REVIEW OF CRIME, PEACE AND SOCIETY
ISSN (O): 3079-6105, ISSN (P): 3079-6091
Vol. 3, No. 1, 2025, 11-20

The Geneva Accords of 1954 and Their Legacy for Conflict, Justice and Social Order in Post-War Vietnam

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Abstract

This article examines the 1954 Geneva Agreement as an "unfinished" ceasefire, shedding light on its long-term legacy for conflict, justice, and social order in Vietnam. Rather than approaching the Agreement primarily from a diplomatic or military perspective, the study situates it within an interdisciplinary theoretical framework encompassing peace studies, transitional justice, and conflict transformation. Employing historical analysis and textual analysis, the article demonstrates that while the Geneva Agreement succeeded in achieving *negative peace* by bringing an end to direct armed violence, it failed to establish the foundations for *positive peace*. This failure stemmed from the absence of enforceable political mechanisms, transitional justice arrangements, and processes of social reconciliation. The findings suggest that the lack of such mechanisms contributed to the reproduction of structural violence, the persistence of antagonistic collective memories, and the emergence of a post-war social order characterized by limited societal consensus. By tracing these dynamics, the article highlights how a ceasefire-oriented settlement can inadvertently entrench unresolved grievances and latent conflict. On this basis, the study draws broader implications for both theory and practice in peacebuilding, emphasizing the necessity of integrating justice, reconciliation, and social reconstruction into ceasefire agreements in order to move beyond temporary stability toward sustainable peace in post-conflict societies.

Article History
Received 23 August 2025
Revised 29 December 2025
Accepted 10 December 2026
Published 13 December 2026

OPEN ACCESS

Keywords
Ceasefire and Conflict Legacy, Geneva Agreement (1954), Sustainable Peace, Post-conflict Justice

Introduction

The 1954 Geneva Agreement constitutes a pivotal moment in modern Vietnamese history, marking the end of the First Indochina War and inaugurating an internationally brokered ceasefire. In much of the existing scholarship, the Agreement has been approached primarily from a historical–diplomatic perspective, emphasizing the decisive victory at Dien Bien Phu, shifts in the international balance of power, and the Agreement's significance for Vietnam's national liberation process (Dung & Chi, 2019; Bowen, 2015; Ninh, 2011). Domestic studies similarly characterize the Geneva Agreement as a strategic turning point that laid the groundwork for socialist construction in the North while sustaining the struggle for national reunification (Hieu, 2004; Ngoc et al., 2015; Ha, 2020).

Such approaches, however, tend to treat the Geneva Agreement as a moment that concluded war, rather than as a starting point for a series of prolonged social and political consequences. The establishment of a temporary military demarcation line, large-scale troop regroupment and population movements, and persistent difficulties in implementing the Agreement fundamentally

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restructured Vietnam's social space and political life after 1954 (Bai, 2019; Hoa et al., 2019; Loi, 2014). In this context, violence did not disappear but was transformed—from direct military confrontation into enduring forms of structural violence and political antagonism—corresponding to what peace studies describe as *negative peace* (Galtung, 1969).

From the perspectives of conflict studies, transitional justice, and peacebuilding, ceasefire agreements that lack mechanisms of justice and social reconciliation often leave behind deep and enduring legacies of conflict (Baker & Jelena, 2016; Lederach, 1997; AlDajani & Leiner, 2024). The absence of post-conflict justice arrangements following the Geneva Agreement contributed to the formation of fragmented social orders and antagonistic collective memories, with lasting implications for peace processes and national reunification in Vietnam (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Campbell, 1998).

On this basis, this article approaches the 1954 Geneva Agreement not merely as a historical settlement, but as a formative source of enduring conflict legacies, justice-related challenges, and post-war social order in Vietnam. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary debates on conflict, peace, and post-conflict societies.

Literature Review

Scholarship on the 1954 Geneva Agreement can be broadly grouped into three main approaches: (i) historical–diplomatic analyses, (ii) studies of the implementation of the Agreement and its political–social consequences, and (iii) theoretical perspectives on conflict, justice, and post-war peace.

