Mark Bowden wrote *Hue 1968* in time for the fiftieth anniversary of the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Hue, which was fought in the opening months of 1968 and constituted the turning point of America’s intervention in Vietnam’s civil war between nationalist and communist forces. Bowden’s account of the Battle of Hue is a richly textured, multifaceted history that will become the standard history of the battle for years to come.

Bowden argues that the Battle of Hue itself was the turning point of America’s war in Vietnam. The battle was one part of North Vietnam’s 1968 Tet Offensive during which communist forces launched a series of uprisings and attacks throughout South Vietnam, including the political capital of Saigon and the cultural capital of Hue, in the hopes of forcing an American withdrawal from Vietnam and unifying the country under communism. While a part of the Tet Offensive, the fighting in Hue included brutal urban combat that leveled an important piece of Vietnam’s cultural history after nearly five weeks of fighting. These communist attacks failed but they triggered increased protests in the United States and led the next American president, Richard Nixon, to begin a five-year process of withdrawing US forces. The Tet Offensive was a military defeat but a political victory for the communists.

In this work, Bowden uses the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Hue synonymously. While he examines the context of the Tet Offensive in general and the urban battle in particular, Bowden uses these two different terms interchangeably as though they were the same. He writes that the fighting in Hue “has never been accorded the important position it deserves in our understanding of the Vietnam War” but he offers no historiography from the war’s major histories to substantiate that point (p. 519). The Tet Offensive is widely seen as the turning point of the war and Hue a part of it, but Bowden implies throughout that the Battle of Hue itself was the turning point and that without this savage battle, the Tet Offensive would not have been the communist victory that it was. He writes that “the pivotal point [of the war] was the Tet Offensive and this battle, its most wrenching episode” (p. 519). In this sense, Bowden is not saying anything new. However, if he stated more clearly and argued more cogently that the Battle of Hue itself became the central point of the communists’ military campaign, and therefore the battle itself became the war’s turning point, that could be an entirely different argument.

Contextually, he builds a case for an intelligence failure beginning at the senior military and political levels of the American command. He documents the predictions of General William Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in 1967 and 1968 that American victory was close. Here, Bowden establishes the perspective of senior American leaders that the war was well in hand, if only because Westmoreland had said so and, Bowden writes, Westmoreland “was as prepared as ever a general could be to win La Guerre d’Indochine” (p. 40). If nothing else, this strategic perspective helps to explain the thunderclap surprise of the Tet Offensive as well as the initial assessments that the communist attacks were a not serious threat.

While Bowden writes about misperceptions and misunderstandings at senior levels, he focuses less on the American intelligence failure to notice and warn of the
communist offensive, although he does note the intelligence failure (p. 90). Instead, he dwells much more on the communists’ careful and prolonged build-up for the offensive, particularly in Hue. One of the book’s strengths is how much he integrates and weaves the Vietnamese perspective throughout the entire narrative. Through interviews with many veterans and survivors of the battle, Bowden has gathered a wide variety of Vietnamese experiences of the Battle of Hue. Integrating these Vietnamese voices into Hue 1968 alone separates it from standard works on the subject. Because he extensively includes Vietnamese voices, many American readers will read for the first time about Vietnamese military and civilian perspectives, including seeing division and disagreement among North Vietnamese military leaders.

The focus of the book, however, is the “in the weeds” exploration of the battle itself. The bulk of the book documents the fighting, including US Marines trying to assess the situation accurately and then fighting through the southern and northern halves of Hue with little urban combat training. He continues to give space to both Vietnamese and American voices as he narrates how the battle unfolded, including the experiences of Viet Cong fighters and North Vietnamese soldiers as they desperately tried to maintain their hold on Hue. Also woven throughout are the experiences of the civilians, mostly Vietnamese but also a few Europeans and Americans. Bowden does not shy away from the massacres and murders committed by the North Vietnamese as they took the city, which he writes were “official, deliberate, and coordinated” (p. 303). He also describes the civilians killed by the Americans as well, whether by Marines unable or unwilling to discern noncombatants from enemy combatants or by American artillery and naval shelling that buried thousands of sheltering Vietnamese. Bowden paints a grim picture of the battle where everyone, regardless of nationality, was simply trying to stay alive but lived awash in fear and confusion. As a result of his having conducted so many interviews, Hue 1968 is one of the best descriptions of the hell of prolonged urban combat out there.

