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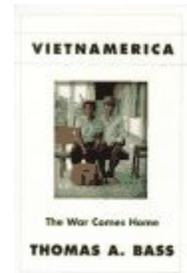
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas A. Bass. *Vietnam: The War Comes Home*. New York: Soho Press, 1996. 278 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56947-050-3.

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The Dust of Life

In this powerful, moving, and intensely disturbing book, Thomas Bass (who is currently Scholar-in-Residence at Hamilton College) has described what might be considered the last battle of the Vietnam War. This battle was not fought in the rice paddies and jungles, but instead took place in the often Byzantine and almost always cynical bureaucracies of the United States and Vietnam. In place of the wholesale slaughter of the Vietnam War, the casualties of this battle are condemned to live in a social limbo. In the end, however, the result is much the same: it is a battle in which there are no true winners.

In *Vietnam*, Bass has focused on the people who have come to be known in Vietnam as *bui doi* (the dust of life): the thousands of Amerasians (some estimates range as high as 200,000), fathered by U.S. servicemen and various government officials during the long Vietnam War. Bass addresses some simple and direct questions: What happened to the Amerasians left behind in Vietnam? Why were so few allowed to leave Vietnam after the war? Why was the U.S. government so lethargic in arguing for their release? What was the impact of the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act, and how many Amerasians came to America under its auspices? And finally, what has become of the thousands of Amerasians who came to the United States in the late-1980s and early-1990s?

Abandoned when their American fathers left Vietnam, the Amerasians have also largely been abandoned

by their fellow Vietnamese. Often refused schooling, jobs, and other basic rights and necessities, they were marginalized and stigmatized. Many turned to petty thievery and begging for their survival. Some clung to the hope that one day they would be free to leave Vietnam, travel to America, and be reunited with their fathers.

According to Bass, that was a slim hope, at best. Even with the establishment of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) through the efforts of forty countries acting through the United Nations in 1980 (described by Bass as “an effort to turn Vietnamese boat people into airplane refugees” (p. 3), the number of Amerasians who could take advantage of the program was small. Bass allots equal blame to Vietnamese officials, who he accuses of nothing less than “bureaucratic thuggery” in dealing with Amerasians who try and leave the country (p. 27), and to U.S. officials from the Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, claiming that, “Virtually everything done to help Amerasians leave Vietnam has been accomplished in spite of State Department efforts to block these moves” (p. 35). From the Vietnamese perspective, several factors have encouraged a less than humanitarian stance toward the Amerasians: the officials routinely expect bribes, and the Amerasians usually cannot afford this; the Amerasians almost never have complete identification records, as birth certificates have been lost or destroyed and family members, ashamed of them, have often lied about their real mothers and fa-

thers; the Vietnamese officials see the Amerasians as, at worst, traitors, and, at best, living symbols of the U.S. rape of Vietnam. On the U.S. side, things are a bit more complicated. The Amerasians are viewed as embarrassing reminders of an ugly and sordid episode in American history and INS officials prefer to err on the side of bureaucratic efficiency rather than human compassion in considering the applications of Amerasians. All of these, however, should not have been irremediable problems. As Bass notes, the irony is that, at least in public, the Americans claimed that they wanted to facilitate the transfer of the Amerasians to America, and the Vietnamese indicated that they wanted to get rid of the Amerasians. (And why not? According to Bass, the United States was paying the Vietnamese government \$80 for every Vietnamese who left under the auspices of the ODP—\$20 for medical exams and \$56 for “administrative support”.) Yet, the Department of State chose to play politics with the issue, using the Amerasians as “‘bargaining chips’” in an effort to both punish and wring concessions from the Vietnamese government (p. 40). The result: “While America obsessed about recovering the bones of its dead soldiers, the *living* American prisoners in Asia languished in bureaucratic limbo” (p. 35).

Things brightened a bit in 1987 when, due to the efforts of a variety of voluntary relief and humanitarian organizations, the Amerasian Homecoming Act (AHA) was passed (which one observer refers to as the “biggest paternity settlement in history” [p. 111]). With this, a good deal of the red-tape jungle was removed; all an Amerasian needed to prove was that he or she was the child of an American, and this could be accomplished in a variety of ways (sometimes as simple as showing their faces to interviewers). In the next few years, 25,000 Amerasians (along with 60,000 “relatives”) were flown out of Vietnam, first to camps in the Philippines for further processing, and then, for most, on to the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees in Utica, New York for language training and job counseling.

