Revising a Course to Include US, Hmong, and Vietnamese Soldiers' Literary Reflections on the War

A Journey Started by the Words of a Student

A student, after my course was over and the student had graduated, stopped by just to say "hi."

The student enjoyed the class, they said, but they wanted to encourage me to talk about "the other side" of the war. I asked whether they had any suggestions. They talked about protest movements, Kent State, American popular music against the war.

It occurred to me, in that moment, that the student imagined that "both sides" of the Vietnam war included the hawks who sent our military into war and the hippies who protested it. Both sides of the war were inside the United States; the Vietnamese were not, for this student, one of the "sides."

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Or read "How Can You Not Shout, Now That the Whispering Is Done?" *Humanities* 2019, 8(4), 172; https://doi.org/10.3390/h8040172

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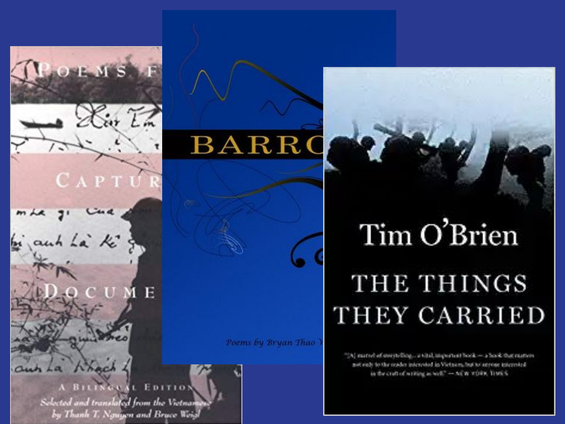

The American Sense of Enemyship, 1955-1975

American construction of the enemy in the North Vietnamese was energized by ***political ideology*** and by ***racist experience***.

Political ideology constructed the North Vietnamese as a proxy for Communism. The North Vietnamese posed no direct threat to the Americans; they had not invaded the United States, nor did they intend to do so. The threat they posed to the U.S., manifest in the "domino" theory, was indirect and a construct of Cold War propaganda. The North Vietnamese were constructed as enemies by political ideology, not by a real, felt threat to the American way of life. As the United States was fighting a war against Communism, the American soldiers were shooting at Communism by shooting at the North Vietnamese.

The lived experience of a guerilla war disoriented the soldiers; they ceased waiting to fire upon the Viet Cong and simply began shooting the Vietnamese. As Jean Paul Sartre noted in his work against the Vietnam war, "The armed forces of the United States torture and kill men, women and children in Vietnam because they are Vietnamese" [On Genocide, 82]. The guerilla nature of the war, in the end, eroded the ability of the American soldiers to determine which Vietnamese people were friend or foe.

Sarte gives a rich and violent description of the change in the behaviors of U.S. soldiers:

> [T]he racialism of the Yankee soldiers from Saigon to the 17th parallel has increased. The young Americans torture without repugnance, shooting at unarmed women for the pleasure of completing a hat-trick: they kick the wounded Vietnamese in the testicles; they cut off the ears of the dead for trophies. The officers are worst: a general was boasting in front of a Frenchman who testified at the Tribunal of hunting the Viet Cong from his helicopter and shooting them down in the rice fields. They were, of course, not NLF fighters, who know how to protect themselves, but peasants working in their rice fields. In these confused American minds the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese tend to become more and more indistinguishable. [81]

Sartre hammers the description home: "A common saying is 'The only good Vietnamese is a dead one', or, what comes to the same thing, 'Every dead Vietnamese is a Viet Cong'" [81]. At some point, for some soldiers, they ceased shooting at specific Vietnamese as proxies for Communism and started shooting at anyone who was not visibly American.

In terms of enemyship: for twenty years, more or less, the American soldiers of the Vietnam war fought Communism, or they fought the Vietnamese, as a racial category.

The North Vietnamese Sense of Enemyship, 1887–1975

The North Vietnamese sense of enemyship was radically different from the sense of the Americans. We will point to two salient features of the rhetorical and ideological construction of the enemy, two ways that the North Vietnamese experienced the enemy. First, the Vietnamese understood the war not as a war against the United States, but as the next phase in a century-long war against colonial powers of which the United States was one]. Second, the Vietnamese understood the war as a war to repel invaders, and their work as soldiers was to protect their nation, envisioned as their lover, from these invading forces.

For Vietnamese soldiers, the conflict did not begin with U.S. participation in the war in 1955. Rather, in the lived experience of some of its soldiers, the beginning of the war dated to 1946 (the first "Indochina war" against France). For others, the war began with the 1887 formal recognition of Vietnam as "French Indochina" [the moment when the Vietnamese lost control over their home]. Soldier and poet Duc Thanh tells us, in "In the Forest at Night," that he is "the son of the Vietnamese,/ under siege for a hundred years/ By the French and Americans" [Poems from Captured Documents, 45]. For Duc Thanh, the war is not not a war against the United States. It is most certainly not a war to advance Communism, as American propaganda advocated. Duc Thanh fought a war against colonial powers.

