


Spring 2016

# Hanoians' Experience: Suspending Moral Bias to Recognize Human Dimensions of War

Maggie Norsworthy

*SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Norsworthy, Maggie, "Hanoians' Experience: Suspending Moral Bias to Recognize Human Dimensions of War" (2016). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 2341.

[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/2341](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2341)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

# Hanoians' Experience: Suspending Moral Bias to Recognize Human Dimensions of War

Maggie Norsworthy  
Lehigh University '17  
Anthropology and Political Science

\* \* \*

*Submitted for partial fulfillment of requirements for World Learning, SIT Study  
Abroad, Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and Development*

*Spring 2016*

*Advisor: Jason Picard, SIT Graduate Institute*

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	4
A note on word choice.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Methodology.....	9
Literature Review.....	14
i. Brief Review of War in Vietnamese History.....	14
ii. A Socialist and Patriotic Mindset.....	15
a. Impact of Eras of Foreign Occupation.....	15
b. Unity.....	17
i. People’s War.....	20
c. Other Exacerbating Factors: Bombs and Loss.....	22
d. Duty and Defense.....	23
e. Differences in Military Morale.....	24
Research Findings and Analysis.....	26
a. Impact of Eras of Foreign Occupation.....	28
b. Unity as War Strategy: People’s Perspective.....	29
c. Morale.....	30
d. Rhetoric.....	30
e. The Language of Loss.....	34
Conclusion.....	35
Limits.....	36
Further Research.....	37
Works Cited.....	39

## Acknowledgements

To Co Thanh, I want to offer my appreciation for taking this idea seriously and allowing me the flexibility I needed to explore it, while providing me with enough structure to ask the right questions. Thank you for the connections, the fearlessness in supporting my pursuit of this topic, and the constant support.

To my housemates in Hanoi, thank you for always being there for a pick-me-up, a philosophical discussion, or to confer about the direction of our research. Thank you to every member of this cohort for creating a delightful academic environment of peers that are both deeply informed and deeply thoughtful. You all made me want to do work that would be challenging and insightful, and I cannot wait to see what you all have come up with over this month.

To Linh and Phat from SIT, I thank you for being consistently cheerful, supportive, and hilarious, and for answering a text or helping with a task no matter how last minute. I really admire your deep knowledge of both English and Vietnamese, and it was immensely helpful for a project focusing on the use of language. Thank you so much.

To my advisor Jason Picard, thank you for your willingness to listen to me drag this idea from philosophical musings to something I could actually talk to people about. Thank you for your deep integrity and dedication to your work, which has inspired me throughout the ISP process.

To Le Van Lan and Vu The Long, thank you for the early interviews, which helped me immensely in framing my research methods. Your wisdom about Vietnam's past is admirable and unparalleled.

To Mark Ashwill, thank you for providing countless resources and helping me talk through the logic of navigating the divide between the West and the East.

To Linh Nguyen from Hanoi University, thank you for being a great friend and an endless source of energy throughout this process, as well as a wonderful translator and giver of advice.

To my early written survey and focus group, thank you for your engagement, your energy, and your insight. You helped me immensely in understanding the war better, understanding how to ask my questions better, but mostly in reminding me of the deeply important human component of this work.

Lastly, thank you Hanoi. Thank you for being full of strong, open, insightful individuals who, despite external pressure and difficult subject matter, were so ready to connect and help me learn about this topic. This city is endlessly beautiful and interesting and an amazing place to learn. I hope to keep coming back until I have tried everybahn my stand and visited every coffee shop.

## Abstract

Talking about, and learning lessons from The American War in Vietnam can be a process whose genuine engagement requires a suspension—even if temporary—of moral and cultural biases that are embedded in the Western mindset. This research project is one that composes military strategy, government rhetoric, and very human accounts of war in Vietnam in order to understand how people in Hanoi experience and talk about war, with an ultimate aim of making some of these stories and lessons digestible to a Western audience.

My findings discuss some key components of the North Vietnamese mindset towards the American War in Vietnam: the relevant historical context regarding foreign occupation, patriotism and unity, duty and defense, and some overall effects of attacks and bombs, with a deeper focus on what I found to be the most important aspect: unity. I then compare the picture of this mindset with some respective elements of the U.S American wartime mentality. The ultimate pursuit of this research is increased understanding and diplomacy between nationalities and philosophies, as well as advocacy for human-oriented analysis of international conflicts in general.

This is a project oriented towards epistemology and constructivism. A constructivist approach to studying war is a human approach to studying war, and it is one that helps us to understand the true impact of governmental decisions that might seem distant to us. Analysis of war without adequate attention to the human dimension, at its worst, risks uninformed policy decisions and inaccurate historical analysis.

**Key words:** American War in Vietnam, Vietnam War, government rhetoric, propaganda, “People’s War,” Communism, Eastern philosophy, collectivism, individualism, morale.

## A Note on Word Choice

As one component of my study is word choice and word usage, I will take a moment to clarify some vocabulary choices. To refer to concepts, events, groups, or ideas in general—when I am not pointing to a particular political agenda or perspective—I will attempt to use the clearest word choice available.

**-American War in Vietnam:** This is the term I will use to describe the war between Vietnam and the United States from 1955 to 1975.

**-North Vietnamese Army:** Rather than Viet Minh, People's Army of Vietnam, or other names, North Vietnamese Army provides the most direct reference to the army that fought for this region.

**-Viet Cong:** I will use this terminology to refer to the resistance army in South Vietnam, to distinguish them from the pro-American forces and the North Vietnamese Army.

**-propaganda:** This is not a note on a specific word choice, but more a note on acknowledging biases. Propaganda is frequently talked about in a negative light in popular US discourse, but it is important to remember to contextualize propaganda and recall that the US also engages in the use of propaganda, as evidenced by this pamphlet from the American War in Vietnam.



*(Image 1.1-American War Propaganda Poster-Krueger, Gitter, Beiswenger)*

## Introduction

*“The human factors of the insurgency were therefore understood only in an impressionistic and intuitive fashion. This was bound to affect policy decisions with respect to counter-insurgency.”*  
-1965 Report by Rand Group on Viet Cong Motivation

*“...because the popular view of the Vietnam War focuses on Americans in combat...it is fundamentally ahistorical.”*  
-Michael Hunt, *A Vietnam War Reader*

As a Western citizen, it is no small task to attempt to understand and empathize with an Eastern-influenced mindset. Our bias can transcend mere differences in lifestyle. As David Black (n.d) notes, Westerners might hold complicated, deep biases in areas such as “privileging the agenda of the self” and “trusting history less than change.” These kinds of biases can seem impossible to translate and navigate. Therefore, a reasonable approach to foster understanding, is a full—even if temporary—attempt at immersion into another’s mindset and philosophy. This immersion is particularly pertinent in the case of the American War in Vietnam. Understanding a historical period so controversial that much of its basic terminology risks bias requires a careful and patient analysis of perspectives besides our own.

Empathy towards an Eastern mindset can be described using the literary term “suspension of disbelief.” This term is defined as “a willingness to suspend one's critical faculties and believe the unbelievable; sacrifice of realism and logic for the sake of enjoyment.” (Dictionary.com) I have reframed this definition to suit this project: “a willingness to suspend one's critical faculties and *understand the uncomfortable*; sacrifice of *moral bias* for the sake of *understanding*.” As Samuel Taylor Coleridge once grappled with our ability to empathize with fictional characters, so too can we call upon this impetus now, to empathize with those who see the world differently from we do. To try and see clearly this information and logic is a critical first step to understanding a historical event whose retellings are often mired in political sentiment.

It was from this philosophy that I crafted my research proposal. I acknowledge that there is something untraditional about fitting a somewhat philosophical approach into a standard research format. Some of my findings are, by definition, subjective. To gather insight on the human dimension of war in Vietnam requires loosening a reliance on “hard facts,” commonly told histories, or instincts to judge based on our own understandings of morality. Much of the

human dimension of war was not lived out in the realms of international politics or historical “truths”.

This is a project oriented towards epistemology and constructivism. A constructivist approach to war is a human approach to war, and it is one that helps us to understand the true impact of governmental decisions that might seem distant to us. To challenge how we in the U.S know what we know can produce moving results: a recognition of the forces that shape our understanding of the world. I have chosen rhetoric as my means to exploring an epistemological and constructivist approach; words play a significant role in how we decide what we know, and how we construct our meanings and narratives of our world. This logic will gain meaning as it is further contextualized in this study.

Delving into the perspective of the citizenry of Vietnam did not always prove to be straightforward. As I am working in a country with a strong centralized government where freedom of speech is not a given, it is hard to define or capture what a “true Vietnamese perspective” means. Yet, when I turned towards literature, eager to understand the role of Vietnamese propaganda and government control of the national conversation, I realized that my pursuit might be more possible than I once thought. The pervasive impact of patriotic propaganda in Vietnam showed me that the party or government perspective the war often *did* shed light on the people’s opinion of it. And, by temporarily suspending my bias toward total freedom of thought, I gained more insight into the Vietnamese mindset.