The historical–diplomatic approach focuses on the international context and negotiation dynamics of the Geneva Conference. Both domestic and international studies emphasize the decisive impact of the Dien Bien Phu victory, the involvement of major powers, and the strategic significance of the Agreement in bringing the First Indochina War to an end (Bowen, 2015; Dung & Chi, 2019; Herring, 2001; Young, 2007). Vietnamese scholarship in particular has framed the Geneva Agreement as a landmark achievement of national diplomacy and a strategic turning point that inaugurated a new phase in the struggle for national liberation (Hieu, 2004; Ninh, 2011; Son, 2024). Edited volumes and conference proceedings further provide comprehensive accounts of the negotiation process and the historical meaning of the Agreement (Ngoc et al., 2015; Huan, 2014).

A second body of literature concentrates on the implementation of the Geneva Agreement and its political and social repercussions after 1954. These studies document the challenges of enforcing ceasefire provisions, especially regarding troop regroupment, population movements, and the reorganization of social life (Bai, 2019; Hoa et al., 2019; Loi, 2014). Several works note that the implementation of the Agreement unfolded amid escalating political tensions, laying the groundwork for prolonged confrontation between North and South Vietnam (Ha, 2020; Hoa, 2015; Luong, 2020). While valuable in detailing historical processes and policy outcomes, this literature tends to remain descriptive and rarely situates these consequences within broader analytical frameworks of conflict dynamics or post-war justice.

The third approach draws on theoretical perspectives from conflict studies, transitional justice, and peace research, offering conceptual tools to reinterpret the Geneva Agreement. Galtung's (1969) distinction between *negative peace* and *positive peace* underscores that a ceasefire does not necessarily equate to the resolution of conflict. Scholarship on transitional justice and peacebuilding highlights the interdependence of justice, reconciliation, and sustainable peace (Baker & Jelena, 2016; Lederach, 1997; AlDajani & Leiner, 2024). At the same time, studies of collective memory and identity demonstrate how post-conflict societies construct new narratives and social orders that may reinforce fragmentation and antagonism rather than reconciliation (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Campbell, 1998).

Taken together, these strands of literature reveal a significant gap: a lack of interdisciplinary analyses that conceptualize the 1954 Geneva Agreement as a formative source of conflict legacies,

justice-related challenges, and post-war social order, rather than merely as an event that ended a war. Addressing this gap is the central objective of the present study.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates approaches from peace studies, conflict studies, and post-war justice in order to analyze the 1954 Geneva Agreement as a formative source of enduring conflict legacies and social order in Vietnam. Central to this framework is Johan Galtung's (1969) theory of violence and peace, which distinguishes between *negative peace*–the temporary absence of direct violence–and *positive peace*, understood as the presence of social justice and sustainable reconciliation. This distinction makes it possible to conceptualize the Geneva Agreement not merely as a ceasefire, but as a structural arrangement that enabled the persistence of structural violence and protracted conflict.

In addition, the study draws on theories of transitional justice and peacebuilding to examine the limitations of the Geneva Agreement in addressing the consequences of war. Scholarship by Baker & Jelena (2016), Lederach (1997), and AlDajani and Leiner (2024) emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between justice, reconciliation, and sustainable peace, while also demonstrating that ceasefire agreements lacking post-conflict justice mechanisms often lead to the reconfiguration of conflict in new forms. This perspective is further informed by studies of collective memory and social identity, which illuminate how post-conflict societies construct antagonistic discourses and fragmented social orders in the absence of reconciliation processes (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Campbell, 1998).

Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative research design that combines historical analysis with textual analysis. Primary sources include official documents of the Geneva Agreement, materials related to its implementation, and relevant historical and political studies (Bai, 2019; Ngoc et al., 2015; Loi, 2014). Discourse analysis is applied to examine how narratives of peace, justice, and national reunification were formed and reproduced in the post-Geneva context. This methodological approach enables the study to link concrete historical processes with broader theoretical frameworks concerning conflict, justice, and post-war social order.

