

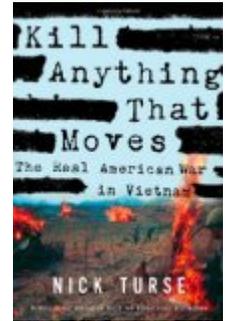


Nick Turse. *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013. 370 S. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-8691-1.

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## Intentional Atrocities in America's War in Vietnam

American atrocities during the long war in Vietnam were not limited to the My Lai massacre or other random acts of violence; rather they were part of a larger coordinated policy by American military leaders. According to journalist Nick Turse, the Pentagon, complicit historians, and time conspired to obscure this “real” story of Vietnam. Through vivid descriptions of the horrors of war, Turse attempts to unlock what he calls the “hidden history” of the Vietnam War. Written for a popular audience, *Kill Anything That Moves* offers an important addition to the historiography of the Vietnam War by attempting to strip away the layers of history that have obscured the depth and breadth of civilian casualties and suffering during the U.S. phase of the conflict.

At the heart of the text rests questions about the American way of war in Vietnam. Turse confronts the reader with the difficult question of whether the United States constructed and instituted a policy that called for, or at least resulted in, hundreds of incidents like the massacre at My Lai in March 1968, which left hundreds of innocent men, women, and children dead for no apparent reason. He asks whether the United States military created a culture of violence in which the wanton killing of civilians was not only accepted, but encouraged, through the incentivizing of violence that measured results in body counts. If the system, from basic training up to the strategic planning level, created a sense of ruthless violence as an acceptable battlefield tactic, Turse raises the question of how much agency soldiers on the ground had in refusing immoral or illegal orders. Further, Turse in-

vestigates how American perceptions of their own superiority, whether military or racial, helped to construct the plans for war and allowed American soldiers and their commanders to justify their actions.

In the end, Turse concludes that the My Lai massacre was not an aberration but the standard and that the United States engaged in a coordinated effort to commit and cover up these war crimes. He argues that My Lai's uniqueness was not that it happened, but that it became so public. One cannot explain away the level of atrocities in Vietnam by suggesting that it was only a few “bad apples.” Additionally, Turse argues that by seeing My Lai as the exception rather than the rule, historians have dismissed other atrocities as mistakes when they were really part of a larger system of American war crimes. There were a few heroes, in Turse's mind, who stood up against the war machine, like service members Ron Ridenhour and Jamie Henry who served as “whistle-blowers,” shining a light upon the atrocities committed by the United States in Vietnam. According to Turse, the war in Vietnam was a criminal act (from how America fought the war to why it fought it) and the media at the time and historians after the fact have left this crime unreported.

To support this assertion, the bulk of Turse's work sets out to explore how the U.S. military created a system in which mass civilian killing could flourish, thereby placing the blame for these atrocities squarely on the shoulders of the commanders rather than the soldiers in the field. Turse sees the seeds of atrocity initially sown

during boot camp where drill instructors instilled in soldiers a sense of unquestioning obedience to their superior officers. He maintains that the psychological trauma inflicted on recruits at boot camp allowed the military to foster a culture of violence. Once in the field, soldiers found rewards, promotions, and even rest tied to “body counts,” a metric used to gauge the enemy’s ability to sustain its war effort. Body counts were a part of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s efforts to rationalize warfare through “technowar,” and this emphasis made mass civilian death more likely as soldiers were encouraged to make little distinction between enemy combatant and civilians. The policy of “overkill,” as Turse calls it, led to the near-total destruction of civilians, villages, forests, and anything else that the Americans could shoot, bomb, burn, or bulldoze. Thus, the war intentionally disrupted civilian life, destroying villages and displacing millions who fled to cities only to encounter a different set of horrors. According to Turse, the rules of engagement and other official policy statements represented nothing more than public relations issued with a wink and a nod and were meant only for public consumption and not considered standard operating procedures in country. Thus, basic training and implied orders to kill everything superseded official orders to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants.

As a work of popular history, *Kill Anything That Moves*, lacks a bibliography, though Turse does provide copious notes. Turse is skeptical of official U.S. government sources, because he views them as propaganda. To offset this absence of material, he draws from sources he deems more credible: Vietnamese government records, veterans’ memories from the interviews he conducted, and published participant narratives (of average soldiers, not the commanders). It appears that Turse accepts veterans’ memories uncritically; their perceptions of what happened become crystallized facts for Turse. He also utilizes the records of a Pentagon task force set up to investigate suspected atrocities, the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, whose collected papers in the National Archives contain hundreds of documents pertaining to alleged incidents. In terms of secondary sources, Turse leans heavily on popular histories rather than academic works and relies a great deal on the efforts of other investigative journalists. On the whole, the notes suggest a deeply researched work, though more secondary works by academic historians could have helped give the text added weight beyond the realm of popular history.