I began to see that warring with America prompted the Communist Party to adopt a tactical way of looking at truth and at patriotism, viewing the national mindset as a deeply important aspect of strategy when facing a foe with superior technology and greater material resources. How does a government mobilize a people to machine-like efficiency and dedication without forcing them to sacrifice their humanity and community? By divorcing analysis of the American War in Vietnam from political sentiment, a very human account of strategy and tough choices began to materialize.

During a focus group, one North Vietnamese Army veteran asked me what could be done to stop war from happening. He wondered if I understood the gravity and complexity of what I was asking: how could I question people about what they “thought” of war? I responded with the best answer I could—the core of this research topic—increased understanding, empathy, and dialogue between people. If nothing else, I hope this research project achieves the goals of



humanizing the North Vietnamese perspective of the American War in Vietnam and prompting Western readers to practice some empathy towards life during this time. Oftentimes, we allow legitimate concerns of seemingly incompatible mindsets to hinder us from exercising the compassion of which we might be capable. Or, if “compassion” and “empathy” seem to be too loaded of terms to talk about this bloody era, perhaps frame this exploration around increased understanding; for no diplomatic goals can be responsibly considered without some degree of mutual understanding.

The body of my research will be organized thusly: I will begin with a briefing on Vietnam’s relevant history for the past few centuries to provide context; I will then move into presenting some important philosophical elements of the North Vietnamese mindset in light of my literature. First, following up on the relevant history, I will offer some findings on the impact of foreign occupation on the Vietnamese mindset, and how these historical realities often served to motivate and unify Hanoians. I will then go deeper into this idea of unity in Vietnam, mostly focusing on the deliberate actions by the Communist Party to foster ideological unity amongst Vietnamese people. Next, I will note the devastating impact of bombs and destruction to ultimately support an the undeniable spirit of duty and defense amongst the North Vietnamese. These sections will provide a baseline but holistic view of the North Vietnamese war mindset, which I will briefly contrast with the respective American war mindset. The Data and Analysis section will follow a similar pattern, pausing for deeper reflection on the terms *nhân dân, hy sinh*, and *Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước* and spending more time reflecting on rhetoric in general.

## Methodology

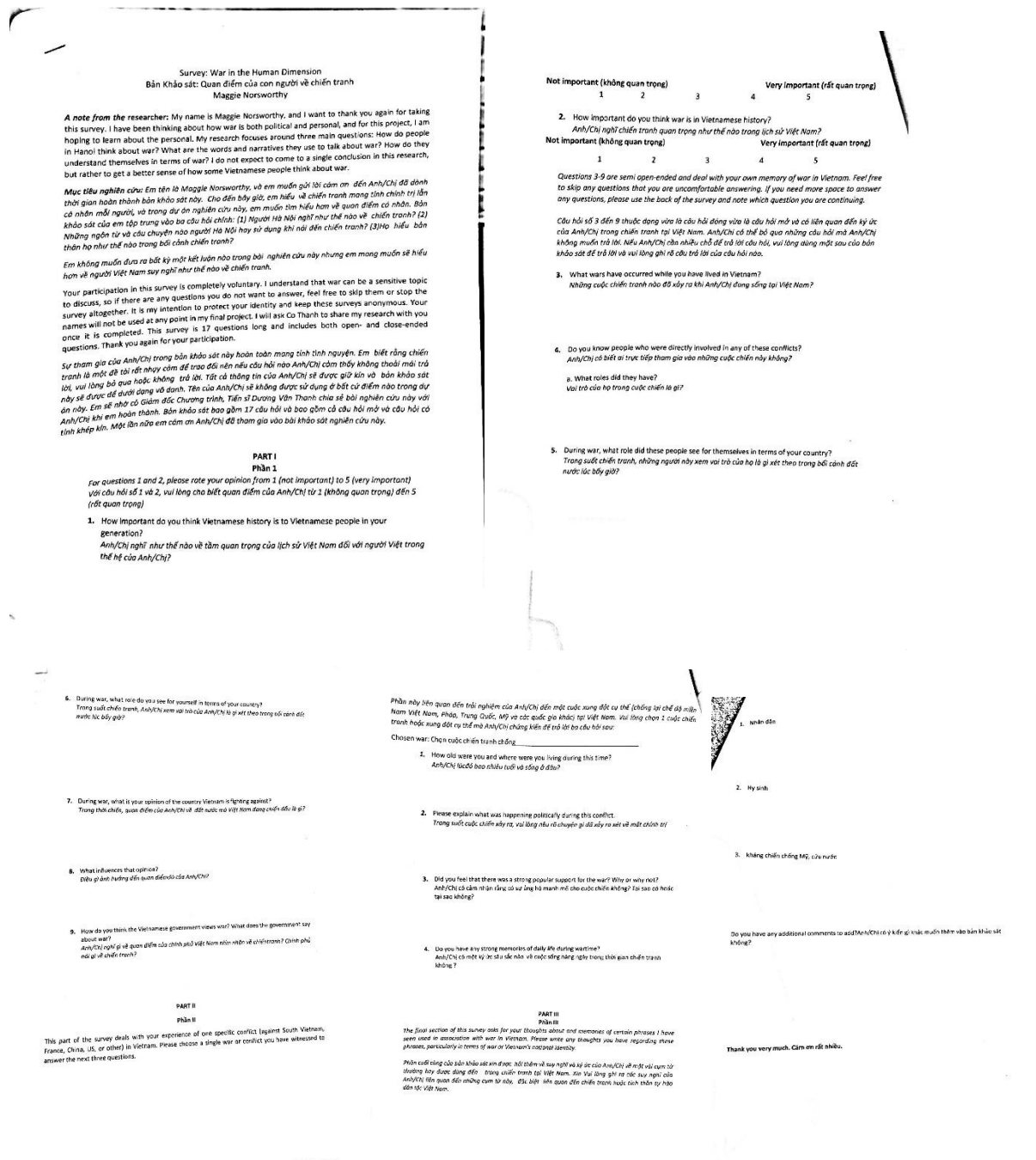
The overall outline and scheduling of my research required some flexibility, particularly in that my in-depth interviews occurred earlier than intended. However, these interviews with Vu The Long and Le Van Lan proved to be quite helpful in framing my subsequent research. From talking to Le Van Lan, I picked up some key words and phrases as well as insight into the very deliberate and open use of propaganda by the Vietnamese government. From speaking with Vu The Long, I learned about the material dimension of life during this time and gained another valuable war narrative.

My original research questions and survey drafts prompted respondents to explain their experiences with and thoughts on war in general. However, it quickly became clear, perhaps because I am American, that my interviewees and survey respondents had the most to say about the American War in Vietnam. While my initial proposal was not framed around this war exclusively, focusing on it has been beneficial when performing research on this scale and within this timeframe.

It was from the mindset of exploring the human dimension of war that I developed my research methods. After conducting my in-depth interviews, I began drafting my initial survey. I administered a detailed written survey to a group of Hanoians above 50 years of age and facilitated a focus group. I then administered a shorter oral questionnaire to random participants at Hoan Kiem Lake. I gathered key quotes and anecdotal evidence from these sessions which I viewed alongside my literature.

### *Written Survey and Focus Group*

The first type of survey I developed was to be answered in writing. It was longer than my later draft and was designed for people with whom I could not communicate in English. Admittedly, this earlier version and the responses it garnered helped me make edits on the random oral survey I later administered. This written survey version was given to a group of 9 adults that were over 50. This group was formed through convenience sampling. I had this survey translated into Vietnamese and allowed the participants to fill in their responses. A picture of this survey is on the following page.



(Figure 1.1- In-depth Written Survey)

This survey is divided into three parts. Part I focuses on war in general. This is also the section of the survey where I sought to learn more about how the government talks about wartime adversaries. Part II asks for reflection and memories of a single war (most chose to talk about the war with America). Part III asks for open-ended wartime connotations of the words *nhân dân*, *hy sinh* and *Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước*. To my surprise and appreciation,

what was intended to be a written survey session also turned in to a focus group. I gained much insight about life during war as well as Vietnamese mentalities from this group, which included two veterans of the American War in Vietnam. Quotes and anecdotes I learned in this session are analyzed in the Data section.

### **Random Oral Survey**

When discussing any topic relating to history in Vietnam, a respondent's age makes an undeniable impact on their response. This notion has been confirmed to me through discussion with Vietnamese of many ages as well as a small-scale case study on high school education in Da Lat. Therefore, for my surveying, I chose to create quotas for different age ranges. Their original quotas are as follows.

**Child** (5- 10 people)

**Young adult** (age 15-30, 15 people)

**Middle adult** (age 30-50, 15 people)

**Older adult** (age 50+, 15 people)

I developed the age divisions of these brackets with help of a student at Hanoi University. We agreed upon these age brackets because of respondents' life experiences in regards to war. For example, people in the "older adult" age group were all born during or before the year 1966, meaning they were all alive during the American War in Vietnam and Chinese border wars. Additionally, some of the older correspondents in this group had memories to share of the French occupation period. Middle and young adults were either not alive or too young for a full comprehension of human affairs during this war, though their insight was valuable for discovering the impacts of war on the mindsets of subsequent generations.