Results and Discussion

Geneva 1954 as an "unfinished" ceasefire agreement

The 1954 Geneva Agreement on Vietnam was, first and foremost, a military ceasefire arrangement designed to bring an end to direct hostilities after nearly a decade of the First Indochina War. The core provisions of the Agreement focused on the cessation of fighting, the regroupment of forces, and the establishment of a temporary military demarcation line, rather than on comprehensively addressing the political and social issues arising from the conflict (Bowen, 2015; Ngoc et al., 2015).

The ceasefire and regroupment provisions were conceived as technical measures intended to separate the belligerent forces and reduce the immediate risk of renewed military confrontation. In practice, however, the process of regroupment and troop movement occurred on a massive scale, producing profound demographic shifts and far-reaching transformations in social organization and community life (Bai, 2019; Hoa et al., 2019). Regroupment was not merely a military operation but a form of forced social restructuring, in which millions of individuals were compelled to make life-altering decisions under conditions of acute political uncertainty.

The temporary military demarcation line established at the 17th parallel was explicitly defined in the Agreement as lacking the status of a permanent political or territorial boundary. Yet in practice, this line rapidly evolved into a division of social, political, and symbolic space, disrupting community networks that had historically existed in continuity across regions (Loi, 2014; Huan, 2014). What was legally framed as temporary gradually acquired durability in social reality, contributing to the formation of two parallel and antagonistic political–social orders.

Even more significantly, the Geneva Agreement lacked enforceable political mechanisms to ensure the long-term implementation of its provisions. No international institution with sufficient authority was established to monitor compliance, address violations, or coordinate the post-ceasefire political process. As a result, provisions related to nationwide elections and national reunification quickly stalled, exposing the limits of the Agreement as an instrument for building sustainable peace (Hieu, 2004; Ha, 2020). Within the broader Cold War context, the Geneva settlement remained fragile and highly susceptible to strategic calculations by both domestic and external actors (Herring, 2001; Young, 2007).

A defining feature that renders the Geneva Agreement an "unfinished" settlement lies in the near-total absence of post-conflict justice mechanisms. The Agreement provided no framework for accountability for wartime violence, nor did it address social reconciliation or war reparations.

First, no mechanisms were established to pursue accountability for violations committed during the war. The omission of responsibility was justified as a political choice prioritizing the cessation of military conflict. However, transitional justice scholarship suggests that the avoidance of accountability often results in the accumulation of grievances and traumatic memories within post-war societies (Baker & Jelena, 2016). In the Vietnamese case, wartime memories were preserved and reinterpreted through antagonistic narratives rather than addressed through restorative justice mechanisms.

Second, social reconciliation was neither articulated as an objective nor incorporated as a substantive component of the Agreement. Communities divided by the military demarcation line were left without institutional spaces for dialogue, healing, or trust-building. This corresponds to Lederach's (1997) argument that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without bottom-up reconciliation processes rooted in communities and everyday social life.

Third, war reparations–an essential element of restorative justice–were entirely absent from the Geneva framework. The material and psychological damages of war were not placed at the center of the post-ceasefire process, leaving many social groups marginalized within the new social order that emerged after 1954 (Bai, 2019).

A comparison with post-conflict justice models discussed in international scholarship underscores the structural significance of this absence. Contemporary approaches to transitional justice and conflict transformation emphasize the central role of justice, reconciliation, and social reconstruction in preventing the recurrence of conflict (Baker & Jelena, 2016; AlDajani & Leiner, 2024). The failure of the Geneva Agreement to integrate these elements meant that the peace it produced was largely formal and inherently fragile.

From the perspective of Galtung's (1969) theoretical framework, the 1954 Geneva Agreement represents a paradigmatic case of *negative peace*: direct violence was halted, but the structural causes of conflict remained intact and were, in some respects, reinforced in new forms.

At a surface level, the Agreement succeeded in ending direct military violence between the warring parties, enabling a period of relative stability. This stability, however, was not accompanied by social justice or community reconciliation. The post-Geneva order was constructed on the foundations of division, control, and political mobilization rather than broad-based social consensus.

