

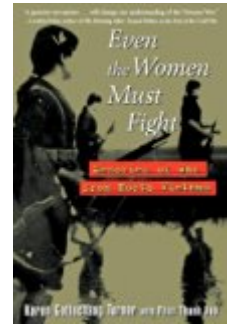
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen G. Turner, Thanh Hao Phan. *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998. xvi + 224 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-471-14689-6.

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When War Strikes Close to Home

The literature available on the Vietnam War can be overwhelming: libraries and archives list hundreds of sources that appear to cover nearly every aspect of the war. The most elusive topics, however, are those from the Vietnamese perspective. Few of the books considered standards on the war reflect the North Vietnamese perspective, except as seen by American military officials. Thus Karen Turner makes a welcome contribution not only to gender studies, but also to the literature on the North Vietnamese, with *Even the Women Must Fight*.

Turner, an East Asia and comparative law scholar, traveled throughout Vietnam during a three year period. With the assistance of Phan Thanh Hao, an interpreter and journalist from Hanoi, Turner studied the role of North Vietnamese women as soldiers during the Vietnam War. She conducted interviews with many of the participants and their comrades and reading diaries and literature from the period, as well as army reports housed in Saigon at the Combined Document Exploitation Center (CDEC).

The author correctly notes the prevalence of female leaders in Vietnamese history, exemplified by such heroines as the Trung sisters and Thi Xuan, yet asserts that they “never enjoyed for long the fruits of their struggles or challenged seriously the dominant patriarchal culture” (p. 28). According to Turner, although the government established museums and exhibits devoted to the women’s role, the memoirs and heroines of the Vietnam War suggest that women should have “courage in battle

without losing their womanly virtues” (p. 37). She also indicates that the present Vietnamese government tries to emphasize the fighting spirit of the women warriors, while downplaying their actual combat skills. Turner also discovered that the position of Vietnamese female warriors underwent a post-war marginalization in Vietnam, as society focused nearly exclusively on the sacrifices of their male counterparts.

One of the most interesting aspects of Turner’s inquiry was the complicated relationship between a society bound by Confucian ideals of motherhood and the subservient female role and the very real position of women who are former combatants who have returned to their homes. Turner seeks to empower the Vietnamese woman by revealing their role in the war, discussing the effects of their presence on society, and adding what Turner calls “important insight into timeless moral and philosophical questions about the war” (p. 22). How the women and their communities dealt with such issues engaged much of the author’s attention.

Turner asserts that many of the female fighters who survived now face poverty and neglect, either having missed their opportunity to marry while engaged in combat, or having become ill, or been exposed to chemicals such as Agent Orange (which prevent them from bearing healthy children). The author identified the paradox: the war’s participants see the efforts of these women as invaluable, yet with no children or families, Vietnamese traditional society views them as pitiable.

Turner identifies a number of major topics that warrant further investigation, such as how women faced the challenges of combat and how traditional Vietnamese society dealt with them as returning soldiers. Unfortunately the book only touches on many of the author's questions and a number of the topics could benefit from a more singular approach and uninterrupted attention. Doubtless Turner's work is an invaluable addition to the historiography on Vietnam and on women and war. Her work would make a good reader for an introductory Vietnam War course or even as a supplement to graduate

study. The author provides a new and approachable alternative to the standard assigned texts because it gives not only a female viewpoint, but also insight into the North Vietnamese perspective.

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