This breakdown was helpful in initially approaching surveying, but I did not end up completing my surveying as I had originally planned. As we attempted the survey with children, it became evident that many of the questions were too complicated for a child to answer, and engaging with this age bracket would likely require development of a new survey draft. Therefore, in order to keep this project feasible under the time constraints, I shifted my focus to the older age groups. Additionally, due to an unexpected hindrance on my interpreter's ability to meet for surveying, I was only able to gather 26 oral surveys instead of my expected number: 45. Of the 26, I spoke to ten young adults, ten middle age adults, and six older adults.

As my topic is less concerned with pursuing a completely accurate narrative and more oriented towards with the popular narrative (which is not to say the popular narrative is inaccurate), I felt the purpose of my survey was to get a sense of how people in Vietnam talk about war, and ideally view this alongside some narratives of the Communist Party. Rather than collecting quantitative data for statistical analysis, I chose to design my random surveys so that the respondents would be able to speak freely and at length. I have included an image of both pages of my random survey:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Random Survey- War in human dimension in Vietnam</b></p> <p><b>Research Question:</b> How do people in Hanoi think about war? What are the words and narratives they use to talk about war? How do they understand themselves in terms of the war?</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PART I</b></p> <p>Age: _____ Education Level: _____  Gender: _____ Profession: _____</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have you lived in Northern Vietnam your entire life?</li> <li>2. What wars have occurred while you have lived in Vietnam?</li> <li>3. Do you know people who were directly involved in any of these conflicts? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What roles did they have?</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. How do you think the Vietnamese government views war?</li> <li>5. When your nation is involved in wars, how do community members describe or talk about people from the opposing country?</li> <li>6. How important do you think war is in Vietnamese history?  <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: left;">Not important</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1</td> <td style="text-align: center;">2</td> <td style="text-align: center;">3</td> <td style="text-align: center;">4</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Very important</td> </tr> </table> </li> <li>7. How important do you think history is to Vietnamese people in your generation?  <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: left;">Not important</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1</td> <td style="text-align: center;">2</td> <td style="text-align: center;">3</td> <td style="text-align: center;">4</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Very important</td> </tr> </table> </li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PART II</b></p>	Not important	1	2	3	4	Very important	Not important	1	2	3	4	Very important	<p>This part of the survey deals with your experience of one specific war (South Vietnam, France, China, US, other) in Vietnam.</p> <p>Chosen war: _____</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How old were you and where were you living during this time?</li> <li>2. What was the most important part of your country's strategy during this war?</li> <li>3. Do you have any strong memories of daily life during this war?</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PART III</b></p> <p><i>The final section of this survey asks for your thoughts about and memories of certain phrases I have seen used in association with war in Vietnam. Please share any thoughts you have regarding these phrases, particularly in terms of war or Vietnam's national identity.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. nhân dân</li> <li>2. hy sinh</li> </ol> <p>Do you have any additional comments to add?</p> <p>Thank you very much.</p>
Not important	1	2	3	4	Very important								
Not important	1	2	3	4	Very important								

*(Figure 1.2- Random Oral Survey)*

I conducted this survey at Hoan Kiem Lake and at Nguyen Linh's residence, both located in Hanoi. No names of participants were recorded, and all refusal to take the survey or refusal to answer any questions was respected.

The survey is divided into 3 parts. Part I was an effort to understand the impact of war on the individual respondent's life and allow the participant to enter the mindset of thinking about war. Part II of the survey gave the opportunity for more in-depth reflection on a specific experience of a war, and also included a very important and telling question: what do you think was the strongest part of Northern Vietnam's strategy during this war?

Part III delved more into the Vietnamese mindset, attempting to gain understanding about how Vietnamese people talk about themselves and their lives during wartime. The phrases I

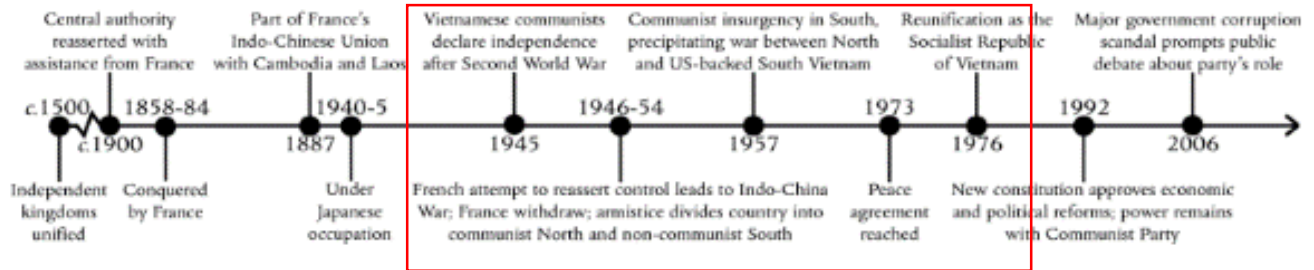
asked about, *nhân dân*, *hy sinh*, and later *dân tộc* came to me through reading *Vietnam at War* by Mark Phillip Bradley and in my in-depth interviews with historian Le Van Lan and archaeologist Vu The Long (Bradley 2009, Lan 2016, Long 2016). By asking about these words, I was able to consider whether the propagated government terminology had its desired impact of reaching “hearts and minds. “

As stated before, these findings were considered alongside the relevant literature’s information regarding the popular narrative.

# Literature Review

## Timeline: War in Vietnam

Before embarking reflection of Vietnam’s history, a very brief reminder of this history is in order.



(Image 1.2-Vietnam Timeline-Whitaker’s 2012)

I have outlined the relevant historical period, which spans roughly the mid 1940’s to the mid 1970’s. Recall that the era from 1945 to 1954 was the French Indochina War, where France eventually relinquished the control of Vietnam that they had possessed since the mid nineteenth century (Whitaker’s 2012). Soon after the French Indochina War, in 1955, began the American War in Vietnam, which lasted until 1975 (History.com). Recall these rough historical periods to contextualize any dates mentioned in this project.

### A Socialist and Patriotic Mindset

*“Better to conquer hearts than citadels.”*  
-Le Loi, 1426

As building the foundations for a socialist mindset proved to be a trying and deliberate process for the Communist Party, so too is developing the best framing to explain this mindset.

The organization of the literature review is as follows: I will begin with discussion of the impact of Vietnam’s history with foreign occupation, with a focus on French colonialism. Taking this history into consideration alongside the information in the next section—regarding deliberate and organic unity in Vietnamese culture—together with a note on the consequences of bombs and destruction to galvanize support, will progress into the following section on the strong sense of duty in Vietnam. Lastly, I will contrast what I have noted about the Vietnamese mindset with some components of the respective U.S American mindset.

## **Impact of Eras of Foreign Occupation**

*“A sense of Vietnamese national identity...grew in reaction to foreign interventions.”*

*-Stanley Karnow*

It is difficult to distill the impact of foreign occupation and influence on Vietnam into one or two words. Life experiences, generational differences, personal dispositions create myriad interpretations of foreign powers among individuals.

Yet, there are some relevant sentiments expressed about the centuries of foreign influence that shed some light on the North Vietnamese mindset. In this section, I will share some information on expressed attitudes towards the French, as their Western similarity to Americans and lengthy history with Vietnam provide a foundation for meaningful analysis of the Vietnamese perspective. I will follow with some findings regarding sentiments toward U.S American involvement in Vietnam.

Many aspects of life under French colonialism in Vietnam were unabashedly abusive. The colonial government weaved demeaning behavior into their policy; engaging in many dastardly tactics such as addicting the Vietnamese to opium (Karnow 1997). Additionally, France strategically divided Vietnam into three different sections: *Tonkin*-North Vietnam, *Annam*-Central Vietnam, and *Cochinchina*-South Vietnam (Hunt 2010).

Kim Ngoc and Mark Phillip Bradley distill of some of the impacts of this era of domination on Vietnamese attitudes, shedding light on two of the particularly lasting offenses of the time: humiliation and disunity. Says Bradley (2009), “French domination provoked a class of Vietnamese tradition trained in Confucian classics and oriented toward political service to engage in an ever deeper and more desperate way to end Vietnam’s humiliating condition.” Not only did the era of French occupation prompt a patriotism-based commitment to fighting for national sovereignty, but “the fragmentation of colonialism has made the Vietnamese extremely sensitive to the issue of organization, and the history of modern Vietnam can be seen as quest for *đoàn thể*,” in English, community or union (Kim 2002). Viewing French colonialism in this way begins to explain how its longevity contributed to a mobilized and unified front of Vietnamese citizens.



