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7 Excessive Violence in a War Without Fronts: Explaining Atrocities in South Vietnam (1965–1973)

My Lai was a shock to everyone except people in Vietnam.¹
It probably would be unfair to describe the Vietnamese as an unusual brutal people. But at the same time, I have personally witnessed more brutality in Viet Nam than in any other country of Asia.²

Introduction

When *Life* magazine published graphic pictures of the My Lai massacre on 5 December 1969, large parts of the American society were shocked.³ Ronald Haeblerle's images of the butchery in the cluster of huts known to American ground troops as My Lai (4) in Quang Ngai Province were reprinted in the following days in multiple media outlets across the world. What happened in My Lai, a hamlet that had previously been raided by American troops, not only reinforced the antiwar movement but also led many GIs to come out in public and testify about atrocities committed in Southeast Asia. Countless veterans accused the military doctrine of the American armed forces in their explanations of what they did and why. Hence, after the massacre at My Lai, military sources that dealt with similar allegations and wide accounts from journalists and eyewitnesses on atrocities in Vietnam were written and compiled.⁴

1 Kevin Buckley, as quoted in John Kifner, "Report on Brutal Vietnam Campaign Stirs Memories," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/28/us/report-on-brutal-vietnam-campaign-stirs-memories.html>.

2 Malcolm W. Browne, *The New Face of War: A Report on a Communist Guerilla Campaign* (London: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 114.

3 Dale Wittner et al., "Exclusive Pictures, Eyewitness Accounts: The Massacre at Mylai," *Life*, December 5, 1969, 36–45. For a propagandistic account of the massacre by the People's Army of Vietnam, see People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), "PAVN Political Section Report on Massacre at My Lai, March 1968," in *Vietnam War Crimes*, ed. Samuel Brenner (Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press, 2006), 63–67.

4 The Vietnam war crimes working group, a Pentagon task force created after the uproar of the My Lai massacre, documented and investigated 244 allegations of war crimes other than My Lai during the Vietnam War. The selection process for inclusion as well as the applied

However, historians trying to document North and South Vietnamese atrocities still stand before almost insolvable challenges. Sources have either never been produced, have been destroyed, or are not accessible. Moreover, in a society where more than 60 percent of the population was born during or after the war, oral history is limited. Whether unfiltered and transparent interviews will ever become available is a legitimate question. Additionally, in Vietnam, the writing of history remains largely a competence of the state and the party. Therefore, modern Vietnamese historiography still rests on a Marxist point of view that portrays the war as a “great patriotic war.”⁵

The aim of this chapter is to develop answers to the question of why both sides extended the conflict from the battlefields to the civilian population. Where did this excessive face-to-face violence stem from? Why did brute violence toward noncombatants occur? What caused “acts of direct and deliberative violence against civilians [or] enemy troops that violate[d] international rules of war” and went beyond the conventional use of violence common to war?⁶ By focusing on both parties of the conflict, this article adds a comparative contribution to the existing research examining the reasons for excessive violence in the Vietnam War which deals almost exclusively with an American perspective.⁷

criteria, however, remain unclear. See NARA, RG 319, Records of the Army Staff, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER), Records of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, War Crimes Allegations Case Files. The documents of the Peers Commission mostly deal with the My Lai massacre, see NARA, RG 319, Records of the Army Staff, Records of the Peers Inquiry, Administrative and Background Material Files, 1967–1970; Records created after the completion of the Peers Inquiry 1969–1975. For published sources on American war crimes, see Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, *In the Name of America: The Conduct of the War in Vietnam by the Armed Forces of the United States as Shown by Published Reports* (Annandale: The Turnpike Press, 1968); John Duffett, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); William R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979); The Citizens Commission of Inquiry, *The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam: An Inquiry Into Command Responsibility in Southeast Asia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

⁵ Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 428.

⁶ Edward S. Herman, *Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 13.

⁷ See Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (London: Vintage Random House, 2010); Deborah Nelson, *The War Behind Me: Vietnam Veterans Confront the Truth About U.S. War Crimes* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013).

My Lai and America in Vietnam

A year-long civil war paved the way for the escalation of the big war in 1965. Already in 1957, around 15,000 real or perceived “enemies” of the regimes in Hanoi and Saigon were believed to have been killed.⁸ Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–1963), disliked through all sectors of South Vietnamese society, alienated the farmers from Saigon and led the North to back the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF), founded in 1959. In the ensuing years, worsened by the ideological dynamics of the Cold War and the interpretation of South Vietnam as a precedent, the superpowers caught in a solidarity dilemma were poised to back their respective sides: The fear of losing credibility led Washington to support the regime of Diem, while Moscow and Beijing sided with Hanoi.