In writing about the US Marines who fought through Hue, Bowden catalogs the painful process whereby Marines, lacking any urban combat training, learned bloody lessons on urban operations while conducting one. The Americans fighting both through southern Hue and the Citadel learned what it meant to push a determined enemy out of a city filled with civilians. Hue 1968 vividly demonstrates why the urban environment is distinct from other combat environments: the fear, the exhaustion, the emotional numbing, the complexity and confusion of fighting in a city, trying to kill enemy soldiers but not noncombatants, and Navy corpsmen patching up Marines to send them back into the fight again.

The other misperception that Bowden documents, aside from senior American leaders’ belief that victory was near, was the failure by lower-level commanders to understand the severity of the fighting in Hue. If the Tet Offensive was initially not taken seriously by strategic leaders, then neither was the fighting in Hue by operational leaders. While company-level officers tried to communicate the actual situation to their superiors, Bowden credits military and civilian journalists for getting important information to the world on the horrors in Hue. Thanks to the press, the outside world quickly learned how bad the fighting was within Hue even as American leaders downplayed the battle’s ferocity. Bowden uses these press accounts as the battle unfolded to give a near real-time account of the fighting. Further, Bowden argues that these press reports were both more accurate than the military’s reporting and were “uniformly sympathetic to US fighting men” (p. 524).

In his conclusion, Bowden underscores further American leaders’ failure to grasp the severity of both the Tet Offensive and the fighting within Hue. He reminds us that the United States can only claim a tactical victory and that the communists achieved a larger strategic and political victory that still came at an incredibly steep price. Bowden argues that the experience of fighting in Hue, and Vietnam in general, should teach Americans to treat foreign policy with more humility and to be less ideological. The Vietnam War shows that America ought to resort to war only for “the most immediate, direct, and vital national interest, or to prevent genocide or wider conflict, and then only in concert with other nations” (p. 526). As he asserts these lessons, it seems that he is venting frustration with America’s present-day policies toward the global war on terror as much as trying to draw lessons from America’s past.

Professional historians might object to his dependence upon firsthand accounts, namely his interviews of veterans and survivors, because of the limitations and fickle nature of memory, especially after half a century. Oral history is an excellent source but, as his sparsely written endnotes indicate, it is nearly his only source. And while Bowden, a former journalist, clearly knows how to conduct effective interviews, he does not seem to corroborate or complement those interviews with in-depth archival research, which could strengthen his
work. After-action reports, written immediately after the action, would surely enhance interviews with veterans recalling events from fifty years ago. Although he writes that he used Army and Marine official records, it is not clear what records he consulted, where he uses them, or how much. The endnotes are meager and do not indicate much reliance on archival sources, especially records or reports from fighting units.

Bowden’s *Hue* is different from his earlier *Black Hawk Down* (1999), which was written a few years after the events in October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia, but memories fade and change over time. In a tête-à-tête with the director of *Fury* in the online journal *Foreign Policy*, military historian Robert Rush observed, when interviewing veterans of a World War II campaign, that veterans’ memories often became conflated with movies and other veterans’ experiences and were at odds with unit reports.[1] Historian Carol Reardon likewise observed the pitfalls of relying too much on memory as she researched her book, *Launch the Intruders* (1972), on an A-6 Intruder squadron in 1972 Vietnam. Reardon made use of squadron members’ memories but understood that she could not wholly rely on interviews and oral histories. Reardon checked those memories against the squadron’s master logbook, which recorded details about each mission, as well as other unit records. Her book pulls heavily from the aviators but also draws from archival sources.

To be fair, Bowden acknowledges the limitations of memory, which helps to explain why he gathered so many participants’ firsthand accounts and interviews. But while *Hue* is a gripping read—without question, Mark Bowden is an excellent writer—I have to wonder how this work might be improved if he had coupled more extensive use of combat units’ records with his interviews of veterans and survivors of the battle. To be clear, these critiques are not damning. If nothing else, these issues would make for a good discussion in an upper-division undergraduate or graduate history course on historical methodology, historians’ use of sources, and the importance of using a mix of primary sources, including both archival sources and oral histories.

These critiques of his argument and sources aside, Bowden has produced a compelling narrative of the Battle of Hue that it is worth the read and will justifiably become the standard text on the battle. With the US Army’s new focus on combat in megacities and with the recent urban battles in Mosul as well as Syria’s civil war, this book should take on new relevance to civilians, policymakers, and soldiers alike.

Note


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