

Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution

(1999) -- by Sandra C. Taylor

“Long-haired warrior” . . . “was later applied to all the women of the southern resistance by Ho Chi Minh himself.”

“To Westerners, these women appear to be victims, lonely, aged before their time, living in poverty. They have not achieved political power, and their place in the family is much the same as before.” [Cf. *Two Cakes Fit for a King* here and throughout excerpts]

Women’s role in the war: “She took responsibility for her household and raised her children, she carried on production so the soldiers could be fed, and she fought in place of her husband when he went off to war. These dicta were practiced more commonly in the North than in the South because everyone was mobilized there for the war against the Americans. . . . The three responsibilities grew out of the words of Ho Chi Minh, who exhorted his followers: ‘Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom,’ a slogan still visible on billboards in Vietnam in 1991.”

“Although peasant women cultivated and harvested paddy rice and raised farm animals, these women were not the traditional passive, religious wives—timid in public, lacking in social consciousness, and, even if oppressed, more used to enduring than fighting back. They followed the ‘three obediences’ of Confucius, obeying first the father, then the husband, then the oldest son. They observed filial piety, honoring their ancestors, their parents when they were children, their husband’s ancestors after they married. How could such women go to war?” “[M]any became fighters for liberation because it was a family tradition. . . . to them, the Americans were successors to the French” “the Communist Party gave the resistance an ideology, an interpretation of history that justified people’s suffering and enabled them to see victory as inevitable, however long that might take.” “Since 1930, party doctrine had encouraged women to believe that there was a place in the Party hierarchy for them, that they could be part of the government, and that they would not be tied to the home and the demands of husband and oppressive mother-in-law.” “Ho had spoken informally of an end to arranged marriages and of the opportunity for women to learn to read, study, participate in politics, and be truly men’s equals. Northern Communist women still remembered his words in 1994.” “This charismatic leader provided them with the determination to survive torture and imprisonment in the belief that victory would soon be theirs. He was the god of their civil religion, the image of whom they burned incense, a man worthy of residing on the shrine to their ancestors. . . . Ho’s charisma stimulated them. His austere life of sacrifice was an inspiration, a model for their own.”

“The tasks they could undertake during wartime provided them with independent lives: moving about freely as liaisons, working as propagandists, and proselytizing for the Party. The one thing that could be promised but not delivered on was true equality, the opportunity to take positions at the top of the political order.”

The Vietnamese today remember the Truong sisters of C.E. 40 (who led armies before committing suicide when the Chinese returned) because they “displayed traditional Vietnamese values of courage and resistance—despite a tradition of female subservience.”

“French conquest lowered women’s status below what it had been under the Vietnamese dynasties. Women were ‘slaves of slaves,’ subordinate to their husbands, who were, in turn, chattels of the French.” [cf. *The Quiet American*]

“As the French war expanded, women played an increasingly large role. . . . Political activism was the primary assignment of women in the resistance, and they learned how to oppose the enemy through covert actions, liaisons, and propaganda.” “ [I]n 1945 the first all-woman guerrilla unit was formed” “According to Vietnamese sources, two-thirds of these laborers [at Dien Bien Phu] – the *dan cong*, or civil porters – were women. They were local people who could return to their villages when their duties were over.” [Cf. *Battle for Dien Bien Phu*]

Ho Thi Bi “reluctantly gave up her [three] children to be raised by her grandmother, knowing that their crying would give away her troops’ location. . . . To break Ho Thi Bi’s will, the enemy captured and killed her husband and her younger brother, and at the same time her youngest child died. . . . But she had to ‘obey Uncle Ho since she knew she was a daughter of the Vietnamese nation and had a duty to obey the nation’s tasks”

“Women who were from families that supported the French or who were Roman Catholic, lived traditional lives, unlike the revolutionaries, and they observed roles appropriate for Vietnamese womanhood far different from those of the radicals.”

“Some 1 million women had participated in the anti-French resistance.”

