi's sewer system and argue that they were at various times tools of empire, modes of modernity, and vectors of vermin. Just as the overwhelmed sewers of the past thirty years reflect the anxieties of a world with a changing climate, so too did the sewers of the early twentieth century betray the fears of a colonial era. In this way, the histories contained in *Rat Hunt* remain relevant for us all.

## NOTES

[1] Michael G. Vann, "Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History," *French Colonial History* 4/1 (2003): 191-203.

[2] Caroline Herbelin, *Architectures du Vietnam colonial: Repenser le métissage* (Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques [CTHS], 2016).

[3] Sokhieng Au, *Mixed Medicines: Health and Culture in French Colonial Cambodia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Michitake Aso  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
maso@albany.edu