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# North Vietnamese Women in War: Redefining Victory and Gender Roles

KALI DEVARENNES

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich said it best, “Well behaved women seldom make history.”<sup>1</sup> The role of women in many societies has often been overlooked. Typically, women were expected to be housewives, and to be emotional and submissive to men. Women across the world have challenged gender norms and defied gender discrimination. During the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese women played prominent roles, although their contributions often went unrecognized. The evidence and accounts within this paper demonstrate their contributions, as well as their strength and fortitude. Not only did they serve as doctors and nurses, but they fought as fierce warriors who endured the hardships of war equivalent to their male counterparts.

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1 Lavoie, Amy. “Ulrich Explains that Well Behaved Women Should Make History.” *The Harvard Gazette*, September 20, 2007, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/09/ulrich-explains-that-well-behaved-women-should-make-history/>.

This essay explores the various responsibilities of North Vietnamese females in the war and discusses their experiences. Despite previous assumptions and standards about the expectations of North Vietnamese women, their actions in the Vietnam War highlight the transformation of traditional gender roles.

While the participation of North Vietnamese women in war is known in Vietnam, it is unevenly recognized and constitutes a sort of hidden history in American understandings of the war. The harshness of the Vietnam War was a painful reality for the United States and, perhaps unsurprisingly, recognizing North Vietnamese women for their war efforts was not at the forefront for Americans. Because of these circumstances, there is a major problem accessing resources that documented these experiences. However, the sources within this paper provide details that reveal the inspiring contributions North Vietnamese women made to the war. From the Vietnamese Trung sisters fighting against China in 40 A.D. to the warriors who served in the Vietnam War, these women played an integral part in redefining gender roles.<sup>2</sup> This essay will also include the perspective of then twenty-five year old North Vietnamese physician, Dr. Dang Thuy Tram. However, the other sources within this paper will focus on the women who had military roles, which is the occupation that is most overlooked, yet most intriguing.

With this in mind, it is beneficial to understand what led to the involvement of North Vietnamese females in the Vietnam War.

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2 Jessica M., Frazier, "Collaborative Efforts to End the War in Viet Nam: The Interactions of Women Strike for Peace, the Vietnamese Women's Union, and the Women's Union of Liberation, 1965-1968," *Peace & Change* 37, no. 3: 354, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.2012.00754.x.

After the end of French colonial rule in Vietnam, several countries attended the 1954 Geneva Conference to reach an agreement to split Vietnam at the 17th parallel into a North and South and to hold nationwide free elections.<sup>3</sup> The democratic elections failed to take place due to the U.S. fear of Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party winning the election.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the United States took the matter into its own hands. The U.S. initially had a background role in the war and let the North and South do most of the fighting on their own, but they supported the success of the South.<sup>5</sup> However, in 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred, which dragged the U.S. into total war against North Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> There were several misconceptions between the North Vietnamese and the U.S. regarding this incident. Nevertheless, U.S. attacks against the North rapidly ensued.<sup>7</sup> By 1965, the U.S. and the North were engaged in a brutal, bloody war.

As a result, Ho Chi Minh saw the need for women and the

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3 Pierre, Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: a Revisionist Critique," *Cold War History* 11, no. 2 (May 2011): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740903244934>.

4 Jessica M., Frazier, "Collaborative Efforts to End the War in Viet Nam: The Interactions of Women Strike for Peace, the Vietnamese Women's Union, and the Women's Union of Liberation, 1965-1968," *Peace & Change* 37, no. 3: 340, [doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.2012.00754.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.2012.00754.x).

5 Marolda, Edward J. "Grand Delusion: U.S. Strategy and the Tonkin Gulf Incident." *Naval History* 28, no.3 (August 2014): 25, <http://search.ebsco-host.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&N=96921995&site=ehost-live>.

6 Ibid.

7 Marolda, Edward J. "Grand Delusion: U.S. Strategy and the Tonkin Gulf Incident." *Naval History* 28, no.3 (August 2014): 26, <http://search.ebsco-host.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&N=96921995&site=ehost-live>.

important role they could play in the war effort. He demanded that Vietnamese women participate in the war and that they uphold three responsibilities: “continue production when men went into the army so that the people would be fed, to run family affairs and care for their children, and to fight the enemy when necessary.”<sup>8</sup> Minh knew that the involvement of females in the war would serve as inspiring propaganda to the public when his male soldiers became deflated.<sup>9</sup> However, the new roles provided by Minh prompted women to embrace the ideal of serving their country and prove that they could perform with the same standards expected of men. They in turn expressed themselves in a fierce and tireless manner by transforming into combative soldiers.