In practice, however, the AHA was fraught with bureaucratic bungling and cruelty. Proving their American paternity was not as easy for the Amerasians as might be imagined, and thousands who did not look “American” enough for U.S. officials or who had little if any documentary evidence to support their claims were denied exit from Vietnam. Even those who “passed” must have felt like exhibits in a sideshow, looked over from head to toe by American bureaucrats who were scanning for signs of “Americanness.” The camps in the Philippines were little better than trashy and sometimes dangerous mid-

way points, where few Amerasians were better prepared for their new life in America. In Utica, the effort was disorganized and often misguided. After four months of language training and tips on how to get a job, the Amerasians were on their own.

The program was often rife with corruption. In Vietnam, wealthy Vietnamese seeking escape from the country often resorted to “buying” Amerasians who would then claim them as relatives. Bass estimates that ninety percent of the Vietnamese “families” that came to America under the AHA contained at least one fake relative, and he relates several extremely sad instances in which the Amerasians, having once served their purpose, are discarded by their “wives,” “husbands,” or other “relatives” as soon as they left Vietnam. In other cases, some of the Amerasians themselves are fakes, having undergone plastic surgery or other measures to try and look as American as possible.

It is in discussing the Amerasian experience in Utica, however, that the book reaches its emotional climax. The Amerasians are portrayed as complex and sometimes frustrating individuals, at one and the same time frightened and hopeful, suspicious of others and searching for emotional support, proud of their survival skills and filled with self-doubt and self-hate. The schizophrenic emotions are simply a reflection of their self-perception: neither American nor Vietnamese, they are “at home” nowhere. While Bass recounts some stirring Amerasian success stories, these examples are not the norm. Suicides and attempted suicides are commonplace among the newly relocated Amerasians. Their poor self-image and sense of loss is combined with an extreme suspicion of anyone and everyone around them. Harboring hopes of eventually reuniting with their American fathers, they are almost inevitably disappointed: only a handful of the Amerasians’ fathers have even attempted a reconciliation. Many turn to crime: “Home invasions are Vietnam’s greatest contribution to crime in America” (p. 145). Rootless teenage Amerasians beat about the decaying inner core of Utica, moving from temporary job to temporary job, getting into fights (often with the other large group of recent immigrants from Russia), or gradually moving to other regions, most notably Orange County in California. The book ends with the plaintive observation of one of the refugees concerning one of his fellow Amerasians: “It doesn’t matter where he is. Just like the rest of us, Charlie will always be a wandering homeless Amerasian” (p. 275).

Historians, especially those who teach courses on the

Vietnam War, may have some reservations about the book. It has neither notes nor bibliography; there is no index. Bass's research is almost completely based on interviews conducted in Vietnam, the Philippines, and the United States. It does not address what are generally considered the large historical questions concerning the war, and is, in reality, more of a sociological study of the Amerasians than anything else. And, to be sure, there are issues on which Bass could be more clear or go into more depth. For example, while claiming that the Amerasians are virtual pariahs in Vietnam, many of the Amerasians he interviews in that nation have obviously obtained some schooling and some have relatively good jobs and businesses. Does this indicate that perhaps they are finally being accepted back into Vietnamese society? An issue that could have been investigated more thoroughly is the place and treatment of *Eurasian* offspring in Vietnam. Bass touches on this, indicating that during the French occupation of Vietnam, the Eurasian children seemed to have been treated quite well; only after the French defeat did they begin to feel the animosity of their countrymen. Why was the French treatment of their progeny so different from the attitude taken by the Americans? And why (or so it seems) were the Amerasian offspring singled out for such loathing, while the Eurasian children have (apparently) assimilated into Vietnamese culture?

All this considered, I heartily urge my colleagues to

overlook the fact that Bass's work lacks the traditional trappings of a "scholarly" work. The small complaints I have raised do not detract from the fact that this is a moving *and* important contribution to the literature dealing with the Vietnam War. The experience of these living casualties of the war tell us a great deal about the nature of the U.S. involvement in that conflict, the American way of dealing with the rather messy leftovers, and excruciatingly painful human costs which the war entailed. The book may frustrate some readers who expect a story about heroes and villains which comes to a happy ending. There is little of that here. The Amerasians are neither saints nor demons. Bass recounts their sad and brutal tales, and then tells us that "many of the stories in this book may be untrue. The pain behind them, on the other hand, is real" (p. 145). The people running the AHA and the Resource Center are never really portrayed as sadistic brutes or as angels of compassion. Instead, they come across as people who, more or less, want to "do good", and, in the traditional American way, are often clumsy and insensitive in attempting to do so. In all of this, perhaps, one can see the most painful parallels with the Vietnam War: no heroes, no villains, just more human suffering than the heart can bear.

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