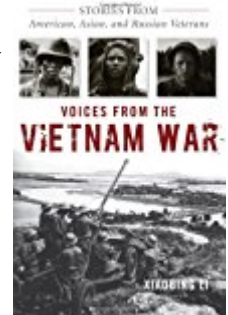


**Xiaobing Li.** *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian, and Russian Veterans.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 296 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2592-3.



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For a long time, oral history has been an established and widely accepted tool of historical research. Although there are specific methodical problems, the possible yield is obvious: a scrupulous analysis of eyewitness accounts may permit a detailed reconstruction of facts or chains of events. They may open new perspectives on historical interrelations on different levels. They tend to question traditional, selective interpretations, and they allow for a close reading of motivations and aims of historical actors. At the same time, corresponding memoirs or interviews appear as a constitutive contribution to the process of negotiating, challenging, or confirming public-national-memories and interpretations of the past. In view of these multifaceted possibilities, the presentation of reports from different national points of view promises important insights into somehow neglected aspects of central international developments of the twentieth century. Xiaobing Li's synopsis contains twenty-two interviews with American, Russian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese participants of the Vietnam wars (starting

in 1946 with the French Indochina War and ending in the Communist takeover in 1975). The author furnishes the interviews with brief statistical and contextual data. His work highlights the importance of such comparative narratives and contributes to a deeper understanding of war and remembrance in different, changing societies. Originally, the author had interviewed fifty-three Americans, about ninety "Communist veterans," and seventy-two former South Vietnamese soldiers. The published selection reflects the original imbalance, which points to the more secret and more restricted approach of the former Communist misalliance to the Vietnam War as well as to its political and social consequences.

Apart from multilateral perspectives, the volume brings together experiences from various battlegrounds and, above all, from different military structures, namely, from the medical services and the huge logistical machinery. Within this framework, Li uses the vivid descriptions of former participants for several purposes. Here, his general conclusions regarding the international

and political informative value of the narratives partially tend to overstretch the material: the interconnection between American escalation and the worsened relations between Beijing and Moscow was more complex than the accounts assume. Besides, Li's insistence on questions of team spirit and fighting morale of Communist and non-Communist troops alike or on operational assessments from time to time overshadows his second main focus: one of the author's aims is to look into the "subject of men and women's lives beyond the battleground" and to show "that each society has its own way to transform its civilians into soldiers" (p. 10).

In this context, the particular previous knowledge of the soldiers, their images of their enemies, and their postwar assessments and rationalizations of the war period are of special interest. Furthermore, the collected memories extend the author's question regarding the transformation of civilians into soldiers: they inform us about mixed, uncertain, or changing loyalties of soldiers on both sides. In addition, they remind us of yawning gaps between, above all, American and Vietnamese prewar experiences and general preconditions. As Li rightly observes, Vietnamese citizens had to live through a new Thirty Years' War, which became a part of their lives and family histories. This constellation would augment Vietnamese motivations and perceptions with additional complex and strong reasons. So, for Sergeant Tran Thanh, general military values were integral parts of his self-image as a member of the "Black Thai" minority (p. 41). He not only understood the bloody conflicts in political terms, but also remembered a certain ethnic dimension in the relations between North and South Vietnamese--these ethnic undercurrents could strengthen or contradict political frontiers. For others, the reunification of Vietnam under Communist rule appeared to be the only chance to unite their own families. The recollections suggest that the North Vietnamese authorities often were able to reconcile such individual motivations with

the general political line. Propaganda, indeed, constituted one instrument of winning the allegiance of the people, but the possible impact of repressive influences is ignored by the North Vietnam veterans. However, their South Vietnam counterparts did not develop a similar degree of patriotic fighting spirit. Li's informants present a complex explanation for this shortcoming. In general, they underline the counterproductive effects of a dominant American presence in the war against the North. Thus, they argue, South Vietnamese soldiers did consider the war to be an American enterprise: "We were fighting the American war in Vietnam" (p. 26). Connected with this point of view was the feeling of alienation between a modernized army and a traditional society. This reasoning is thought provoking, but to a certain degree may depend on twisted postwar developments. Among seventy-two southern veterans interviewed, sixty-one live in the United States.

Russian and Chinese accounts underline the problems of the officially celebrated Communist international solidarity. Obviously, several Soviet soldiers and experts, in their relations with Vietnamese comrades, resembled the patronizing attitude of the emissaries of the American superpower on the other side of the frontline. Others, again like their American colleagues, might have been confronted with unexpected distrust or dislike by their Vietnamese comrades in arms. Besides, military exigencies notwithstanding, Soviet as well as Chinese "voluntaries" continued the Sino-Soviet struggle on Vietnamese soil. The Soviet KGB diverted its resources in North Vietnam to spy on China, and the Chinese air raid defences did not share their insights into possible weakness of American or southern aircraft with the Soviet command. On the individual level, Li's Russian and Chinese respondents do not reveal an extraordinary sense of socialist internationalism. Instead, their narrations reflect a more traditional military or national sense of duty, combined with sober personal calculations, which led them into

the Vietnam War. The same individual factors pervade American accounts. According to these reports, the young U.S. forces in Vietnam were also imbued with distressingly naïve ideas about warfare under Vietnamese conditions. In fact, American, Russian, Chinese, and Vietnamese soldiers represented different worlds and cultures, which aggravated their antagonistic ideas and undermined political alliances. The internationalization of the Vietnam War prolonged the fighting and multiplied the suffering. Despite the mentioned shortcomings, Li's book is a powerful reminder that it was individuals with their own schemes of life and with their own dreams and hopes who did the fighting for a complex mixture of reasons.

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