This unity was long-lasting, and existed among citizens as well as along the war front. According to a U.S government-commissioned, 1965 report on “Viet Cong” morale, after independence from France, many Vietnamese viewed subsequent struggles with the United States as “a continuation of the war of independence against the French.” (It is important to note that this report was about the Viet Cong, most of whom were from the southern portion of Vietnam. Yet, I do believe the findings belong alongside analysis of viewpoints of people in North Vietnam. While the Viet Cong was far from the lotus of the revolutionary movement, they were receiving instructions and education from the same overseeing body as the North and were ultimately hugely important in implementing the agenda of the Viet Minh. Additionally, this research was performed talking to Viet Cong POWs. I kept these ideas in mind when considering its conclusions (Encyclopædia Britannica).) On a larger scale, many older members of the Viet Cong viewed the struggle against the Americans as a part of the struggle to reestablish Vietnamese independence, a “struggle between Vietnam’s legitimate leaders and usurpers protected by a foreign power” (Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). Expressing the trials of this era in these terms suggests that *any* outsider attempting to influence Vietnam is not welcome, and that a history of defending Vietnam’s national identity produced generations of Vietnamese ready to protect their country. It is quintessential to realize that the Vietnamese mind has resisted colonization, and that interventionist actions perhaps designed to foster freedom can have the exact opposite effect. After centuries of protecting their national identity, Vietnamese resisted any international presence oriented towards control.

Yet, what of the other players on the word stage? Indeed, U.S action in Vietnam did not occur within an international vacuum. Major communist thinkers and activists, such as Vladimir Lenin, were well aware of the struggle in the East. During this time, Lenin wrote an essay declaring Communist powers’ support for those oppressed and struggling against capitalism (Bradley 2009). In the wake of an era where the influence of outsiders served to dehumanize, disenfranchise, and divide Vietnamese people, it is not difficult to understand how appealing and refreshing it might have felt for an outsider to both validate the Vietnamese struggle and speak in a way that is so strongly evocative of inclusivity and of common purpose.

## Unity

*“Peasants, workers, and intellectuals all crowded into the ranks of the armed forces of the revolution.”*

*-General Vo Nguyen Giap*

The Vietnamese government utilized communist philosophy to foster the development of a singleness of mind and of purpose. In analysis of these efforts, a renewal of suspending moral bias is essential; Westerners must attempt to temporarily place these biases—in areas such as freedom of speech and thought—on our mental backburner. After undertaking this action, a logical understanding of the government’s actions during this time is possible.

### *1948 Second National Congress of Culture*

This meeting, and the action it subsequently sprouted, highlight the deep connection between language, politics, self, and country. In attendance were high-status artists and intellectuals, who enjoyed a liberal intellectual atmosphere until this point. Cognizant of the heavy impact of the work of this intelligent class, the Communist Party resolved to alter this atmosphere in order to exploit the talent of these individuals for the revolutionary cause. Recall that in 1948, Vietnam was in the midst of a war with the French. Consistent with collectivist values, artists were encouraged to relinquish the element of self-expression in their art as part of a Communist policy some called *kháng chiến, kiến quốc*, which translates to “nation-building resistance” (Kim 2002). While this congress was remembered wistfully by many as the last time that Vietnamese intellectuals were allowed to discuss and debate freely, it is important to note that members of this class were also in agreement about the intense need to mobilize for the cause of national defense and independence (Kim 2002).

### *The 1949 Conference of Debate in Việt Bắc*

While many socialist-focused initiatives were conceptualized at the 1948 conference, the 1949 conference was where much of the work was undertaken. Artists and intellectuals were chosen to front the labor of affecting a region-wide ideological component of the Communist party. The agenda of this conference was as follows:

1. Specify ideological content
2. Decide on different literary and cultural forms to promote such content
3. Shape structure of intellectual activities (Kim 2002)

“Thus,” as Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh explains, “the time had come to tighten control over intellectuals and their activities not only to rein in discussions that might get out of hand but to make sure that the tools were available to inspire people to the level of sacrifice necessary for the resistance” (Kim 2002). Indeed, propaganda and education are vital for maintaining a group commitment to communist values. As the data analysis section will show, sacrifice, or *hy sinh* in Vietnamese, is a highly sentimental, galvanizing term of wartime. Vietnamese officials planned this conference with a specific 1949 military campaign in mind; the Party ostensibly knew the level of sacrifice that this campaign would require.

*“Văn nghệ nhân dân”; “Cách mạng hóa tư tưởng, quần chúng hóa sinh hoạt”*  
*“People’s literature and art”; “Revolutionize ideology, popularize activities”*

These two phrases describe some of the aforementioned labor of converting a society to a more socialist mindset. The Communist Party was undertaking a substantial task: redefining people’s view of self. Revolutionizing art required a critical analysis of art forms, artists’ chosen perspectives, and their subjects.

One occurrence of this conference, the artistic transition of Nguyễn Đình Thi, serves as a bridge of understanding from an individualist mindset towards a collectivist one. According to Communist critics of Thi, his poetry was “outdated, dark, and complex” (Kim 2002). Though he possessed a poetic voice that might be accepted by a Western audience, Thi was encouraged to rethink his style because “his poetry is a reflection of part of his soul rather than the voice of the masses” (Kim 2002). While much of the resistance struggle of Vietnam was indeed painful, words of pain that were deemed “non-legitimate” were thought to be irreconcilable with the sentiments of the public struggle (Kim 2002).

As Ngoc explains, Party culture authority Tố Hữu had the final say. Hữu asserted that while he himself understood Thi’s poetry, appreciating the sad and wistful tone and even acknowledged that he empathized with the feelings it expressed, Thi’s work was not motivational (Kim 2002). Staging a revolution requires work. Hữu pointed out that he could not use “I” as criteria of whether or not a poem is good, but poetry must rather be evaluated based on the public perception and subsequent reaction (Kim 2002). As Kim poignantly notes, poets were losing control over the direction of their work while simultaneously being put in charge of so much more, now finding themselves key components of their nation’s revolution (Kim 2002).

Analyzing the initiatives enacted at these conferences allows for insight into some components of the philosophy of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Namely, I noted the indication of a deep acknowledgement to artists and intellectuals as key tools to reach the masses and establishing ideologies and narratives. Additionally, as controlling public thought and dialogue is as controversial as it is difficult, these conferences indicate a Party understanding that liberation was important enough to warrant censoring the work of the intelligent class.

The Party ostensibly viewed the work of education in a similar utilitarian light. As Kim explains, by 1951, it was widely understood that “the party must take the offensive, explicitly and concretely, in thought reform policy, as it moved to prepare for...eventual victory” (2002). The educational happenings of this time also provide insight into people’s considerable dedication to thought reform policy. Some politically indoctrinated students began organizing “struggle sessions” (Kim 2002). These sessions, that frequently turned violent, occurred when students attempted to correct the potentially counterrevolutionary thoughts of their peers. This practice employed impactful rhetoric, calling students who behaved unacceptably *Việt gian*, or “traitor” (Kim 2002).

In fact, similar rhetoric was noted in the report on 1965 Viet Cong morale. In order to keep the ranks of the Viet Cong both unified and deeply committed to the cause, “backwardness [was] prohibited,” “backwardness” referring to activities that can be viewed as individualistic or selfish. These examples speak to the immense power of stigmatization and critique among the Vietnamese, a phenomenon that has been noted by Bob Chenoweth, a veteran of the American War in Vietnam and a former Prisoner of War at Hỏa Lò Prison. Chenoweth amazingly credits his time in captivity at the “Hanoi Hilton” as the time when he “began understanding another race” (Kernan 1978). Perhaps his experiences can speak to some of the cross-cultural understanding that this research aims for. According to Chenoweth, “they [the prison guards] didn’t like it when we fought because it was the first rule that you can’t change people’s minds with force. Criticism, peer pressure, is very important in their society, but we don’t have that, it means zip to us” (Kernan 1978). Indeed, these social mechanisms of the Vietnamese mindset were imperative in fostering a collective spirit in a military context as well as a civilian one.

## People's War

*"...this invincible weapon which is people's war."  
-General Vo Nguyen Giap*

In an interview with Deutsche Welle international news, historian Derek Frisby called Vo Nguyen Giap 'a master of revolutionary war' (Domínguez 2013). Not only was Giap credited for ousting the French and Americans from Vietnam, but he was renowned as a brilliant military theorist. In a popular 1970 work *Military Art of People's War*, Giap explores some core questions and key strategies of the "People's War" approach.

He begins a section entitled "People's Army, People's War" with a head-on analysis of the question "Why were the Vietnamese people able to win?" (against the French—recall that the U.S War in Vietnam was still occurring) (Giap 1970). In Giap's words, "the Vietnamese people were able to win because their war of liberation was a people's war" (Giap 1970). In subsequent paragraphs, Giap explores the "People's War" concept, citing familiar ideas regarding the steadfast determination and tireless unity of the People's Army. He summarizes "People's Army" in this way: "the Vietnam army [is] a child of the people. The people, in return, give it unsparing affection and support. Therein lies the inexhaustible source of its power" (Giap 1970). Comparing the more ambivalent mindset of the United States military with a force of such deeply engrained unity and an "inexhaustible source of...power," contextualizes the North Vietnamese military victory. Giap also underlines the importance of the "mutual affections of brother-in-arms" and the work of propaganda and education amongst the masses as vitally important for sustaining revolutionary fervor (1970). Giap reiterates the importance of the Vietnam People's Army comprising members of all classes, a "worker peasant alliance" with an ultimate goal of securing national independence (1970).