When the massacre at My Lai was committed, large contingents of American and Allied ground troops had already been present in South Vietnam for three years. In fact, before the first combat-ready Marines went ashore in Da Nang on March 8, 1965, John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) increased the number of American “military advisors” to the South Vietnamese regime by a factor of five, to 16,000.⁹ Three years later, on the fateful morning of March 16, 1968, Sergeant Haeberle of the 31st Public Information Detachment was armed with three cameras: one official Army camera and two private ones, shooting colored photographs. “Guys were about to shoot these people, I yelled, ‘Hold it,’ and shot my picture. As I walked away, I heard M16s open up. From the corner of my eye I saw bodies falling, but I didn’t turn to look.”¹⁰

After his honorable discharge, Haeberle sold the pictures of the bloody horror that symbolized to many the blunt brutality of war in Vietnam. Although some of the images had already been published in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* on November 20 by reporter Joseph Eszterhas, the expose in a nationwide print magazine such as *Life* (which soon would reach a staggering 8.5 million run and was affordable for the middle class) intensified the debate about the ethics and morality of the American conduct in Southeast Asia. “The people of My Lai

8 Bernd Greiner, “The March 1968 Massacre in My Lai 4 and My Khe 4.” Accessed June 8, 2017. <http://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/march-1968-massacre-my-lai-4-and-my-khe-4>.

9 Ibid.; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York: Random House 2012), 705.

10 Wittner, “Exclusive Pictures, Eyewitness Accounts: The Massacre at Mylai,” 36. For all of Haeberle’s pictures see Library of Congress, Military Legal Resources, Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, Vol. 3: Exhibits, 14.03.1970, Book 6: Photographs.

were simply gunned down” concluded the journalists who wrote the story in *Life*.¹¹ With the publications of the pictures of My Lai, the disclosure of a cover-up as well as disappearing files, the Army in particular and the US policy in Vietnam in general was discredited.¹² Since the Tet Offensive almost two years before the story in *Life*, more and more Americans refused to support the war in Vietnam. And the controversy that arose from the massacre in My Lai would do little to convince the rising number of doubters that Vietnam was still “the place,” as Kennedy once famously proclaimed for “making our power credible.”¹³

The acts of violence in My Lai also troubled the jurors at the court martial of the main defendant, Lieutenant William “Rusty” Calley: They deliberated for a record-breaking seventy-nine hours before they finally reached a verdict on 31 March 1971. Calley was found guilty of premeditated murder and one count of assault with intent to murder, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Apart from that, all the other accused were discharged from the Army, never sentenced nor found guilty. A short time later, Calley was partially pardoned by President Richard M. Nixon (1913–1994), who sided with many Americans who saw in Calley a scapegoat. The president set him at large after forty-four months of house detention.¹⁴ General William Ray Peers (1914–1984), who presided over the investigation into the My Lai massacre, is reported to have criticized the verdicts as “a horrible thing.” He went on saying “we have only one man finally convicted, and he’s set free after doing a relatively small part of his sentence.”¹⁵

My Lai was not the only massacre that was committed in South Vietnam: In the most fought over regions of the war – the northern provinces of South Vietnam as well as the Mekong Delta – at the very least seven massacres

11 Wittner, “Exclusive Pictures, Eyewitness Accounts: The Massacre at Mylai,” 36.

12 Bernd Greiner, “Spurensuche: Akten über amerikanische Kriegsverbrechen in Vietnam,“ in *Kriegsverbrechen im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Wolfram Wette and Gerd Ueberschär (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), 461–473; Seymour M. Hersh, *Cover-Up* (New York: Random House, 1972).

13 John F. Kennedy, as quoted in Andrew Wiest and Chris McNab, *The Illustrated History of the Vietnam War* (London: Amber Books, 2015), 32.

14 Michal R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 216–230; Greiner, *War Without Fronts*, 314–317; 322–324.

15 William R. Peers, as quoted in Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 358. See also Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1992), 284–314.

committed by American troops have been confirmed.¹⁶ Additionally, the “Tiger Force,” a long-range reconnaissance patrol unit of the 101st Airborne Division, likely killed over a thousand noncombatants during its operations in the Song Ve Valley in Quang Ngai province between May and November of 1967.¹⁷ Additionally, only several months after the massacre at My Lai, a Marine outfit entered the village of Son Thang and killed civilians without mercy.¹⁸ Whether American soldiers participated in twenty-four massacres in collaboration with their South Vietnamese allies in the period between March 1968 and the end of 1970, as claimed by representatives of the NLF, remains disputed.¹⁹ However, the records of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group indicate that murder, torture, slayings, rapes, executions, maltreatment of prisoners, lootings, mutilations of enemy dead, raids, attacks, homicides, assaults, indiscriminate use of firepower on civilians or their property, thefts, and other misconducts and violations of the Geneva Conventions were frequently accused and must be regarded as a common occurrence. Even the burning of a staked Vietnamese girl with gas by GIs has been documented.²⁰

The dispute over the nature and extent of American war crimes committed during the Vietnam War is as old as their discovery at the end of the 1960s. To this day, it has been a quarrel that is carried out with political arguments. “Every unit of brigade size has its My Lai hidden someplace” claims one side,²¹ while the other side claims that civilians harmed during firefights were a regrettable exception, for example when the Secretary of the Army stated: “What apparently occurred at My Lai is wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations in Vietnam.”²² This latter narrative was reinforced by Nixon’s interference in the Calley case and stands in

16 Greiner, *War Without Fronts*, 15–17.

17 *Ibid.*, 161–179. See also Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006).

18 Gary D. Solis, *Son Thang: An American War Crime* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998).

19 Greiner, *War Without Fronts*, 17; NARA, RG 319, Records of the Army Staff, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER), Records of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, War Crimes Allegations Case Files, Box 1 Alexander Allegation thru Ice Allegation, Folder: Enemy Allegation.