“If women were compelled to fight [in the 1950s] by the presence of foreign invaders, people responded with [a] . . . saying: ‘If the country is invaded by the enemy, the family will be destroyed.’ The image of the fighting woman struggling to save her family and the fatherland was a familiar one.”

“Among the founders [of the NLF, National Liberation Front] were two women: Nguyen Thi Dinh and Duong Quynh Hoa.” “More than 30 percent of the NLF cadres were women”

“Not all peasant women approved of the way the NLF women had become involved in political activities – they talked ‘manly talk,’ which dealt with fighting, struggle, and politics, not home and children. The activists lived with male cadres, and they used jargon that the average peasant did not understand.”

“Women did not have to be Party members to work with the women’s [resistance] associations. . . . But women – young girls or old women – would hear the same message as Party members: hate the enemy, drive out the foreign aggressors, protect and save the fatherland.”

“‘mother of soldiers’ . . . These women provided for soldiers who were passing through their villages by acting as surrogate mothers.”

“a common phrase: that her actions were for her parents, husband, and children, and that her suffering had been justified.”

“One woman lost her husband, her father, three brothers and sisters, and her son. She did marry again, but her second husband also was killed.”

“The Heroic Mothers [a title/honor bestowed by the Party] had to have lost three sons or more”

“Ancestor worship—honoring the family shrine and the husband’s image—was of critical importance in proving their loyalty beyond the grave. Many of these families had maintained a tradition of resistance.”

“Their wartime activities reflected traditional roles women played, yet went beyond them. “

“Those who survived, in itself a feat in this area of great violence, maintained that they did not regret what they had suffered for the cause. They had achieved what they had fought for: liberation and independence from foreign oppression.”

“Women were also recruited by promises that a new order would care for their personal needs, strengthen their traditional roles, and, indeed, free them from obligations to their mothers-in-law.”

“Women joined the NLF for reasons that stemmed from Vietnamese history, tradition, and the contemporary situation. . . . One does not read of young women defying their fathers or husbands to join the Front.”

“The second important consideration was the profound influence of Ho Chi Minh had among the peasants. . . . [T]he believed that following him could bring independence to their country.”

“Requirements for joining were simple: any female, sixteen years of age and willing to cooperate in the activities of the association, was eligible.”

“The female cadres aroused political consciousness by reminding women about how they were exploited”

“[B]y 1965, the NLF claimed more than 1 million women among its members, and they were an integral part of the revolution.”

“As the war progressed, women increasingly participated in militia and guerrilla units.”

“At the beginning of the American conflict, women were ordered to follow the ‘three-pronged attack’: spreading propaganda and recruiting, performing support services to the NLF. And harassing the ARVN and police. In addition, the women were to help transform their home areas into so-called fighting villages or combat townships, surrounded by bamboo spikes, with traps in which sharpened stakes disabled the unwary enemy.”

“As the war increased in violence, revenge for past brutality encouraged more people to take part.” “Many Vietnamese, despite the attraction of Communist ideology and idealism, fought for vengeance”

“The elderly, even if they did support the Front, were often horrified that the girls would leave home to work among men, acting ‘without care or caution,’ not like traditional young women. Old women feared the breakdown in morals among the young, who would be living with others of the opposite sex Yet their parents had to encourage them to participate or risk being labeled as reactionaries.”

It’s unclear where the term “long-haired warriors” originated.

“[T]he Front even set up a ‘schedule of awards for “American-killing units” and individual “American-killers” .”

Nguyen Thi Luong “had to think of a disguise so that she would not be suspect if she was detained. Her way, that of a ‘white-haired woman,’ was to pretend to be mad. When she was stopped by enemy soldiers and told

to eat dog feces to prove that she was crazy, she did so. She went without any clothes except for a sash around her waist in which she hid the messages. And she slept, unclothed, in the dirt. Soon she could freely enter the American military base, where she begged. There, she obtained information on troop movements from sympathetic South Vietnamese soldiers. In carrying out this ploy for five years, . . . her disguise served her well. Even the doctor who examined her concluded that she was crazy. . . . The only thing that almost broke her spirit was the news of her son's death, which she received two years after he died. But she swore that she would get revenge, so she repressed her tears and worked twice as hard, doing his work as well as her own."