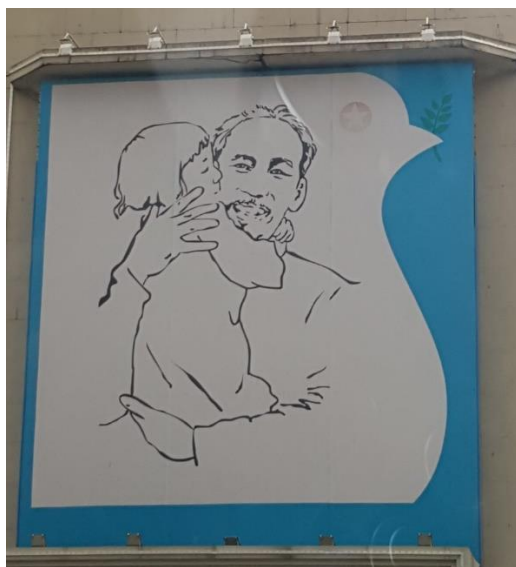
Equally important strategically is cultivating a long-term orientation within the revolutionary force (Giap 1970). As expressed in the Viet Cong morale report, for many members of the military, winning the fight against America meant exhausting America's troops. The following conversation was a common one amongst researchers and Viet Cong POWs. Reports the Rand Corporation (1965):

"We asked how long they thought the war would last. Many said they thought it would be a long war, but some said "It cannot last very much longer now." When

we asked, “What do you think will be the outcome?” a frequent answer was, “The war will continue until one side becomes worn out.” When we probed further, “Do you see one side getting tired yet?” the answer tended to be, “Yes, and it’s not our side.”

### *Rallying Includes All Classes*

Walking the streets of Hanoi today, it is not uncommon to see what most Americans would immediately identify as “propaganda” of the legendary historical figure Ho Chi Minh. This is as evident in his grandiose and meticulously attended mausoleum as it is in street art that evokes familial appreciation for “Uncle Ho’s” deep commitment to his people.



*(Image 1.3-Street Art of Ho Chi Minh. Photo taken by Maggie Norsworthy)*

One influential address from Ho Chi Minh provides some insight into the Vietnamese people’s respect and affection for this figure, as well as the power of revolutionary rhetoric to reach people of all classes. Says “Uncle Ho,”

*“Dear Fellow Countrymen! National salvation is the common cause of our entire people. Every Vietnamese must take part in it. He who has money will contribute his money, he who has strength will contribute his strength, he who has talent will contribute his talent” (Hunt 2010).*

Indeed, this quote not only exemplifies the sense of duty instilled in citizens, but the notion that traditional indicators of power or status were not required in order to contribute to the country's liberation. For one other example of the depth of Vietnamese commitment to the revolutionary cause from all levels of society, one need not look farther than a 2000 obituary for former Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. Where most obituaries might note the family members that the deceased is survived by, Pham's was a bit different. Interestingly, there was no public information available regarding Pham's family. This was the result of a deliberate, life-long decision by Pham in order to send the message that he was primarily loyal to the revolutionary cause. In a culture where family ties have a deep significance, Pham's choice demonstrates an extremely deep level of commitment.

Indeed, towards Vietnamese from every walk of life, the Communist Party aimed to garner increasing power over thought and action, encouraging full-fledged support of the revolution from all citizens. Standing up against the French—and later the United States, Japan, and China—required nothing less than full commitment from all facets of the nation. Yet, there existed additional external factors that undoubtedly underscored message preached by the party, assuring Vietnamese that their country needed reform. These factors included artillery bombardment from the U.S.

### **Other exacerbating factors: bombs and loss**

*"For the first time in a generation armed and unarmed peasants have arisen in Vietnam to press their demands..."*

*-Edourd Daladier (Karnow 1997)*

Bombs, for all the devastation they foster, have an uncanny tendency to mobilize or even revolutionize the afflicted population. Henry Grabar (2013) uses the example of the U.S bombing of Cambodia—which spanned 8 years and included 2.7 million tons of explosives—to illustrate the impact of explosives on community sentiment towards those dropping the bombs. According to journalist Richard Dudman, the bombing and the shooting "was radicalizing the people of rural Cambodia and was turning the country into a massive, dedicated, and effective rural base" (Grabar 2013). In the case of Cambodia, some literature even argues that one effect of this destruction was a population prepared to foster the rise to power of the genocidal Pol Pot.

But in Vietnam, according to the morale report, artillery and aerial bombardment led to intense hatred towards Americans at a hugely significant rate. Be it heuristics or the truth, Viet Cong members claimed that “when one innocent peasant is killed, ten rise in his place; when ten are killed, one hundred will rise up” (Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). Throughout the war, as the U.S showered Vietnam in bombs and artillery, they were quite possibly strengthening both the resolve and the number of troops to defeat.

### **Duty and Defense**

As stated previously, it is evident that the context of French occupation as well as the importance of unity and collectivism in Vietnamese culture led to both a propensity for Communist philosophy and a deeply impactful duty to defend Vietnam on a national scale.

One important rhetorical device that I came across was *hy sinh* or “sacrifice” (Bradley 2009). I will elaborate more on Vietnamese reflections on this term in my analysis, but for now it is important to note that Vietnamese people tended to associate this term with a high degree of respect, a high sense of duty, and a specifically national orientation. During wartime, the ruling party also took deliberate, public action to foster a feeling of honor surrounding war martyrs, or *liệt sĩ*. (Bradley 2009). Again, recall the blurred line between civilian and military in Vietnam. As referenced in Ho Chi Minh’s inspirational address, *all* members of society, not just the rich or powerful, were explicitly encouraged and expected to contribute what they had to the war.

Vo Nguyen Giap echoes these sentiments: “to resist the American aggression, arms in hand, for the sake of national salvation, is the most sacred duty of every Vietnamese patriot, of every Vietnamese people” (Giap 1970). The power of this rhetoric is quite apparent. A people’s war is a very specific kind of war; those not officially affiliated with the military were incredibly important. These “people” were mothers, honored for their willingness to send their sons to fight for the cause and families, who fed and took care of soldiers in their own homes. Most strikingly, these people were Vietnamese in rural villages who literally took “arms in hand” to support the revolutionary cause as guerilla fighters (Giap 1970).

Those in the traditional army, of course, were also “ready for the supreme sacrifice,” and, according to the Rand report, “the most articulate and committed communist prisoners interviewed by us stressed the voluntarism of the movement and pointed out that you cannot make a revolutionary fighter of a person dragooned into service” (Hunt 2010; Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). While some North Vietnamese were drafted into fighting, the vigor of the



sentiments of these Viet Cong POWs seem to echo the observations of Chenoweth, that Vietnamese culture deeply reflected the notion that “you can’t change people’s minds by force” (Kernan 1978).

### **Differences in Military Morale: The U.S Army versus the Vietnam People’s Army**

In addition to profiling the willingness of the army to make sacrifices for the sake of the country, the reports on Viet Cong morale shed light on specific measures taken by the Vietnam People’s Army to build and sustain dedication to the revolutionary cause. Overall, perhaps in a nod to the Buddhist monks many associate with Vietnam, the Rand observers noted a “monkish solidarity” among the Viet Cong. The POWs interviewed provided insight into the internal organization of the army that both cultivated morale and constantly renewed a uniform commitment to their cause. In daily meetings, Viet Cong units discussed specific topics: the general spirit or morale of the unit; the internal unity and solidarity of the unit; the external unity (between the unit and the civilian population); frugality; and an evaluation of the work performance since the last meeting and allocation of jobs for the next day (Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). Additionally, units implemented a “buddy system,” dividing into groups of three soldiers. These units were impressively effective for political indoctrination as well as a “psychological prophylaxis” against the trying tension and anxiety of wartime (Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). I point out the effectiveness because, though the Viet Cong objectively fought in deeper material squalor than the already difficult conditions facing the U.S army, Viet Cong Prisoners of War repeatedly stated that they “live gloriously and die splendidly.” These team- and morale- building policies seem to be extraordinarily effective within the Vietnamese forces (Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). Additionally, according to historian Le Van Lan, soldiers of the U.S American Army required significantly more rations during wartime than did the Vietnam People’s Army (Lan 2016). Perhaps, again, this was related to morale and commitment to their cause.

Some observations from this report illicit an explicit contrast with the respective U.S military mentality. According to one Viet Cong POW, in a sentiment that once again nods at the observations of Chenoweth as a POW, “they fight only for pay...we are fighting for the just cause” (Donnell, Pauker, Zasloff 1965). While U.S American soldiers were oftentimes plagued with moral dilemmas and ambiguities about the war’s purpose, while young people were burning

their draft cards and millions were protesting the war efforts from the U.S, while it seemed for many that they would rather do anything else than fight in the Vietnam War, the fighters of the Viet Cong apparently “[saw] no option but to keep on fighting” (Goure, Russo, Scott 1966).