20 Benjamin C. Dubberly, “Atrocities during the Vietnam War,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2011), 79.

21 Oran Henderson, as quoted in author unknown, “Colonel Says Every Large Combat Unit in Vietnam Has a Mylai,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1971, 13; Myra MacPherson, “American Soldiers Committed Atrocities in Vietnam,” in *Vietnam War Crimes*, 23.

22 Stanley R. Resor, as quoted in Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 34.

sharp opposition to other statements: For example, the “Winter Soldiers” – veterans who came to sharply oppose the war – didn’t beat around the bush when their speaker John F. Kerry claimed that “war crimes committed in Southeast Asia” were not “isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command.”²³ Similar to the witnesses testifying before anti-war hearings, such as the Citizens’ Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam or the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal, the Winter Soldiers claimed:

We intend to demonstrate that My Lai was no unusual occurrence, other than, perhaps, the number of victims killed all in one place, all at one time, all by one platoon [sic!] of us. We intend to show that the policies of Americal [23rd Infantry] Division which inevitably resulted in My Lai were the policies of other Army and Marine division as well.²⁴

Hue and Communist Atrocities in Vietnam

Atrocities committed by communist forces may never be fully uncovered. However, research has shown that terror and atrocities were staples of the Viet Cong strategy.²⁵ In fact, like the land reform of 1956, cadres and higher party officials from the apparatus had the authority to capture suspects and try them before a “people’s court” or execute them after a mock trial. A captured document during the early phases of the war read: “Anyone who uses force to prevent the people’s will . . . may be executed on the spot by the district cadre.”²⁶ Although these atrocities stemmed less from frustration or emotional outbursts, they were nonetheless systematically calculated and thoroughly committed

23 John F. Kerry, as quoted in Congressional Record (92nd Congress, 1st Session) for Thursday, April 22, 1971, Complete Testimony of Lt. John Kerry to Senate Foreign Relations Committee. On Behalf of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Accessed June 8, 2017. www.wintersoldier.com/graphics/Kerry_1971_Testimony.pdf.

24 William Crandell, as quoted in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, 2. See also Richard Stacewitz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1997), 237.

25 In the following, the term “Viet Cong” will be used for the successors of the Viet Minh. This mainly refers to the armed arm of the NLF, which South Vietnamese and many Americans called Viet Cong (originally an abbreviation for “Vietnamese Communist”).

26 A captured document from the Mekong Delta, circa 1965, as quoted in Douglas Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror* (Saigon: U.S. Mission, 1970), 25. For atrocities committed during the land reform see Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 156–157.

with a political deterrent in mind. Accordingly, victims of communist terror were frequently disemboweled, decapitated, or stoned to death and put on display in public places. Perceived enemies were buried alive and killed in front of the village population. Assassination squads were already murdering noncombatants before the escalation of the war. In fact, in 1964 alone, 3,275 women and 1,510 children are believed to have been murdered or wounded by the Viet Cong; kidnappings, rapes, dismemberments, and other crimes against civilians reached in that year an average of 376 per week.²⁷ Solely in one week of June 1965, 52 civilians were killed, 63 wounded, and 713 kidnapped.²⁸

On 5 December 1967, two battalions of the Viet Cong entered the village of Dak Son and killed 252 men, women, and children. Since the inhabitants were Montagnards, an indigenous ethnicity in the central highlands, and therefore opposed to the objectives of the Viet Cong, the latter executed civilians without mercy and also took hostages.²⁹ Because the NLF only accepted the law of war partially, prisoners of war were frequently tortured, skinned, or even eviscerated. According to a journalist, members of the NLF killed annually 4,000–5,000 “civil servants of the Saigon Regime.”³⁰ Additionally, American prisoners were paraded through the streets of Hanoi and tortured; South Vietnamese POWs were even starved to death.³¹ Like their counterparts, the Viet Cong also mutilated enemy dead. Just as the CIA had done in conducting their “Phoenix Program,” the North Vietnamese prepared death lists of people who fell

27 Directorate of Psy-War Planning, *Viet Cong Atrocities and Sabotage in South Vietnam* (Saigon: Ministry of Information and Chiêu Hô, 1967), 3; Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Vietnams* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 370–373; Deane Heller and David Heller, “The Systematic Terror of the Viet Cong,” *American Legion Magazine*, March 1966, 11.

28 Heller and Heller, “The Systematic Terror of the Viet Cong.”

29 Dubberly, “Atrocities,” 79; Charles Krohn, *The Lost Battalion: Controversy and Casualties in the Battle of Hue* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 30; Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 245, 276; author unknown, “The Massacre of Dak Son,” *Time*, December 15, 1967, 32–34. See also Archives and Special Collections Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, Quantico, Virginia, Folder: Wars: Vietnam-Viet Cong; John G. Hubbell, “The Blood-Red Hands of Ho Chi Minh,” *Reader’s Digest*, November 1968, 64–65.