Huang Loc names his colonial enemies with rancor in "Condolence to a Friend." Writing from the Quang Tri campaign in 1972, he asks "Who took that fatal shot? / What gun hit the mark? / Please, sacred spirit, show me / The murderer, call out his name." The answer is cold and hard, and it makes clear the Vietnamese experience of the war: "He's an imperialist. / He's a colonialist. / He's a bandit" [Mountain River, 47]. The enemy is not once reducible to an American, a Yankee who must go home, because the American War, in the minds of its soldiers, was just one more manifestation of the century-long fight for freedom from the colonizers.

The enemy, in the mythic narrative of the Vietnamese soldiers, comes to attack the homeland whom the soldiers must defend as they would defend a lover. Nguyen Dinh Thi writes a poem as if addressed to a lover back home, but uses that form of address to explain his experience of war. In "Remembering," he notes, "I love you as I love our country, / In pain, hardship and with great passion. / Every step I take you are in my thoughts, / Every meal I eat, every night I sleep" [Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars, 15]. That passion is with him every day; it fuels his efforts in war.

Importantly, this love of country, imagined as a romantic love, is not idiosyncratic nor even particularly Vietnamese: "We'll fight all our lives for our love. / We love each other, and we are proud to be human" [15]. The impulse to defend a lover against an invader, after all, is human, not a byproduct of nationalism.

Again, to be clear, motivations for fighting in war are diverse; I offer here only a sample. The North Vietnamese sense of enemyship, as discussed here, entailed fighting the war to protect their nation, envisioned as their lover, from colonialism.

The Hmong Sense of Enemyship, 1910-1975

The Secret War, in Laos, complicates the diverse experience of enemyship in the Vietnam war further -- the Hmong brought their own stories to their experience of enemyship. The history of Hmong conflicts in Laos and Vietnam is fluid, as the Hmong struggle for self-determination against a backdrop of shifting colonial powers.

The Hmong had rebelled against the French colonial powers from 1910 to 1912 [in the conflict called "Mi Chang's rebellion"], and from 1918 to 1921 [called the "War of the Insane" by the French]. Both rebellions were suppressed by the French. In World War II, the French shifted from *enemy colonizer* to *ally*, as the Hmong sided with the French to push Japanese occupiers out.

After WWII, between 1946 and 1954, Hmong led by Touby Lyfoung resisted the North Vietnamese, while Hmong led by Faydang Lobliayao resisted French colonial rule. In both cases, the Hmong were fundamentally seeking autonomy. Touby Lyfoung believed that autonomy was better preserved by alliance with the French against the Communist North Vietnamese; Faydang Lobliayao believed that autonomy was better preserved by alliance with the North Vietnamese against the French.

When Vang Pao formed alliances with the United States, he was, in many ways, picking up Lyfoung's strategy, allying with the western colonial power against the Communist colonial power. In return, the U.S. airlifted roughly 40 tons of food per month to Hmong communities and funded new schools throughout the remote regions of Laos, training Hmong girls as nurses and medics to care for wounded soldiers and increasing Hmong literacy.

While Americans and North Vietnamese were "taking sides" against each other, the Hmong found that the war came to them. Lao poet Bryan Thao Worr's claim that "There were refugees/ Who to this day cannot explain why they were the enemy/ When the war came" ["The Last War Poem," *Bamboo among the Oaks,* 98] makes sense when we see the Hmong as participants in someone else's war narrative, rather than protagonists of their own. Hmong served as allies of the United States in fighting the Secret War, but they were, in many ways, fighting a different war than their American allies fought.

On the one hand, some Hmong saw the Americans as allies against Communism: Mai Der Vang asks "Do you think of your missing wife/ how the Pathet Lao dragged her/ naked, screaming, and bleeding/ by her long black hair/ deep into forest shadows" ["Dear Soldier of the Secret War," *Afterland*, 7]. Pathet Lao were a communist political movement in Laos; the Hmong were allies of the U.S. against Pathet Lao, and so against Communism, in the Secret War.

And yet, there was little affection for the Americans after the war: Mai Der Vang asks "Do you think of the American returning/ to the coffee cup,/ new linens / in a warm bed,/ pulling into the driveway" ["Dear Soldier of the Secret War," 7]. The Hmong sacrifices in the Vietnam war dwarfed American sacrifices. By war's end in 1975, nearly 40,000 Hmong soldiers had been killed or were missing in action -- totalling approximately one-fourth of all Hmong men and boys. For point of comparison, the US death total in Vietnam was about 58,000 when the total US population was 200,000,000. Hmong soldiers, many of whom were children when they were asked to bear arms, resented the Americans who left them behind.

Bryan Thao Worr tell us that, in retrospect, other soldiers [not the Viet Cong, nor even the Americans who left them behind in loss] were not the real enemy of the Hmong. Onstead, the Hmong people "are victims of fat tigers and foreign policy" ["The Last War Poem," 98]. In this way, Hmong experience of the war and of enemyship was their own.