That leads to what some might perceive as fallbacks of the American military mentality during this period. Hopefully the contents of this report thus far have illustrated the various forces that combined to create a passionate and mobilized North Vietnamese wartime mindset. And indeed, as the Rand report indicates, this insight that was a surprise to many Americans in the 1960’s. This report demonstrates that the U.S’s adversaries were well aware of our growing weaknesses. And North Vietnam’s military strategy, General Giap’s “People’s War,” was partially contingent upon impending American fatigue. Perhaps this explains why one veteran in my focus group did not find it accurate to call Vietnam “tired” of foreign presence, as much of Vietnam’s war strategy seemed to hinge, rather, on the *U.S’s* increasing exhaustion.

Ultimately, as Karnow (1997) astutely summarizes, “American strategists [had] an ignorance of Vietnam’s history, a long and torturous series of conflicts and accommodations that gave the Vietnamese a profound sense of their own identity.” This sense of identity revealed itself time and time again throughout my data collection.

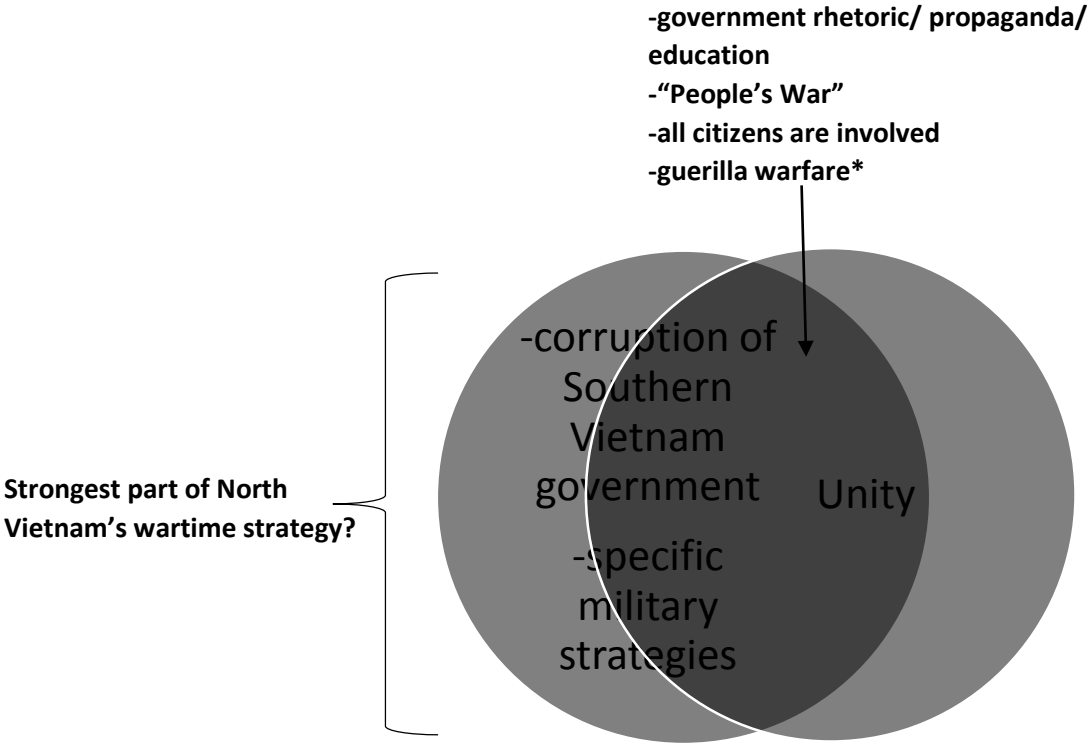
## Research Findings and Analysis

I will now provide two diagrams I conceived through reflection on my surveys and my literature review in light of one another. As capturing a “mindset” is a task requiring inherent flexibility, these diagrams might smooth the transition between some of the concepts of the literature review and of the field research.



*Figure 1.3- Venn Diagram relating Duty and hy sinh (sacrifice)*

*This Venn diagram illustrates the overlap of: my findings when asking Hanoians about the word “hy sinh” (sacrifice) and my secondary research regarding a North Vietnamese sense of duty. This diagram should serve to show how (at least in the war context), Hanoian civilians, the military, and the government seem to agree that duty and sacrifice for the good of the country go hand-in-hand. Thus, the two circles are almost completely overlapping.*



*Figure 1.4- Venn diagram relating North Vietnamese war strategy and impressions of unity*  
 This Venn diagram outlines my findings when comparing literary research on Vietnamese concepts of unity with survey research on perceptions of North Vietnam’s strongest wartime strategy. Overwhelmingly, people cited “unity” as the most important strategy, even if it was mentioned amongst more specific military strategies. Thus, the significant overlap of the two circles. The text in the middle of the circles gives some general examples of government mechanisms used to foster nationwide unity during wartime.

*\*I had some difficulty classifying guerilla warfare. I came to think it could be understood as both embodying the deepest example of civilian commitment or an example of the flexibility in divisions between civilian and military during wartime in Vietnam as compared to the US.*

My research—both primary and secondary—has allowed me to identify what I think are some key components of the North Vietnamese war mindset and historical perspective. The relevant information I have identified from literature was largely consistent with my interview

findings. Therefore, I will use similar organizational categories to present my interview and survey findings, hopefully adding some depth, context, and humanity to my findings in literature.

It was my initial focus group that made me realize that while I was hoping for a more general view on war, I would find the most information and perspective regarding the experience of the American War in Vietnam. However, as America is a foreign superpower to Vietnam, the history of foreign occupation cannot be disregarded and is immensely impactful in the Vietnamese perspective.

### **Impact of Foreign Occupation**

According to one survey taker, on the question of the importance of history to Vietnamese people in their generation, history represents the “tradition to build the country and keep the country of Vietnamese people.” Applying this to the question of rhetoric and mobilizing, history becomes a highly politicized, deliberately employed and experienced component of Vietnamese thinking; particularly for the ultimate goal of “building” and “keeping” Vietnam. Considering how much of Vietnamese history is mired in defense against foreign aggressors, it becomes clear how the past can rise to increased relevance in times of conflict.

Additionally, the Vietnamese viewpoint towards foreign aggressors in the past is a fruitful realm in which to consider rhetorical choices. In an early interview with Le Van Lan, while introducing my topic, I referred to the war in question with the name I always had: “The Vietnam War.” This seemingly introductory comment launched our conversation into the realm of questioning rhetoric, with considering the impact of my calling the war “The Vietnam War.”

Polarizing wartime rhetoric has been employed throughout Vietnamese history, beginning with naming the conflicts themselves. When Vietnam was struggling against French domination, the conflict was popularly called “*kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp*” which translates to “the war of resistance against the colonialist French.” Later, when Vietnam and the United States were engaged in war, the conflict was referred to by a similar title, “*kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước*.” This roughly translates to “resistance war against the imperialist Americans, to save the country.” Now, pausing here, momentarily suspending whether we think this sentiment is valid, it is easy to see that simply referring to a conflict with such strong language can impact the national conversation about this conflict.

I encountered similar language during my visit to Hỏa Lò prison, also known to prisoners of war as the “Hanoi Hilton.” The prison site, now a popular museum, gives some insight into the way history is explained to Hanoians and tourists alike. One section of the museum was devoted to the experiences of American pilots that were held in Hỏa Lò as Prisoners of War during the American War in Vietnam, and the language used to describe the era is quite telling. For instance, in a video display explaining the American escalation of the war from 1964, the English subtitles explain that not only were the U.S. government’s actions “extremely dangerous moves up the war ladder,” but also “threaten[ed] even the world’s peace and security” (Hỏa Lò 2016). Additionally, in a panel providing an introduction to the United States-focused section of the museum, the opening sentence establishes a similar perspective: “The United States government carried out sabotage warfare by using their air and naval forces against the North of Vietnam.” (Hỏa Lò 2016). These examples provide some insight into another contribution to the national conversation about this conflict.

### **Unity as War Strategy: People’s Perspective**

*The War in Vietnam was realized not by cannon, by gun, by soldier...but the most important part of this was propaganda and education.”*  
-Le Van Lan (2016)

My field research brought the findings of my literature review to life. When conducting my focus group, for example, patriotism and determination were unanimously cited as the most important part of North Vietnam’s wartime strategy.

My random oral surveying further substantiated these sentiments, reiterating the importance of *both* civilian and military efforts during the war and shedding some light on the people that bore the brunt of wartime losses. One participant’s quote provides a citizen’s opinion on the government’s role during wartime: “We need the government to regulate the activities of citizens, organize protests, [and] guide people.” This citizen’s perspective challenges the notion that the government’s control over Vietnam is unwanted. In fact, especially during wartime, Vietnamese people expressed to me a very deep devotion to their nation, sometimes at the price of personal freedom. Hanoians are proud of their nation’s ability to rally for defense: “[the] spirit of unity is very important;” “parents, children, everyone participated in war.” Expressed in Vietnamese, “*toàn dân kháng chiến*” or “*kháng chiến toàn dân, toàn diện, rường kỳ*” meaning, respectively “all people for the resistance,” and “all generations for the resistance.”