30 Alexander Casella, “The Politics of Prisoners of War,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 1972, 12.

31 The communist propaganda as well as Jane Fonda disputed this. See Ngoc Bao, “American POWs Were Never Mistreated,” in Brenner, *Vietnam War Crimes*, 129–132; Jane Fonda, “American POWs Have Been Well Cared For,” in *ibid.*, 117–119. For an account of war crimes committed against American POWs, see the statement from Navy Pilot Porter Halyburton in Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), 222–228.

into disgrace. A high-ranking defector claimed that up to three million South Vietnamese were placed on such lists.³² Like American troops far off in difficult operations, Viet Cong units were given a lot of leeway and atrocities were tolerated to maintain morale and esprit de corps. It seems that torture, intimidation, and murder were almost commonplace; terror and assassinations were especially used to intimidate South Vietnamese officials.³³ In one instance, the hands of a seven-year-old boy were cut off to warn his family about what might happen if they took part in the upcoming elections.³⁴ At another instance the fingers of a six-year-old schoolboy were cut off for going to school. “This is what will happen to you if you continue to go to that school,” said one Viet Cong to horrified schoolchildren.³⁵ A similar cruel warning was imposed on villagers near Da Nang: They were herded in front of the house of the village chief, the local representative of the population. Soldiers of the Viet Cong cut out the tongue of the village chief, while the residents as well as the chief’s pregnant wife and their children were forced to watch this cruel torture.

His genital organs were sliced off and sewn inside his bloody mouth. As he died, the VC went to work on his wife, slashing open her womb. Then, the nine-year-old son: a bamboo lance was rammed through one ear and out the other. Two more of the chief’s children were murdered the same way.³⁶

In another case, on May 5, 1965, Viet Cong soldiers stopped two buses. The sixteen passengers were trussed up, marched into the woods, forced to the ground, and shot.³⁷

During the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, communist forces in the old imperial city of Hue killed at least 2,800 civilians. They also took prisoners, many of whom were never seen again and remain unaccounted for. Many of the dead were executed with their hands tied behind their backs. In other cases, the victims were beaten to death, buried alive in dirt, or had cloth stuffed into their

32 Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 31.

33 Jean-Louis Margolin, “Vietnam and Laos: The Impasse of War Communism,” in *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, eds. Stéphane Courtois et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 565–576; Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 246–252.

34 Hubbell, “The Blood-Red Hands of Ho Chi Minh,” 61.

35 An unidentified Viet Cong soldier, as quoted in *ibid.*, 66.

36 *Ibid.*, 61–62.

37 Heller and Heller, “The Systematic Terror of the Viet Cong,” 10.

mouths, showing “clear evidence of atrocity killings.”³⁸ Roman Catholics were rounded together, found guilty, marched through rugged terrain, and shot.³⁹

Hue was the largest communist atrocity that took place during the Vietnam War. Little is known about the perpetrators and their victims, the latter of whom were selected in cold blood and killed by local communist forces who occasionally knew them. Bodies were buried and hidden, contrary to previous massacres where the dead were marked and displayed as a deterrent. However, the perpetrators adapted to the raging battle, killing mainly minorities first as well as groups of suspects. By then eliminating community leaders, foreigners, intellectuals, and other key figures – the sources of future opposition – they paved the way for a communist takeover of Hue. But the violence developed a momentum: Family members killed their own relatives, even communist students were found among the dead, as well as pets. It seems that communist forces tried everything to exterminate the fabric of the social order so that a new hierarchy could be placed upon the city. This was combined with the bitter fighting of local political factions against and within each other.⁴⁰ The NLF denied having anything to do with the massacre, stating that “there was absolutely no policy or directive from the Front to carry out any massacre. It had simply been one of those terrible spontaneous tragedies that inevitably accompany war.”⁴¹ The death toll would probably have been even higher if the old imperial city had not been reconquered by American and South Vietnamese troops on 3 March 1968 after twenty-eight days of battle.

However, Hue sent a clear signal to the rest of South Vietnam. If the communists were to win this war, they would not stop imposing their rule and new order on the South. All perceived enemies would be either reeducated or

38 Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam At War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 152; Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 47. The numbers of the dead remain somewhat disputed. In 1974, D. Gareth Porter accused Pike of exaggerating the number of killed civilians. See D. Gareth Porter, “The 1968 ‘Hue Massacre’,” *Indochina Chronicle* 33, June 24, 1974, 2–13.

39 Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 49–50.

40 ICRC archives, Geneva, Archives générales, B AG 202 223–036, Protestations concernant les mauvais traitements infligés aux prisonniers et aux civils, première partie; B AG 202 223–041, Protestations de la République du Viêt Nam; Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 50–59; The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Folder 10, Box 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11-Monographs, Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, The Human Cost of Communism in Vietnam: A Compendium Prepared for the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Washington 1972, 64–82.

41 Huynh Tan Phat, as quoted in Truong Nhu Tang, David Chanoff, and Doan Van Toai, *A Vietcong Memoir* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 154.

assassinated, and old grudges would be settled by violence with legal amnesty for the communist perpetrators.