"The soldiers of the Front were divided into main forces, local forces, and guerrillas, and the third category was most suited to women because they could 'be a soldier when the enemy comes and a civilian when he leaves.'"

Vo Thi Mo "observed three Americans sitting down, eating snacks, and sharing photographs. The soldiers became very emotional and even started crying. Mo was stunned by this; perhaps they, too, were human. Although she would have received the Victory Medal Class One if she had killed them, she could not bring herself to do it. She was the subject of a Party inquiry as a result, but was not punished."

"By 1970, women not only were organized, but had acquired weapons and knew how to use them. They remained a minority of the . . . NLF, but they posed a problem for their enemy by their very existence. Guerrillas were always hard to identify, since the men did not wear uniforms or behave as traditional soldiers did, but women guerrillas were even more unusual and more difficult to identify."

"The Party doctrine of 'emulating heroines' led to the honoring of specific women and units. Some women were awarded medals, and they were often publicized in the Party newspaper or proselytizing documents"

"Young women in their late teens undertook a variety of tasks. Those young women who transported goods carried out heavy physical labor After some months, these teenagers, whose weight was probably not even 100 pounds, could carry that much or more."

IN THE NORTH:

"Women in urban and rural areas of the North lived traditional lives, more bound to Confucian strictures than their southern sisters because they had absorbed more Confucian influence."

"They helped soldiers hide from the bombs, gave them medical assistance, collected baskets of unexploded bombs on rice fields, destroyed slow-exploding bombs, and served on ferries to transport soldiers across the rivers while they were attacked by bombs and shells and torpedo boats nearby. . . . Women were formed into female militia units, to be in charge of defending bridges and roads, shooting at planes, and fighting South Vietnamese Rangers near the boundary of North and South. . . . Although they were not permitted to go south until 1966, women did work in transportation teams to carry food supplies as far as they were allowed to travel, hauling ammunition and weapons as well. . . . Altogether, women became 60 to 80 percent of the workforce in the North, laboring in the fields, factories, and offices. . . . Since the North was a society fighting a total war, all hands were needed. When they were old enough, these women were armed and ready to defend their land."

“Thousands of women and girls labored on the [Ho Chi Minh] trail, widening and repairing it and making detours when necessary. . . . Sixteen-year-old Tran Thi Truyen carried a sixty-pound pack and hiked for thirty days down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the rainy season. She nursed the wounded in a PAVN hospital . . . and helped construct an underground surgery unit with a thatched hut on top to sleep in.”

“Women rarely traveled south on the trail, unless they were in the army, engaged in nursing duties, or maintaining the trail.”

“[N]orthern women did not live among the enemy, as the women of the NLF did. Hence they were not subject to torture, and few women, even those who achieved military distinction in the PAVN, were known outside the North.”

CONCLUSION:

“The women of the NLF . . . often knew little of communist ideology, but they had experienced oppression on a personal level. They . . . came to loath the Americans because they were foreigners, outsiders, who sought to impose an alien belief system and culture on them. . . . Some did indeed venerate ho Chi Minh, while for others fear of bombing, revenge for the deaths of those they loved, and hatred of the corrupt, venal, and American-sponsored Saigon government and its military establishment was enough.”

“In the most basic ways, the lot of the Vietnamese woman did not change [after the war]. She was mother and wife and worked in the rice paddies or office or factory. Since she was poorly educated, if at all, her children also lacked quality education. . . . As usual, the woman was held to a standard of absolute fidelity, while the man could do as he pleased. . . . Wives were also oppressed by their mothers-in-law