## **Morale**

*“Vietnamese people love the country so much. Every time the invaders come, the patriotism intertwines and becomes the wave to engulf the invaders.”*

*Focus group member, April 8<sup>th</sup> 2016*

Gaining insight directly from Vietnamese people about their morale and attitude during wartime was very revealing of the impact of the government’s rhetoric on the citizens’ vocabulary and worldview. Amongst my sample, comprising mostly people who answered the surveys independently of discussion with one another, I heard many repeated phrases. For example, when asking people about the roles of people they knew during wartime, I heard the phrase “protect the country” multiple times. This is very powerful rhetoric. Not only does it imply a high degree of perceived political efficacy from the citizenry, but it implies that the war was one of defense and protection. This is an idea that is easy to rally around. Easier, for example, than the U.S’ escalation of the war, clandestine bombings, all in the context of an uncontrolled arena for free speech where dissatisfaction with the war could be expressed. On one hand, this suggests an epistemological divide between Vietnam and the U.S: one nation attempts to create truth through the transmissions of the government while the viewpoint of the other has the chance to marinate in a somewhat liberal public sphere and be massaged by the agenda of the government. Now, taking this comparison strictly from a strategic standpoint, it represents one facet of Vietnam’s ability to mobilize behind this war: not only was their motive more easily articulated, but it had a more direct and influential channel through which it was transmitted.

### **Rhetoric: People’s Perspective**

As previously noted, as part of my field research, I asked people for their connotations and reflections on Vietnamese words and phrases I encountered in my literature review. I hoped to glean a sense of how the words were used specifically in a war context. Below are some of the most common and most interesting responses I received about different terms:

*Nhân Dân- “the people”*

*-“Vietnamese people were like heroes.”*

- “[during war, *Nhân Dân* experienced] suffering, lacking of things and family had to suffer the damage.”

- “patriotism...”

- “heart has sentiment, protection, support, always give strength and confidence, citizen, respectful, sacred/spiritual, beloved...”

I first came across this term in *Vietnam at War* (Bradley 2009). When asking Le Van Lan about the term, his answer evidenced both Vietnamese unity and the Vietnamese perspective on propaganda and communism. *Nhân dân* is a term very commonly employed by the Communist party; it is, in fact, the name of the party’s official newspaper. Figures such as Ho Chi Minh and General Giap oftentimes evoked rhetoric about how the Communist party and the government “served” *nhân dân*, even going as far as to call the government a “slave” to the people. According to Le Van Lan, people understand the employment of this slogan, “are happy about it,” and are subsequently likely to do what the government asks of them. To illustrate the widely-encompassing sentiments behind both *nhân dân* and *hy sinh*, Le Van Lan shared a story of a poor family in Quang Tri province whose house sustained significant war damage. Upon “receiving the title *nhân dân*,” the family’s commitment to the war effort was reinvigorated; they donated brick and other materials from their home to build a road for the Vietnam People’s Army.

#### *Hy sinh- “sacrifice”*

- “willingness to die to protect country”

- “die for protection of nation, die for citizens, willingness to give up anything like death, life, or resource”

- “deny individual purpose and focus on collective actions of nation—would do anything during wartime.”

- “gift of individual to contribute to protest, [for the sake of] national security, lots of youth die in the military, but the family feels proud.”

- “willingness and respected duty of all citizens when country is in trouble”

- “it is a privilege to sacrifice for the country”



Among the most striking aspects of these definitions are the words I underlined, which suggest not only a *tolerance* or *acceptance* of the possibility of dying for the country, but a “*willingness*” to do so, even calling sacrificing a “*privilege*” or “*gift*.” These quotes speak to the morale of the Vietnamese people, but also of the collectivist nature of the Vietnamese mindset: a literal “deny[ing] of individual purpose.” This calls to mind and brings context to the experience of Nguyễn Đình Thi at the 1949 Conference of Debate in Việt Bắc. Though poetry with a self-focused or emotionally indulgent purpose can be refreshing and relatable, if the work of artists and intellectuals has the impact on the society that the Communist Party says it does, the quotes might exemplify some success stories of the Communist party controlling the public conversation. Indeed, consider the sentiments expressed by ordinary Hanoians in 2016 alongside those expressed by the previously mentioned General Giap (1970) in his explanation of People’s War “to resist the American aggression, arms in hand, for the sake of national salvation, is the most sacred duty of every Vietnamese patriot, of the entire Vietnamese people.” The two different contexts, decades apart, employ remarkably similar rhetoric. Comparing this rhetorical arena with U.S sentiments during this time highlights both the difference in control over public dialogue between the U.S and Vietnam and the difference in dedication and attitude towards the war.

*Cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước- The War Against Imperialist America, to Save the Country*

- “*the just cause*”

- “*the proud of the nation and the illustrious victory*”

- “*it was certain to be successful*”

- “*the loss of so many people was unnecessary*”

- “*that was the long fight of Vietnamese people. It created the significant loss for Vietnam in terms of property and the people.*”

Lastly, the way that the Vietnamese government and people refer to the war itself is telling. When I originally chose to ask people about this term, I was expecting more of an acknowledgement of the obviously partisan nature of this title. There was no such talk. In fact, most sentiments expressed about this war were basically unanimous. What I was most interested in was the different understanding of objective “facts” of the war, many of which were in direct

opposition to the narrative I had grown up hearing. When asked, for example, if the United States was “invading” or “intervening” in South Vietnam in the 70’s, not a single respondent said the U.S’s actions served as a positive intervention. If they even mentioned the word intervention, it was to express a thought that started something like “the United States may have *thought* they were intervening, but...”

In this same sentiment were many of the answers I received when asking if my participants felt a strong popular support for the North Vietnamese cause during this war.

*-“people from all over the world supported Vietnam in the war against America”*

*-“Vietnamese people altogether supported the fight against America to protect the country.”*

*-“yes, because the war was ill-gotten.”*

*-“we didn’t want the war to happen, but because we were invaded we had to fight to protect the country.”*

*-“The support from Russia and other socialist countries”*

*-“People, friends from all over the world supported Vietnamese people against the empire invaders.”*

These quotes characterize an important layer of the Vietnamese standpoint towards war, one that can be enlightening when pondering Vietnam’s historical war victories; the history of war in Vietnam is largely one of defense. Hanoians told me over and over again, in reference to both themselves and their government, that Vietnamese people hate war. Yet it is this same force, the force of patriotism and communalism and unity, that both fuels their strong distaste for wars and fuels the logic and morale that ultimately tends to propel them to technical victory in the wars they do end up in.

## The Language of Loss: Who won the war?

There's a reason I say "technical victory." One element of my research was to explore the ways people talk about war and possibly begin to expose limits of this vernacular. I was particularly interested in the word "lose" in the case of this war. By all traditional definitions of the word "lose," the United States "lost" the war in Vietnam. Yet, I have found that particularly in an educational setting, it is not uncommon to witness Americans skirting around this language, describing the end of the American War in Vietnam as a "withdrawal" rather than a "defeat." At the same time, in other countries, I found that there was no hesitation to call the American War in Vietnam a loss, hard and fast. I noted additional nuances of the word "lose" when asking people in Vietnam who won and lost the war. Most people I spoke to who experienced the American War in Vietnam said, in so many words, one of two answers.

*"The Americans lost the war but Vietnam lost so much more" or  
"No one wins in war, and the people lose the most."*

I then checked with a bilingual friend regarding the flexibility of the word "loss"- wondering if, like in English, the word could be used to describe both the outcome of a war and the action of losing a life or property. It turns out that, like in English, this is the case in Vietnamese. When I think, then, about the flexibility of this word, I think about the possibilities for fitting our speech about war more accurately to the human dimension of war. By that I mean, thinking deeply about the fact that rigid terminology—and the rigid logic it fosters—might not always be appropriate; for war is ultimately a series of *human* interactions that, even if they combine for some larger purpose within the war narrative, ultimately end up affecting these same humans the most.

## Conclusion

A quintessential lesson from this research is an endorsement of the simplicity of its methods: the best way to learn about life during the American War in Vietnam is to talk to people about their lives during the American War in Vietnam. This process is smoothed by attempting to suspend political and moral bias regarding relations between the U.S and Vietnam at this time.

It is important to acknowledge the more subtle and complex dimensions of this inquiry.

On a larger scale, this project is an attempt to navigate a pursuit for truth when the topic at hand has multiple “truths” and possibly sensitive consequences for those involved. Thanks to support from the academic staff, the openness of Vietnamese people, and the length of time that has passed since this war occurred, my month in Hanoi presented an opportune situation to pursue such analysis.

