

# H-Net Reviews

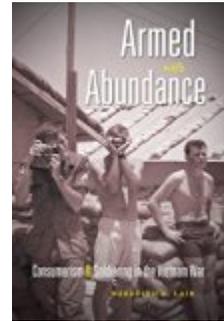
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Meredith H. Lair. *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xviii + 295 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3481-7.

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In 1947 Samuel Marshall published a book called *Men against Fire*, which deals, among other things, with the experience of those who fought in the Second World War. During the decades since the publication of this important book, hundreds of books have appeared that analyze the combat experiences of fighters in various wars in different historical periods. To these studies we should add the publication of memoirs by the soldiers themselves. Testimony from the battlefield can also be found in documentary films.

These studies and testimonies have created a picture of the intensive nature of war and battles, with an emphasis on the horrors of warfare and the personal conquest over fear. A striking example of this tendency is the book by the journalist Sebastian Junger, *War* (2010), which is concerned with the events of a platoon from the 173rd Airborne Brigade during its fifteen-month stationing period in Afghanistan. On the basis of this book, a documentary film, *Restrepo*, was made. The book, and especially the film, emphasizes daily warfare experiences, the physical and psychological difficulties due to area and climate conditions, the elusive enemy, and coping with the loss of comrades. This paradigm can also be found in the book and TV series *Band of Brothers* (1992; 2001). But is war only warfare? *Armed with Abundance* demonstrates that it is not.

One can find books dealing with the noncombat-related experiences of the ordinary soldier in war, for example, John Ellis's *The Sharp End of War* (1980), or Catherine Merridale's *Ivan's War: The Red Army 1939-1945* (2005). Both studies deal with soldiers' experiences outside of combat, but these discussions usually focus on

the lulls between engagements. That is to say, the emphasis is on the experience of battle and warfare together with the physical and mental difficulties of the fighter at the front. But the book by Lair deals with the leisure culture of American soldiers in Vietnam. This is contrary to widespread perceptions of the violence and trauma of the Vietnam War.

Lair does not negate that approach, but she illuminates other aspects of this war. In a fascinating analysis well based upon archival material of the U.S. Army, army unit newspapers, and the memoirs of soldiers, Lair describes in depth the other facet of the American experience in Vietnam, and shows that it may be worthwhile to conduct other interviews with war veterans and direct the questions to the area of leisure culture beyond their desire to tell about their battle experiences. We have here another kind of analysis of the war which asserts that most of the American soldiers enjoyed splashing in swimming pools, cool ice cream, visits by famous performers, and shopping. This is, therefore, a study that focuses on the noncombat-related experience of soldiers during the Vietnam War.

The intensity and trauma of the war in Vietnam is well documented both in research and in popular culture, especially in films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *We Were Soldiers* (2002), and many others. Some may thus claim that Lair's book creates a provocative analysis that emphasizes hedonism rather than warfare, bravery, and sacrifice. But this is not so. Lair does not overlook the fact that a fierce war was being waged in Vietnam. Moreover, military activities provide the historical framework for the discuss-

sion in the book. It should be remembered that statistically only 10 to 15 percent of the hundreds of thousands of American soldiers stationed in Vietnam physically experienced persistent and intensive combat engagements. This is the ratio between combatants and noncombatants that applies to many wars, and Vietnam was no different. The book does not in any way devalue those who fought, even though it examines the activities of noncombatants as well as the experiences of fighters who returned to their permanent base after their battle engagements.

Where should we place this book from a historiographical viewpoint? Firstly, in order to understand the political and military history of the Vietnam War, one should read other books, and there are many of them. This is not a book about the military history of the war, and it seems that Lair did not intend to write such a book. This is a work of research that can be defined as a social

history of the war phenomenon in general and the Vietnam War in particular. But in my opinion, this fascinating research is more than that. In the discussion and careful analysis of the noncombat-related experience, Lair has laid (perhaps unconsciously) the foundation stone for a new historiographical approach, a research field that focuses on the other aspect of warfare, the leisure culture during wartime and between battles. This research can serve as a model for the examination of similar phenomena in other wars, and Lair more than hints at this in the epilogue, which analyzes the war in Iraq.

To sum up, this book is well written, with useful arguments based on a variety of primary sources, and there is no doubt that Lair has presented a challenge to historians to try and detach themselves from the heroic aspects of war and combat to examine other areas of warfare and the additional experiences of the soldier and fighter.

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