During the Vietnam war, these North Vietnamese women who actively participated in battle were known as the long-haired warriors. They asserted that “when war comes, even women have to fight,” which was a phrase they carried with them throughout the war.<sup>10</sup> For decades, these women would never have considered playing active combat roles. In the past, Vietnamese women were beat for not being submissive and were forced to stay at home.<sup>11</sup> However, the long-haired warriors redefined these standards in the war. They endured horrific methods of torture including sticks being shoved

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8 Sandra C. Taylor, “The Long-Haired Warriors,” In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.), 172.

9 Ibid.

10 Sandra C. Taylor, “The Long-Haired Warriors,” In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.), 167.

11 Ibid, 169.

underneath their fingernails and electric shock to their sexual organs.<sup>12</sup> What these women had to endure challenged the traditional view of Vietnamese womanhood.<sup>13</sup> They were no longer subjected to the constraints of domesticated life and embraced their new roles as fighters. The long-haired warriors tackled responsibilities that were unheard of for women, especially at that time. A few of their jobs included “camouflaging anti-aircraft guns, [and] supplying clothing, food, and drink to the battlefield.” They were also prepared to defend villagers from the Americans.<sup>14</sup> Through these actions alone they redefined what it meant to be a strong, empowering woman. They overcame torture and discrimination while proving their ability to fight, actions which demonstrated the drastic shift in gender roles.

On the other hand, while North Vietnamese women had a strong presence in the military, some Vietnamese men did not support this. Even though Ho Chi Minh stressed the importance of these females in war, many of the male soldiers believed that they should remain at home and continue to have domestic roles such as cleaning, farming, and taking care of children.<sup>15</sup> This perception of North Vietnamese women did not prevent Minh from utilizing them to his advantage.

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12 Sandra C. Taylor, “The Long-Haired Warriors,” In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.), 172.

13 Jessica M., Frazier, “Collaborative Efforts to End the War in Viet Nam: The Interactions of Women Strike for Peace, the Vietnamese Women’s Union, and the Women’s Union of Liberation, 1965-1968,” *Peace & Change* 37, no. 3: 342, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.2012.00754.x.

14 Sandra C. Taylor, “The Long-Haired Warriors,” In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.), 179.

15 *Ibid.*, 174.

The women who fought for the National Liberation Front wore all black and were expertly trained to use a variety of weapons.<sup>16</sup> Using these weapons was new to North Vietnamese females, but it broke the barrier of men being the only combatants capable of operating weaponry. Many of these women were young, usually in their teens or early twenties, but could still carry heavy items, shoot large guns and mortars, and make bombs (Fig.1). Photographs of women much like the one depicted in Fig. 1 circulated the globe and encouraged others to join the revolution.<sup>17</sup> Vietnamese women within the National Liberation Front used this as an opportunity to promote ideas of freedom from their traditional roles.



Fig.1: North Vietnamese Women Learning to Use a Machine Gun. Digital Image. New York Times. June 6, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/opinion/vietnam-war-women-soldiers.html>.

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16 Sandra C. Taylor, “The Long-Haired Warriors,” In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.), 179.

17 Sandra C. Taylor, “The Long-Haired Warriors,” In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.), 173.

In addition to the commitment of these fearless women serving in the war as soldiers, other women aided the North off the battlefields. Dr. Tram's memoir *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* emphasized the role of North Vietnamese women in the medical field. This memoir reflected Tram's experiences in 1968 when she worked as a female doctor along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in South Vietnam, which was constructed largely by North Vietnamese women.<sup>18</sup> Tram left her hometown of Hanoi to aid wounded soldiers. She witnessed soldiers with severed spines, amputated limbs, punctured organs, and many more horrific injuries. Perhaps the most tragic and gruesome encounter she had was on July 29, 1969, when an American-planted phosphorus bomb burned a Vietnamese soldier to the point where his skin slowly fell to the floor in crisp chunks, and his eyes were black holes.<sup>19</sup> She also treated one of her fellow nurses, who was hit by shrapnel while working. The mortar paralyzed him as the nerves in his spine were destroyed immediately.<sup>20</sup> Seeing her patients' conditions fueled her hatred of war and of the Americans, but she continued to overcome the adversities.<sup>21</sup> While her accounts in her memoir show a very different role from the long-haired warriors, her actions were equally as important to the revolution. As a doctor, she expressed her support for the National Liberation Front and knew that it was her duty to save as many individuals as she could. She experienced some of the worst parts of the war, which revealed that

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18 Ibid, 171.