At a deeper level, the Agreement left structural violence and latent conflict unresolved, as reflected in social fragmentation, ideological antagonism, and the formation of opposing collective memories. Research on memory and identity suggests that in post-conflict societies, wartime memories that are not addressed through justice and reconciliation processes often become sources for the long-term reproduction of conflict (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Campbell, 1998).

In the Vietnamese context, the Geneva Agreement created a "suspended" condition of conflict: war was temporarily halted, but peace was never fully established. It was within this gap between ceasefire and peace that the conditions for prolonged conflict were nurtured, ultimately

contributing to the re-emergence of large-scale violence in subsequent decades (Phuc, 2023; Phuong, 2024).

Accordingly, it can be concluded that, despite its profound historical significance, the 1954 Geneva Agreement remained an unfinished ceasefire when assessed against the criteria of justice, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. This perspective allows the Agreement to be repositioned not merely as the end of a war, but as the starting point of enduring conflict legacies in modern Vietnamese society.

Conflict legacies and post-Geneva social order

One of the most profound legacies of the 1954 Geneva Agreement was the transformation of military division into social fragmentation. Although the demarcation line at the 17th parallel was formally defined as temporary and devoid of permanent political or territorial meaning, in practice it rapidly became a line dividing social, psychological, and symbolic space. Historically interconnected communities were separated, and family, village, and religious networks were disrupted, producing deep social wounds that proved difficult to heal (Loi, 2014; Hoa et al., 2019).

The large-scale regroupment of forces and population movements were not merely direct consequences of the Agreement, but also functioned as mechanisms of forced social restructuring. Numerous studies have shown that the process of "leaving in order to return" was far from a purely individual choice; rather, it unfolded under intense political, psychological, and security pressures, leaving long-term consequences for demographic structures and community life (Bai, 2019; Hoa et al., 2019). These migration experiences became embedded in collective memory, contributing to the formation of antagonistic narratives concerning legitimacy, victimhood, and historical responsibility.

Social fragmentation in the post-Geneva period thus cannot be understood as a secondary by-product of the ceasefire, but rather as a structural legacy in which spatial division generated divisions in perception and social identity. This interpretation resonates with Assmann and Czaplicka's (1995) argument regarding the role of collective memory in maintaining and reproducing social boundaries in post-conflict societies.

After 1954, Vietnam's social order was reconfigured in a context in which conflict remained unresolved. In the North, the Geneva Agreement inaugurated a phase characterized by both the construction of a new social order and preparation for the possible resumption of conflict. Domestic studies indicate that the implementation of the Agreement unfolded in parallel with the consolidation of political power, the reorganization of society, and the articulation of long-term strategic priorities (Hoa, 2015; Nhan, 2020). Under these conditions, social order was built upon high levels of political mobilization and collective discipline, reflecting a state of "unfinished post-war transition."

At a broader level, the Geneva Agreement contributed to the securitization of social life, as political and social issues were increasingly interpreted through the lenses of conflict and threat. Drawing on Campbell's (1998) perspective, in divided societies identity and social order are often constructed through the continual identification of an "other" as a source of danger. This helps explain why the post-Geneva order prioritized control, mobilization, and preparedness for conflict rather than social reconciliation.

Notably, the absence of post-ceasefire justice and reconciliation mechanisms resulted in the emergence of a new social order marked by a lack of deep societal consensus. Disagreements and wartime traumas were not addressed through dialogue or restorative justice but instead became "frozen" within political structures and official discourses. This condition is characteristic of societies that have achieved negative peace without progressing toward positive peace (Galtung, 1969).

Another significant legacy of the Geneva Agreement was the formation of protracted conflict not only at the military level but also within the realms of memory and social discourse. By failing to address post-conflict justice, the Agreement created conditions in which wartime memories were preserved and reinterpreted along antagonistic trajectories (Baker & Jelena, 2016). In this context, memory did not function as a resource for healing but became a political and symbolic asset for mobilization and the legitimation of continued conflict.

