

Atoning for Vietnam

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Three photographs in particular have come to define the decade-and-a-half-long U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. They show the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk, burnt children in tears as they flee an aerial napalm attack, and the Saigon police chief executing a captive in the street. In a journalistic style as powerful as those iconic photographs, Nick Turse, in a new history of the Vietnam War, examines the decisions and policies that led to that disaster. *Kill Anything That Moves*, which just won a 2014 American Book Award, is a work of compassion and fury that deserves to be in every public library.

Unlike standard histories of the Vietnam War that dwell on diplomatic overtures, military tactics, and the grave deliberations of political leaders, *Kill Anything That Moves* shows how American atrocities in Vietnam came to happen. First, drill instructors subjected recruits to shock, deprivation, humiliation, and stress in order to turn them into programmed killers who saw Vietnamese as subhuman *gooks* (26-28, 39). Second, the U.S. military designated vast stretches of Vietnam as “free-fire zones” where, according to a U.S. Senate study, three hundred thousand Vietnamese civilians would be killed by 1968 (59-60). Third, officers and soldiers were motivated to kill since higher body counts earned them more beer, food, medals, vacation time, and chances of survival (44-45). Fourth, with rare exceptions, American soldiers could not communicate in Vietnamese, a language with six tones that varied in pitch and length (36). Finally, the U.S. military routinely covered up war crime allegations from whistleblowers, who were ostracized, injured, or even murdered by fellow soldiers (38).

The book title comes from Captain Ernest Medina’s response to a soldier who asked whether the captain’s order to kill everyone in the village of My Lai included women and children. Although publicity of the My Lai massacre helped turn public opinion in the United States against the Vietnam War, other large massacres in Vietnam, as Turse explains, went unnoticed for lack of documentation and investigation. That the My Lai massacre became known at all was largely due to the persistence of a few courageous individuals: Ron Ridenhour, a young Vietnam veteran who collected testimony from witnesses to the massacre, Ron Haerberle who took photos of the massacre that were later published in *Life*, and Seymour Hersh whose articles broke the story (3-4).

Turse argues that the war would have been averted, and hundreds of billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars saved, had the United States not sabotaged Vietnam’s quest for independence. After World War II, the United States backed the French occupation of Indochina with weapons and funds, eventually covering 80 percent of France’s war costs in Indochina. After defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French agreed to a ceasefire and to a division of North and South Vietnam pending reunification after elections to be held in two years. Those elections never took place because the United States feared victory by Ho Chi Minh who had led the Vietnamese independence struggle both against the Japanese and the French (7-8).

The ensuing war resulted in 3.8 million deaths, mostly civilian, according to an estimate by researchers at Harvard Medical School and the University of Washington (13). U.S. soldiers routinely destroyed Vietnamese villages and massacred peasants in what the military euphemistically termed “rural pacification.” Corporal Kenneth Ransbottom describes how he ordered his engineers to blow up a bunker full of screaming babies and terrified Vietnamese women and old men, some of whom “were down on their knees like they were praying to Buddha” (113-114). Turse highlights the complicity of Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington in crafting brutal methods to subjugate the Vietnamese people. Huntington advocated forcing peasants out of villages

and into slums so as to deny the Viet Cong popular support in the countryside (145-146).

During Operation Speedy Express, the 9th Infantry Division reported killing 10,899 enemy soldiers but recovered only 748 weapons, one of the many statistics that Turse cites to show that the murder of civilians in Vietnam “was neither accidental nor unforeseeable” (248-249). Among the chilling cases that Turse culls from official documents and eyewitness testimony is one in which an officer “captured two unarmed and unidentified Vietnamese males, estimated ages 2-3 and 7-8 years, ... and killed them for no reason” (15).

In another incident, American soldiers killed ten Vietnamese civilians in an ambush. An investigation found that the dead, who included women and children, had been gathering limes and bamboo shoots shortly before they were shot. No weapons were found on them and no one was punished or held responsible for their murder (18-19).

U.S. soldiers engaged in sadistic games in Vietnam, sometimes deliberately swerving their vehicles to run over Vietnamese in a game that some referred to as “gook hockey” (156-157). The U.S. soldiers who carried out this kind of mayhem were in Vietnam ostensibly for the protection of the Vietnamese people. Many of the worst atrocities were carried out with chemical weapons:

The jellied incendiary napalm, engineered to stick to clothes and skin, had been modified to blaze better and longer than its World War II-era variant. An estimated 400,000 tons of it were dropped in Southeast Asia, killing most of those unfortunate enough to be splashed with it. Thirty-five percent of victims died within fifteen to twenty minutes, according to one study. Another found that 62 percent died before their wounds healed. For those not asphyxiated or consumed by fire, the result could be a living death. Noses and lips, nipples and eyelids would be burned off or melted away, while charred skin would flake off as a chemical-scented powder (83).

Chemical weapons wrought ecological havoc on Vietnam. Turse notes that the U.S. military burned or bulldozed vast areas of forest in Vietnam, and sprayed over 70 million liters of herbicides to destroy vegetation (94-96). A quarter of the dioxin from those herbicides, including Agent Orange, is still detectable today in the soil and in animal tissue (“Agent” 15-16). Roughly three million Vietnamese suffer from the effects of chemical defoliants, which include cancer and birth defects (Cohn and Mirer).

Turse’s lasting achievement is to have brought to public awareness several episodes of mass slaughter worthy of remembrance alongside the My Lai massacre. Those episodes took place in villages that bear such names as Thuy Bo, Phu Nhuan, and Lang Vei. Turse, who does not waste a word in this well-written book, devotes eight lines to the names of the villagers killed at Phi Phu, prompting us to imagine the lives to whom those names belonged, lives cut short by the actions of the U.S. military.

In his afterword to the 2014 edition, Turse recalls that many veterans contacted him in the year after the first edition. One marine wrote, “I saw daily the horrors that you have documented. ... The only way to truly end the Vietnam War is to make amends. Telling the full story of the war is an important step forward” (267). In this regard, *Kill Anything That Moves* is an act of atonement for the Vietnam War. The unspeakable sadness that it conveys is deepened by the knowledge that U.S. foreign policy remains militaristic, shortsighted, and bent on world domination.

References

“Agent Orange Victims,” *Earth Island Journal* (17.1, Spring 2002), 15-16.

Marjorie Cohn and Jeanne Mirer, "The Struggle Continues: Seeking Compensation for Vietnamese Agent Orange Victims, 52 Years On," *Commondreams* (Aug. 10, 2013, accessed Aug. 12, 2014).