Hue might have been an extreme case of violence in a timely and locally narrow space. However, acts of terror connected with atrocious behavior were a staple of the military strategy of the Viet Cong. The journalist James G. Hubbell reported that, by the end of 1967, the communists had engaged in “100,000 acts of terror against the South Vietnamese people.”⁴² Douglas Pike (1924–2002) claimed in 1970 that “terror is an essential ingredient of nearly all [the communists’] programs”⁴³ while Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt (1913–1989), commander I corps tactical zone, said that “communist terrorism . . . is no more a mere accident of war but a systematic program of butchery.”⁴⁴

Patterns of an Asymmetric War

The asymmetric constellation of the war in Southeast Asia played a crucial role in explaining atrocities. The reflection on the characteristics of asymmetric wars in general and the Vietnam War in particular provides the most powerful explanation for such violence. Hence, an imbalance of weaponry and a divergently different understanding of warfare influenced the dynamics of the Second Indochina War. The most powerful military power of the Cold War with the most sophisticated weapon systems of its time clashed with an enemy that was perceived as weak, using little more than a farmer’s army with archaic weapons that depended on supplies from the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Hence, a time-costly guerrilla war was all the North had in its attempt to defeat the South allied with the American superpower. Merging the regular troops of the North Vietnamese Army with a guerilla force in the South was the integral component of the North’s military strategy. Time and time again, GIs and Marines accused this unpredictable Janus face of the enemy as an explanation for their deeds.

From at least 1966 onward, the Viet Cong unleashed a war without fronts, using the civilian population of the South as a cover. The Viet Cong therefore became an invisible enemy that American troops desperately tried to hunt down while failing to localize their main troop contingents. Huge cordons as well as search and destroy operations and the declaration of entire landscapes as free-

⁴² Hubbell, “The Blood-Red Hands of Ho Chi Minh,” 62.

⁴³ Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 9.

⁴⁴ Lewis Walt, as quoted in Hubbell, “The Blood-Red Hands of Ho Chi Minh,” 65.

fire zones did little to bring the enemy to battle. Already in 1964, American journalist Malcolm W. Browne (1931–2012) reported that the skills of the Viet Cong in camouflaging were remarkable, describing how they stayed concealed in swamp waters while breathing through bamboo tubes.⁴⁵ At the same time, the Viet Cong were masters in preparing booby traps, setting mines, hiding deadly Punji sticks, or shooting at the enemy using hidden snipers. Some American outfits lost up to half of their strength without seeing an enemy soldier. Furthermore, low-ranking American soldiers in particular did not understand their role in this war and had no way to gauge its progress. The fact that the opponent rarely showed himself and that traditional concepts of progress were blurred is described in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*: "Aimless, that's what it is: a bunch of kids trying to pin the tail on the Asian donkey. But no fucking tail. No fuckin donkey."⁴⁶

Eventually, this impression led to anger and frustration among American troops. But it also reinforced the cycle of violence on both sides. For the Americans, every Vietnamese became a possible enemy; and for the Viet Cong, every civilian who had contact with the opposing forces became a target of violence. Typically, small teams of Viet Cong raided unarmed villages. For example, in June 1965, when the Viet Cong kidnapped fifteen farmers, one of them even had to dig his own grave to be buried alive. Similar atrocities against non-combatants were reported by journalists: For example, a teenage girl was slashed with a machete and riddled with bullets in Binh Thanh, the head of a civilian from Binh Dai district was hacked off just outside his house, and a twenty-one-year-old Vietnamese from the Khanh Hoi hamlet was slashed 100 times and riddled with bullets fifty yards from his house, while the following was posted to his door: "Sentenced to death by Company 605, Battalion 502 of the Forces of Liberation of South Vietnam."⁴⁷

For the Viet Cong, terror in the form of atrocities had clear aims. The opposite party would be provoked into excessively repressive anti-terrorist actions, earning the contempt and hatred of civilians. Propaganda in the form of calculated atrocities on the local level could reinforce the cycle of violence. Especially those South Vietnamese soldiers whose families suffered from communist reprisals were likely to repay like with like, particularly in the handling of captured Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Browne, *The New Face of War*, 8.

⁴⁶ Tim O'Brien, *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Random House, 2009 [1978]), 105.

⁴⁷ Heller and Heller, "The Systematic Terror of the Viet Cong," 11–12.

⁴⁸ See Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*; William Tuohy, "War is Hell and, by God, This Is One of the Prime Examples': A Big Dirty Little War," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 28, 1965, 417, 510–514.

Military Doctrine

This asymmetric configuration led to new ways of measuring progress. For the Viet Cong, territorial control of an area was not the target; rather, they needed to install their cadres within the civil population. For American forces, it seemed impossible to control large areas, given the limited troop contingents and the strategy of the opponent. Accordingly, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) based in Saigon changed its official terminology of success from the old “area secured” to “body count” as the method of measuring progress. Terms like “annihilation” and “attrition” became widespread within the military ranks.⁴⁹ The enemy was not killed, but eliminated; a big body count led to extra rewards, such as promotions, holidays, and extra meals. After the battles in the Ia Drang River Valley, body counts and kill ratios became the new blueprint for success. Free-fire zones and search and destroy operations, such as “Junction City” (22 February – 14 May 1967) and “Cedar Falls” (8–26 January 1967) were initiated to hunt the enemy down and kill him. However, there was one problem with the body count metric: It did not work. Instead, it intensified the need to produce dead bodies, which was in many cases covered by the chain of command and often intensified with military indoctrination, training, and dehumanization of the Vietnamese people. A Marine from the 1st Marine Division later testified: “It wasn’t like [the Vietnamese] were humans . . . They were a gook or a Commie and it was okay. And anything you did to them was okay because, like they would tell you they’d do it to you if they had the chance.”⁵⁰ In such a context, the killing of civilians became easier. As another Marine put it: “To the Marines, there was no such thing as a free-fire zone in my outfit. Every place was a free fire-zone.”⁵¹

Not only did body count reports become grossly inflated, but also purposefully manipulated – for instance, when GIs went to cemeteries and excavated dead bodies to report them among their body counts.⁵² In addition to wrong reports due to incentives, it was also common for two or more outfits to claim and report the same bodies. This could even happen across service branches:

⁴⁹ Dubberly, “Atrocities,” 80.