For North Vietnam, “People’s War” was a thoughtful and successful wartime strategy. Due to centuries of foreign occupation that allowed revolutionary sentiment and wartime readiness to fester, a sense of Vietnamese unity that is as historical as it is manufactured, the galvanizing impact of bombs and other attacks, and a deep sense of duty and defense, North Vietnam had an “inexhaustible” source of energy and dedication from both military members and civilians during this conflict (Giap 1970). Additionally, a heavy government hand in the public conversation, inspirational Vietnamese leaders, and support and rhetoric from the global Communist movement helped sustain the nation’s energy during a conflict that was “won” by outlasting the opponent.

The two opening quotes of the introduction illustrate the potential downfalls of ignoring the successes and realities of North Vietnam’s wartime strategy: the first pointing to the problems of government policy that is based on “impressions” and “intuitions” and the second to the problems when the popular historical narrative is in fact “ahistorical.” While it can be tempting to transmit our own versions of truth to others, it is vitally important to understand as many sides of history as deeply as we can, to allow them to provide nuances to our own analysis, to ultimately strengthen our own views and to promote diplomacy. There is certainly a time for politics, a time for debating morals, but I believe that there is a danger in beginning these actions too early in our analysis. Therefore, I invite readers to suspend moral bias.

By committing to an approach based on constructivism, epistemology, and subsequently rhetoric, increased holistic understanding of this period of history is possible. This analysis allows a deeper look into words that might signal fear to Americans, allowing words like Communism to be contextualized into Vietnam's deeply historical and community-oriented relationship with this philosophy. Readers may judge for themselves whether or not North Vietnam's actions were morally excusable, but to dismiss them before full consideration the Vietnamese context is irresponsible. Lastly, a human-based analysis of this war may prove a wise model for other international conflicts—a reminder that the quarreling nations are, in fact, composed of people. A commitment to this analytical orientation when thinking about war can provide richness to questions of “winning” and “losing,” challenging our familiar rhetoric to better suit the complex realities of war.

### **Limits**

This work would undoubtedly improve had I a greater knowledge of the Vietnamese language. Not only would this ability have improved my sense of subtleties and patterns of rhetoric in my participants' speech, but it would have likely enhanced the information I could find for my literature review as well. I am grateful, then, for the scholars who have chosen to publish their work in English, as I am grateful to those multilingual individuals who have translated Vietnamese content for an English-speaking audience. Perhaps focusing on rhetoric was a naïve oversight; for it can indeed prove difficult to deepen analysis of a language you do not speak. However, thanks to the fortune of being connected to many individuals with an extensive grasp of both English and Vietnamese, I was able to get more information on those subtleties that I did catch.

Regarding my field research, there were many opportunities for bias. For example, there is a possibility that the citizens of Hanoi who choose to spend time in the public area of Hoan Kiem Lake differ substantially from those who do not. In the same vein, I experienced some people who refused to answer my questionnaire; some older, some government affiliated, and some who claimed they did not know enough to talk to me about the war. This suggests more potential for bias; perhaps there is a difference in opinion between those who are willing to engage with a Western stranger about war and those who are not. Additionally, an unexpected time restraint from Hanoi University rendered it difficult to gather more than 26 interviews. While I feel confident that those 26 questionnaires combined with my other field research

provided fruitful insight into the Vietnamese mindset, my survey population was a tiny subset of the population. In general, the time constraints of this research period could have hindered my ability to reach a certain level of depth on this topic. Lastly, there is always a possibility of social desirability bias, where respondents might have censored their answers to cater to their perceptions of what I was hoping to hear.

### **Further Research**

I believe that a subsequent study with mirroring methodology regarding American rhetoric of this war would be deeply informative. David Sutton's *The Rhetoric of the Vietnam War: An Annotated Bibliography* points at many articles which analyze U.S American rhetorical choices, such as the controversially manipulated Tonkin Gulf narrative, and the pertinence of the use of 'aggressor'-focused language to describe the potential spread of Communism. Though I was unable to gain access to many of these articles, I believe that this review could lead to fruitful follow up research and a chance to put my own culture in this same light.

In terms of this study, as stated before, a deeper analysis of Vietnamese linguistics would provide additional richness to these findings.

Were I to continue this line of inquiry, I would expand my focus of study to include more of the non-governmental factors that shape the public's mindset and the citizenry's conversations. I would spend more time looking at the impact of books, of film, of visual art and poems. I am deeply curious to study the results of the Communist Party altering art at the conferences I researched.

On the U.S American side, war films and literature have a very significant impact on the public conversation about this war. Were I to continue pursuing this work, I would be interested in both the most accurate and the most impactful of these forms of media for the United States.

Ultimately, the deepest curiosities that stemmed from this project were regarding the epistemology of experiencing war. There is a fair amount of research regarding veterans' memories, but from my findings, there is much more to explore regarding a philosophical approach to this line of inquiry.

My initial vision for this work, which was quickly scaled down, was the development of an educational syllabus. I envisioned a course that would encourage students to radically empathize with the unfamiliar mindsets of this time, a course where the readings were the highest quality narratives and the most provocative philosophies from the East and the West, and

the lecturers were experienced in connecting over a troubled past. If I have the chance to continue rounding out my understandings of the human dimension of war, perhaps this syllabus will someday come to fruition.

## Works Cited

- Abrams, J. (2015, November 11). 'I got to know the enemy'. *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*.
- Arnett, P. (1978, August 25). Vietnam POWs continue to voice differences. *The Argus-Press*, Editorial section, pp. 4-5.
- Ashwill, M. A. (2014, February 2). Jumping on the Vietnam War commemoration bandwagon: the vain search for honor. *Huffington Post*, Politics Blog.
- Beitiks, E. (1990, November 22). 1st N. Viet vet to make official U.S tour says it's time for new relations. *Deseret News*.
- Black, D. (2002). Seven forms of western bias. In *Dim your light: Western barriers to Chinese wisdom* (pp. 1-33). Unpublished.
- Bradley, M.P (2009). Experiencing war. In *Vietnam at war* (pp. 77-114). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford.
- Cline, D. (1991). Vietnamese combat vet says, "it's time for reconciliation". *Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, 21(1).
- Domínguez, G. (2013, October 7). Vo Nguyen Giap - 'a master of revolutionary war'. *Deutsche Welle*, People.
- Donnell, J., Pauker, G., & Zasloff, J. (1965, March). Viet Cong motivation and morale in 1964: a preliminary report (Report No. 1). Santa Monica, CA: Rand.
- Giap, V.N. (1970). People's war, people's army. In R. Stetler (Ed.), *Military art of people's war: selected writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap* (pp. 101-117). New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Grabar, H. (2013, February 14). What the U.S. bombing of Cambodia tells us about Obama's drone campaign. *The Atlantic*.
- Goure, L., Russo, A., & Scott, D. (1966, February). Some findings of the Viet Cong motivation and morale study: June-December 1965 (Report No. 9). Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation.
- Hendrix, K. (1990, November 28). Peacemakers : Vietnam War: Nguyen Ngoc Hung once fought against American troops. Now, like some of his former enemies, he hopes to bury past. *Los Angeles Times*, Political Activism.
- Historic development of Vietnam [Map]. (n.d.). The Pentagon Papers. Mount Holyoke, Boston, MA. Retrieved from <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent13.htm>
- History.com Staff. (2009). Vietnam war history. Retrieved May 6, 2016, from <http://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history>
- Hunt, M. H. (Ed.). (2010). *A vietnam war reader: a documentary history from American and Vietnamese perspectives*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Introduction [American Pilot Prisoners of War]. (n.d.). Hoa Lo Prison. Hanoi, Vietnam.
- Kernan, M. (1978, November 19). Shadow of the Hanoi Hilton: the Hanoi Hilton. *The Washington Post*, Lifestyle.
- Karnow, S. (1997). The Heritage of Vietnamese Nationalism. In *Vietnam: A History* (pp. 109-138). Penguin Group.
- Kim Ngoc Bao, N. (2002). Toward a more socialist viewpoint. In *A world transformed: the politics of culture in revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (pp. 83-120). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.



- Krueger, C., Gitter, O., & Beiswenger, J. (n.d.). Vietnam war propoganda. Retrieved May 2, 2016, from American Wars website:  
<https://sites.google.com/site/americanhistorywars/vietnam-war/propaganda>
- Lan, L. V. (2016, April 6). [Personal interview by the author].
- Sutton, D.. (1994). The Rhetoric of the Vietnam War: An Annotated Bibliography. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 24(3/4), 131–147. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3885948>
- Templer, R. (2000, May 3). Pham Van Dong. *The Guardian*, Obituaries.
- Viet Cong (VC). (2016). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Cong>
- Vietnam News Agency Staff. (2009, September 29). The legend of Hoan Kiem Lake. Retrieved May 6, 2016, from <http://en.hanoi.vietnamplus.vn/Home/The-legend-of-Hoan-Kiem-Lake/20099/220.vnplus>
- Vu, L. T. (2016, April 9). [Personal interview by the author].
- Whitacker's Almanack Country Profiles: Vietnam. (2012). *Vietnam Timeline* [Image]. Retrieved from <http://www.financepractitioner.com/country-profiles-whitaker/vietnam>
- Suspension of disbelief. (2003). In *Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon*. Dictionary.com, LLC.