19 Dang Thuy Tram, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 142.

20 Ibid, 38.

21 Ibid, 39.

women were no longer shielded from realities of war long associated with men.

Similarly, Le Thi Dau, a nurse for the National Liberation Front, joined the revolution at only fifteen years of age and witnessed many women in the war who suffered from chronic depression.<sup>22</sup> Although Dau also experienced a very tense environment similar to Tram, she also claimed that serving as a nurse was often exciting and gave her rushes of adrenaline.<sup>23</sup> These women embraced their roles and felt liberated from their domesticated lives. Whereas they were brought up to be submissive and take care of the home, their participation in battle allowed them to express themselves in ways they had never experienced. Although Dau and Tram were under a lot of pressure, they were able to overcome countless obstacles and persevered through the worst conditions. The encounters they faced are hard to process, but it allows for reflection and appreciation for these North Vietnamese women, regardless of their roles in the revolution. Because Tram worked in several places throughout the war, since her clinics were repeatedly destroyed by American forces, she was often in the heart of battle alongside other Vietnamese female fighters. In one of her diary entries, she revealed how late at night she saw American “jet planes drop bombs all over the hamlet...and [fire] streams of bullets down onto the battlefield.”<sup>24</sup> Vietnamese women in the war had to be prepared for anything no matter what their role was.

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22 Michael Hunt, *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 176.

23 Ibid.

24 Dang Thuy Tram, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 122.

Whether it was Tram and other nurses treating patients or the long-haired warriors operating gunners, they knew they had to endure the stresses of war and prove they could handle the same responsibilities given to men.

On June 22, 1970, U.S. soldiers heard faint noises of a radio and spotted Tram walking and killed her instantly; however, soldiers discovered her diary amidst the other documents at the camp.<sup>25</sup> In April 2005, when the military was sifting through military records to burn, Sergeant Nguyen Trung Hieu stopped his comrade Fred from throwing Tram's diary into the fire, as he claimed that Tram's diary "[had] fire in it already."<sup>26</sup> This excerpt alone represents Tram's values and her dedication to the war. Her diary was eventually published and allowed individuals to see what kind of roles North Vietnamese women had in the war. While her recollection of events was geared towards the encroachment of America on Vietnam, her detailed experiences revealed how North Vietnamese women were crucial to the war effort despite previous assumptions about their capabilities.

Additionally, many North Vietnamese women were so dedicated to the war that they often started as nurses and transferred to the military after. For example, Mrs. Hoang Thi Khanh, the Vice President of Vietnam's General Confederation of Labor, started as a nurse in the Vietnam War and eventually became part of the special forces as an undercover agent.<sup>27</sup>

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25 Ibid, 225.

26 Dang Thuy Tram, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 225.

27 Sandra C. Taylor, "The Long-Haired Warriors," In the *War that Never Ends*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014),

After the National Liberation Front underwent heavy losses in the Tet Offensive, Khanh helped recruit women to form a guerilla force that would contribute to the revolution.<sup>28</sup> She wanted women present because she knew they had the capability to serve and protect their country. Many of them were eager to leave their home and fight for a cause, while others wanted peace and reunification with their families.<sup>29</sup> Khan's job as a nurse did not end her involvement in the war as she continued to fight for her country. She proved that North Vietnamese women could expand on their role in society and redefine traditional roles that were thoroughly ingrained.

Overall, the roles of North Vietnamese women in the Vietnam War have not been given as much attention as deserved. This paper provides a new perspective on not only these women but on how gender roles immensely transformed during this period. Notably, there was a lack of focus on North Vietnamese women in war, but Ho Chi Minh was confident in his implementation of women in the revolution. The fact that Minh believed in North Vietnamese women to take on several new, unfamiliar roles should be enough to understand their importance. Women during this period were warriors and educated doctors and nurses that overcame adversity. Understanding their history is an important tool to use when gaining perspective on gender roles. Women and feminist groups today can use the history of North Vietnamese women as a platform for defying traditional gender roles and the treatment of women. Including

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176.

28 Ibid.

29 Michael Hunt, *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 175.

the experiences of Vietnamese women will allow others to consider other perspectives and divert from stereotypical roles. Understanding other countries and cultures and how their actions affected societal change promotes diversity and inclusion. Ultimately, North Vietnamese women proved that gender roles would not define them during a period in history fraught with division.

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