⁵⁰ Scott Camil, as quoted in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, 14.

⁵¹ Thomas Heidtman, as quoted in *ibid.*, 28.

⁵² NARA, RG 319, Records of the Army Staff, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER), Records of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, War Crimes Allegations Case Files; Box 16 Ambrose Incident thru Butts Allegation, Folder: Hunter Allegation (VVAW-WSI); Box 17 Palosaari [Polosaari?] Allegation thru Schwerzler Incident, Folder: Larry Craig Allegation (VVAW-WSI).

I know on numerous occasions when we would receive contact in the field, we would call in support—artillery, gunships . . . , and if necessary, jet fighters. Now, every time someone is killed, there is kind of a dispute over who got him. So the Air Force claims one, the Artillery claims one, the Infantry claims one, and the gunships claim one.⁵³

Additional absurd practices, such as counting dead water buffaloes and other animals, were reported: Returning from my first mission, I witnessed the machine-gunning of an entire herd of water buffalo along with the six or seven buffalo boys who were tending the herd . . . The dead boys and the water buffalo were added to the official body count of the Viet Cong.⁵⁴

When soldiers of the 4th Infantry Division killed nineteen Viet Cong suspects, a contemporary used the repercussion of the American military doctrine as an explanation:

The executions are the direct result of a policy. It's the policy that is important . . . The military doesn't distinguish between North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Viet Cong, civilian—all of them are gooks, all of them are considered to be subhuman . . . And all of them can be killed and most of them are killed.⁵⁵

For the Viet Cong, anxiety and fear were measures of success. The more distress they inflicted on the civilian population, the higher was their chance that those people would not switch sides. One captured Viet Cong confessed that the killing was part of their military doctrine, planned acts of violence committed during operations:

The first time we entered the village, we arrested and executed on the spot four men who had been pointed out to us by the party's district headquarters as our most dangerous opponents. One, who had fought in the war against the French, was now a known supporter of the South Vietnamese government. Another had been seen fraternizing with government troops. These two were shot. The others, the village's principal landowners, were beheaded.⁵⁶

Therefore, the military doctrine as well as the implementation of civil and military leadership on both sides were responsible for creating an “atmosphere

⁵³ Michael Hunter, as quoted in *ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Record, as quoted in Jeffrey Record, “Maximizing Cobra Utilization,” *The Washington Monthly*, April 1971, 12.

⁵⁵ Jamie Henry, as quoted in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, 44–45.

⁵⁶ An unknown Viet Cong soldier as quoted in Hubbell, “The Blood-Red Hands of Ho Chi Minh,” 63.

conducive to atrocities.”⁵⁷ The military doctrine did not hinder violence against noncombatants; on the contrary, it could on both sides be exploited in order to kill and abuse civilians.

Revenge and Hatred

Excessive violence also had its roots in emotions and the feelings of soldiers. Certainly, every soldier is scared in war; however, in Vietnam, this fear mounted to inconceivable heights, especially among American ground troops. The reason for this was that the enemy planted mines and other sorts of exploding devices all over the South. The danger of an instant death penetrated the experiential world of many soldiers. Every step could be punished with instant death or ugly injuries. This was reason enough for Tim O’Brien’s platoon to chase a Vietnamese in front of their daily moves while they sang: “Step out of line, hit a mine; follow the dink, you’re in the pink.”⁵⁸ Another GI explained: “True, nobody should have to be told not to kill unarmed civilians or prisoners, but when the rage and hate is there along with an opportunity to vent it with no fear of reprimand or danger to oneself, it will happen.”⁵⁹

In both cases, the military leadership failed to stop wishes for revenge against perceived enemies. Especially on the American side, the frustration of many troops was well known, but disciplinary actions were scarcely taken. Instead, even perpetrators were kept on a long leash. As one Marine from the 1st Marine Division put it:

You’re scared to death all the way over there. You’re told continually that . . . every Vietnamese is going to kill you; that booby-trapped babies are going to be sent against you and old grandmothers are going to throw bombs at you, which can be very, very true and in many instances is true . . .⁶⁰

Often, these sentiments were linked to extreme boredom in the field. Specialist 4 Sam Schorr, a GI of the 86th Combat Engineers, stated bluntly that members of his outfit “quite often” shot on civilians working in the field “out of sheer

⁵⁷ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 315.

⁵⁸ Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Mariner Books 2009 [1990]), 32.

⁵⁹ James D. Henry, as quoted in Donovan Duncan, “The Men of ‘B’ Company: By James D. Henry (As Told to Donald Duncan),” *Scanlans Monthly*, March 1970, 31.