Studies of Vietnamese history and politics after 1954 show that the Geneva Agreement has often been interpreted as a strategic victory and simultaneously as a "pause" within a long struggle for national reunification (Ngoc et al., 2015; Phuc, 2023). This interpretation reflects a broader reality: the ceasefire was not perceived as the end of conflict but as one phase within an extended conflict process. Such an understanding aligns with the assessments of Young (2007) and Herring (2001) regarding the continuity of the Vietnam War, in which different phases of warfare were linked by unresolved conflict structures.

At the societal level, memories of division, migration, and violence became integral components of collective identity, shaping how social groups perceived justice, peace, and the "other" across the demarcation line. According to Assmann and Czaplicka (1995), when collective memory is not incorporated into reconciliation processes, it tends to reinforce identity boundaries and prolong symbolic conflict, even when direct violence has temporarily subsided.

Taken together, these analyses suggest that the post-Geneva social order was constructed under conditions of suspended conflict and deferred justice. The Geneva Agreement provided a minimal framework for ending direct military violence but failed to supply the foundations for sustainable peace rooted in justice and reconciliation. Peacebuilding and conflict transformation scholarship consistently shows that the absence of post-conflict justice mechanisms often leads to the reproduction of violence in new forms, including structural and symbolic violence (Lederach, 1997; AlDajani & Leiner, 2024).

In the Vietnamese case, the post-Geneva social order was conditionally stable, closely tied to political mobilization and long-term strategic objectives rather than to broad societal consensus. This helps explain why, despite its profound historical significance, the Geneva Agreement was unable to prevent the re-emergence of conflict and instead became a critical link in a chain of protracted conflict spanning several decades (Phuong, 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the legacy of the Geneva Agreement reveals the limits of international ceasefire arrangements when they are detached from questions of justice, memory, and social order. Geneva 1954 thus stands not only as a historical event but as a paradigmatic case for reflecting on the relationship between ceasefire, peace, and justice in post-conflict societies.

Geneva 1954 and lessons for sustainable peace

The 1954 Geneva Agreement reveals a fundamental gap between ceasefire and sustainable peace. From the perspective of peace studies, the termination of direct violence produces only "negative peace," whereas sustainable peace requires the presence of social justice, reconciliation, and the reconstruction of a social order grounded in broad-based consent (Galtung, 1969). The case of Geneva 1954 demonstrates that a ceasefire agreement, even if successful in military and diplomatic terms, may still fail to generate peace if it does not address the structural causes of conflict.

Research on transitional justice and peacebuilding emphasizes that post-conflict agreements should be conceived as long-term social processes rather than closed legal instruments (Baker & Jelena, 2016; Lederach, 1997). Geneva 1954 lacked such mechanisms, rendering the peace it produced temporary and easily reversible. The first lesson, therefore, is that ceasefire cannot substitute for peace, and international settlements must move beyond the logic of merely "ending hostilities" toward that of "conflict transformation."

A core lesson of the Geneva Agreement concerns the central role of post-conflict justice in building sustainable peace. The Agreement's failure to address accountability, social reconciliation,

or war reparations created profound justice deficits that undermined the social foundations of peace (Bai, 2019; Ngoc et al., 2015). As Baker & Jelena (2016) argues, transitional justice is not solely about dealing with the past but also about shaping the political and social futures of post-war communities.

In the Vietnamese case, the absence of restorative justice mechanisms meant that war-related traumas were "frozen" within collective memory and political discourse rather than addressed through dialogue and mutual recognition. This observation is consistent with studies of collective memory, which show that when memory is not integrated into reconciliation processes, it tends to reinforce identity boundaries and prolong symbolic conflict (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). The second lesson, therefore, is that sustainable peace is unattainable when justice is deferred or excluded from post-conflict processes.

Scholarship on reconciliation and conflict transformation further stresses that sustainable peace requires community participation and bottom-up social processes (Lederach, 1997). As a high-level diplomatic and military arrangement, the Geneva Agreement created virtually no institutional space for social reconciliation among divided communities. This contributed to the persistence of antagonism and prolonged political mobilization, weakening the prospects for the emergence of a social order based on consensus.