In part, Turse’s sources reflect where he sees his work entering the historiography: as popular rather than aca-

dem history. From its construction to its arguments, *Kill Anything That Moves* targets the general reader. The prose is stunning and engaging and provides a voyeuristic look at the seedy underside of America’s war effort in Vietnam. Turse’s case studies of provinces that saw significant atrocities (in chapter 4) help to build his case for the regularity of Vietnamese suffering at the hands of the American war machine; however, the case studies of individuals who embodied the American war ethos of kill anything (in chapter 6) serve more to titillate and inflame the passions of readers than to provide deep analysis. On occasion Turse does speak of issues of race and gender, though given his target audience, he refrains from detailed scholarly discussions on the topics and provides instead superficial presentations which illustrate his arguments about the horrors of war.

Though he situates his work in popular history, Turse does see himself engaged in a distinct discourse on the nature of the Vietnam War. Turse positions the book as a challenge to the supposedly dominant neoconservative reconciliationist narrative, which suggests that the war was generally right and winnable and that U.S.-perpetrated civilian killings were random acts, not part of a systemic culture of violence. He takes aim at “apologist historians” who have obscured the harsh reality of America’s war against Vietnam and argues that his exploration of the atrocities committed in Vietnam represents “the real war, the one that barely appears at all in the tens of thousands of volumes written about Vietnam” (p. 22). But Turse does not cite any of these supposedly disingenuous histories or their misguided historians except Guenter Lewy, who stands as the sole embodiment of all historians who offer a different interpretation than Turse on the nature of the war.

Turse has won great praise already from fellow journalists and a few academic historians for exploring the pervasiveness of mass civilian killing and other war crimes during the Vietnam War; however, the issues of conspiracy and contextualization cause problems for his overall narrative. Much of Turse’s argument rests on an assumption of direct causality between the goals of the war planners and the atrocities committed on the ground. From basic training to the overall conception of the war, he maintains, a “kill everything” mentality was constructed that inevitably made mass civilian killings part of the war plan instead of an aberration. Soldiers in the field who made decisions to kill civilians did so, not of their own volition, but because they were brainwashed into becoming killing machines, unwilling to question the orders of their commanders. In this argu-

ment, Turse absolves the soldiers for committing atrocities because they were following orders or incapable of discerning whether their actions were illegal, an ambiguity that would never have happened had the soldiers not been brainwashed to become part of America's killing system. Turse's vision of a conspiracy to commit atrocities seems overwrought, as it unconvincingly removes the agency of individual soldiers and suggests that any action taken by any sector of the military or administration was coordinated at the highest levels and does not represent the independent actions of rogue forces. This top-down causality allows Turse to see conspiracies behind every action and to dismiss any official efforts to stop the atrocities (for example, through instituting rules of engagement that forbade the killing of civilians) as mere propaganda meant to cover leaders and leave the soldiers holding the proverbial (body) bag.

There is something ironic about a book that seeks to contextualize the My Lai massacre yet does not fully contextualize the war itself. Though Turse sees the lessons of Vietnam being ignored in the contemporary American conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, he makes very limited efforts to discern how World War II, the Korean conflict, or even the Cold War influenced the decisions made in prosecuting the war in Vietnam. There is a great wealth of historiography that explores race, empire, and the American way of war (all of which are ideas central to Turse's arguments) that he does not consult or engage with in a meaningful way. The author acknowledges the

existence of Vietnamese atrocities but quickly dismisses them as not relevant to his argument; the result is that his look at atrocities in Vietnam places American incidents in a false vacuum. Furthermore, Turse's concerns with the present day cause him to ignore the larger cultural, political, and economic world in which the United States fought the Vietnam War. The overall result is a lack of sufficient contextualization.

These two drawbacks, perhaps the result of Turse's targeting an audience of general history readers, should not discourage scholars from reading *Kill Anything That Moves*. By highlighting the atrocities committed in Vietnam, Turse helps to dispel any lingering heroic myth of America's benevolent empire. In suggesting a direct causal link between the way the war managers planned and constructed the war effort and how it played out in country, Turse demonstrates that the metrics used to determine success (body counts) combined with the American sense of superiority to create the conditions in which mass civilian death and suffering occurred. Academic historians will be disappointed that issues of race, gender, and power, which pop up throughout the text, are not explored in greater depth. Still, this gap leaves scholars a new point from which to explore these ideas. Turse's powerful prose offers a haunting image of the American war effort in Vietnam that helps to humanize the devastation wrought by the conflict and provides ways to complicate the narrative of the war by offering a fuller picture of events on the ground.

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