⁶⁰ Michael McCusker, as quoted in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, 6.

boredom and also because we just we didn't give a damn."⁶¹ One GI from the 3rd Marine Division testified: "You know if Vietnam is not violently painful then it's such a crashing bore that you can't stand it."⁶² So it seems hardly surprising that when, for example, a Marine of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division was killed by a sniper, the outfit "in revenge, destroyed two entire villages, wiping out everything living."⁶³

But also for soldiers of the Viet Cong, not every act of war was systematically planned. For example, after the execution of two American prisoners, the perpetrators stated that revenge was the motive for their action:

This was an appropriate blow directed at these lackeys of the Americans, notorious for their dishonesty, wickedness and cruelty . . . To punish the U.S. aggressors and their lackeys for having massacred our compatriots indiscriminately, the Liberation Armed Forces command ordered the punishment of the two aforementioned U.S. aggressors.⁶⁴

The desire for revenge took a clearly distinct form during the massacre in Hue. Apparently, the perpetrators were so furious that every principal bone of one of the bodies had been broken.⁶⁵ The Viet Cong frequently denied its victims the right to die with a whole body. In fact, a journalist writing for the right-wing *National Review* found out that "an almost ritualistic mutilation of corpses [was] a constant practice."⁶⁶ A similar atrocity committed on 23 March 1969, described by an American observer showed how strong affective feelings of revenge were during communist atrocities:

Upon occupying the hamlet [of Kohinda], the VC seized the hamlet chief and took him to the center of the hamlet. All of the hamlet's residents, 300, including children, were then herded into the same area and directed to watch the "Army of the National Liberation of South Vietnam" . . . punish the hamlet chief for supporting the GVN [Government of South Vietnam]. The twenty-six-year-old wife and eight-year-old daughter of the hamlet chief were placed approximately four meters directly in front of the hamlet chief by the VC. The hamlet chief was bound and two VC beat and kicked him for several minutes. At the conclusion of the beating, the VC directed him to kneel facing his wife and child. The hamlet chief pleaded for clemency while his wife cried to the VC to spare her husband's

⁶¹ Sam Schorr, as quoted in *ibid.*, 22.

⁶² William Hatton, as quoted in *ibid.*, 72.

⁶³ Michael McCusker, as quoted in *ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴ Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 21, 23.

⁶⁵ Robert G. Kaiser, "350 Hue VC Victims Given Mass Funeral: 350 Hue Victims of VC Reburied," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 1969, A1, A16; Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror*, 58–59.

⁶⁶ Author unknown, "Vietnam: The Photographs We're Never Asked For," *The National Review*, October 18, 1966, 1048.

life. An armed VC stepped in between the hamlet chief and his family and at a distance of less than two meters emptied a magazine of AK-50 . . . into the face and chest of the hamlet chief . . . While one VC held the wife of the hamlet chief, another VC using a butcher knife taken from the stall of a meat vendor in the hamlet, proceeded to slice the calf muscles away from the legs of the hamlet chief until the bones were exposed . . . After completing the mutilation of the body of the hamlet chief, the VC platoon leader . . . told the residents of the hamlet that GVN hamlet chiefs would be treated in the same manner. After this, the VC left the village.⁶⁷

Racism, Indoctrination, and the Lack of Legal Consequences

Background concepts not only facilitated killing, but also reinforced the cycle of violence. In Cold War America, the fear of communism was fueled by the political imagination. The containment policy of the Cold War was intertwined with the premises of the domino theory. In a military institution with a strict code of conformity, a narrowly perceived enemy helped to strengthen the esprit de corps. In America, communists were represented as Asian subhumans; “gooks” seemingly had a minor appreciation of life. Similarly, for the communists, Americans and South Vietnamese were not human beings, but puppet soldiers and invaders. Military training and propaganda reinforced racist prejudices. In such an extreme situation, which war always constitutes, racist prejudices flourished on both sides. Additionally, murders were almost never punished – the opposite seemed the case. All sentences from the twenty-two American servicemen who were convicted of premeditated murder of Vietnamese before March 1971 were drastically reduced on military appeal.⁶⁸ Soldiers found themselves in a situation that offered opportunities to decide who would live and who would die. Kenneth J. Campbell, a Marine corporal and forward artillery observer, stated before the Dellums Committee: I don’t know how many times we were told we have the power of life and death in our hands . . . It wasn’t a warning. We were supposed to be proud of it, and we were proud of it.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Archives and Special Collections Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, Quantico, Virginia, Folder: Wars: Vietnam-Viet Cong, Author unknown, Subject: Viet Cong Public Assassination and Mutilation of a Montagnard Hamlet Chief, date unknown, 2–3.

⁶⁸ Richard Halloran, “21 in Cases Like Calley’s Had Their Sentences Cut,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 1971, 8.

⁶⁹ Kenneth J. Campbell, as quoted in William Greider, “Atrocities Hearings Ended by Dellums,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1971, A3.