Recent approaches to conflict transformation and reconciliation emphasize the complexity of social actors and the need to move beyond binary "winner–loser" frameworks (AlDajani & Leiner, 2024). From this perspective, Geneva 1954 illustrates the limitations of peace models based solely on political compromise, insofar as they fail to account for the diversity of wartime experiences and the need for reconciliation at the societal level. The third lesson, therefore, is that reconciliation cannot be fully "delegated" to international agreements but must be cultivated within concrete social contexts.

Building on these theoretical lessons, the case of Geneva 1954 offers important policy implications for the design of peace processes in contemporary conflict settings. First, ceasefire agreements must be closely linked to viable political roadmaps and equipped with effective enforcement mechanisms. The absence of coercive and monitoring instruments in the Geneva Agreement significantly weakened the sustainability of the post-war settlement (Hieu, 2004; Ha, 2020).

Second, peace policies should integrate elements of transitional justice from the earliest stages of post-conflict processes. Research on peacebuilding and transitional justice shows that delaying justice often increases the risk of conflict recurrence (Baker & Jelena, 2016; Olsson & Moore, 2023). The Geneva 1954 case demonstrates that prioritizing short-term stability by excluding justice from negotiations may generate long-term instability.

Third, post-conflict policies must pay sustained attention to the reconstruction of social order and to the social consequences of war, including migration, community fragmentation, and collective psychological trauma. Studies on regroupment and social restructuring after 1954 indicate that these factors are critical to social stability and long-term peace (Hoa et al., 2019; Nhan, 2020). Neglecting them renders peace fragile and vulnerable to challenge.

Finally, reinterpreting the 1954 Geneva Agreement through an analytical framework linking conflict, justice, and social order contributes to contemporary debates on peace and international security. The Vietnamese case shows that post-conflict settlements cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of ending hostilities but must be examined in relation to long-term social processes and collective memory (Campbell, 1998; Young, 2007).

From this perspective, Geneva 1954 is not merely a historical event but a generalizable lesson about the limitations of ceasefire agreements in producing sustainable peace. This lesson is particularly relevant in contemporary conflict contexts, where political settlements frequently confront similar challenges related to justice, reconciliation, and social reconstruction.

In sum, the 1954 Geneva Agreement demonstrates that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through ceasefire alone. Only when post-conflict justice, social reconciliation, and the reconstruction of social order are systematically integrated into post-war processes can peace move beyond a "negative" condition to become a durable reality. This is the central message that the Geneva 1954 case offers to contemporary peace theory and policy.

Conclusion

This article approaches the 1954 Geneva Agreement not merely as a diplomatic–military milestone that ended the war in Indochina, but as a paradigmatic case of an "unfinished" ceasefire agreement whose long-term effects shaped conflict dynamics, justice, and social order in Vietnam. By integrating theoretical frameworks from peace studies, post-conflict justice, and conflict transformation, the study demonstrates the structural limitations of the Agreement in generating sustainable peace.

At the theoretical level, the article contributes to debates in peace and conflict studies by clearly illustrating the distinction between negative peace and positive peace. While the Geneva Agreement succeeded in terminating direct violence, the absence of enforceable political mechanisms, post-conflict justice, and social reconciliation meant that the deeper causes of conflict remained unaddressed. The Vietnamese case thus shows that ceasefire arrangements, when detached from justice and the reconstruction of social order, may function more as a period of "conflict suspension" than as a genuine starting point for sustainable peace.

From a practical and policy-oriented perspective, the study draws several important lessons for the design of peace processes in contemporary conflict settings. First, ceasefire agreements must be embedded within clear political roadmaps and supported by effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Second, post-conflict justice and social reconciliation should be integrated from the outset, rather than postponed in favor of short-term stability. Third, post-war policies need to prioritize the reconstruction of social order and address the social consequences of war, including community fragmentation, forced migration, and antagonistic collective memories.

Finally, reinterpreting the 1954 Geneva Agreement through an analytical framework linking conflict, justice, and social order not only deepens our understanding of modern Vietnamese history but also carries broader implications for contemporary peace research and practice. The case underscores that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through the cessation of hostilities; it requires a long-term process in which justice, reconciliation, and social consensus play a central role.

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