A vicious atmosphere was the consequence: A Vietnamese communist killed his sister, a girl 15 years old, for collaborating with U.S. Marines. In another instance, a father cut the tongue out of his wife and two children for sharing information with the Americans.⁷⁰ Similar atrocities were reported:

A village policeman was held in place while a VC gunman shot off his nose and fired bullets through his cheekbones so close to his eyes that they were reduced to bloody shreds. He later died from uncontrollable hemorrhages . . . A 20-year-old schoolteacher had knelt in a corner trying to protect herself with her arms while a VC flailed at her with a machete. She had been unsuccessful; the back of her head was cut so deeply that the brain was exposed. She died from brain damage and loss of blood.⁷¹

For the Viet Cong, collaborators were no longer seen as part of the population: The Viet Cong regarded them as deplorable beings that could be tortured and killed without consequences. Similarly, only William Calley was prosecuted after the massacre at My Lai. Therefore, many experts refer to an “erosion of military legal culture at the time of the Vietnam War.”⁷² Not much is known about whether the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army prosecuted perpetrators of war crimes. However, both fighting forces did not apply international humanitarian law during the war, and the assumption of a similar legal leniency after the war might not be farfetched. For example, during an attack on a family in Bach Loc during the early stages of the war, the Viet Cong hacked the father to death using knives, while the rest of his family could flee. During one night six weeks later, the same perpetrators came again and slashed the “widow in the back, arms, legs, breast and forehead” and stabbed the eleven-year-old child while the nine-year-old was beheaded.⁷³ Therefore, the suspicion seems appropriate that perpetrators on both sides were not adequately prosecuted and that accomplices and copycat criminals had an easy game.

Conclusion

The reasons for outbursts of excessive violence during the Vietnam War are manifold. The characteristics of an asymmetric war reinforced fear, hatred, and the want for revenge on both sides. Especially for the allied troops, an

⁷⁰ Hubbell, “The Blood-Red Hands of Ho Chi Minh,” 63–64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷² Greiner, “The March 1968 Massacre in My Lai 4 and My Khe 4.”

⁷³ Heller and Heller, “The Systematic Terror of the Viet Cong,” 12.

unpredictable enemy provoked a military doctrine that set wrong incentives and could be exploited in the field to kill without having to fear legal repercussions. This is not to suggest that the behavior of the other side was more humane. Situational factors that encouraged the radicalization of violence combined with background concepts such as racism and indoctrination led to abuse on both sides. In this situation, the fallback on military necessity as a justification for forbidden violence as well as the insistence on orders from above were constant apologies for committed atrocities. Part of the reason for blurring the boundaries between sanctioned (“normal”) warfare and excessive violence stemmed from the fact that the law of war was not designed for such an irregular conflict. In fact, the NLF rejected parts of the law of war from the beginning, interpreting the conflict primarily as an invasion as opposed to an international conflict, and hence not accepting the Third Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war. On the other side, allied troops were not able to enforce these laws, although on paper the rules of engagements looked “impeccable.”⁷⁴ As in previous irregular conflicts, the assumed weak side descended to a strategy where the means justified the ultimate goal. In doing so, the Viet Cong made a reign of terror part of its conduct of war, decapitating villagers, assassinating pacification workers and collaborators, and looting and leveling entire villages, as well as murdering American prisoners of war. The goal of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army was to enmesh allied troops in a long war, in an unfamiliar territory where the American firepower rested meaningless. The gravest war crime was committed in the old imperial city of Hue. But similar massacres, although smaller in comparison, took place during the entire Vietnam War, committed by both sides. Describing the massacre of My Lai, Jonathan Schell (1943–2014) remarked in 1969: “There can be no doubt that such an atrocity [as My Lai] was possible only because a number of other methods of killing civilians and destroying their villages had come to be the rule and not the exception in our conduct of the war.”⁷⁵ One GI spoke his mind in a letter to President Nixon written in May 1970: Many [American] soldiers told me of their buddies murdering, raping, and abusing of civilians – without provocation.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Telford Taylor, “Nuremberg in Son My,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 1970, 30.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Schell, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, December 20, 1969, 27.

⁷⁶ NA, RG 319, Records of the Army Staff, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (ODCSPER), Records of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, War Crimes Allegations Case Files, Box 7 Mittelstaedt Allegation through Marhoun-Anderson Allegation [Press Media], Folder: Hart Allegation, Letter from John Irvin Hart to President Richard Nixon, May, 01, 1970, 1.

Due to the fact that such excesses took place behind the front lines, this war is best characterized as one without fronts, and one that tended to produce pressure on soldiers that provoked assaults with boundless violence. However, atrocities could also be perpetrated against friendly soldiers. “Fragging” became a term that described the wounding or killing of one’s own officer using a fragmentation hand grenade, often because of perceived incompetence. Staff Sergeant Daniel S. Notley, one of the sharpest critics of the American conduct of war in Vietnam, testified after his deployment: “GIs are starting to vent their frustration on the institutions and the people that have frustrated them rather than on the Vietnamese people.”⁷⁷

Last but not least, attention should be drawn to a problem concerning sources. In most historical research on violence, only cases are described where violence eventually occurred. However, it seems difficult to evaluate why in other cases violence did not extend beyond the “normal” scale. It seems obvious, however, that excessive violence formed an integral part of the Vietnam War – a war where neither side owed anything to the other.

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⁷⁷ Daniel S. Notley, as quoted in The Citizens Commission of Inquiry, *The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam*, 192–193.

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