HERITAGE AND MEMORY STUDIES

Ron Eyerman, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring

Vietnam

A War, Not a Country

Amsterdam
University
Press

Amsterdam
University
Press

Vietnam: A War, Not a Country

Amsterdam
University
Press

Heritage and Memory Studies

This ground-breaking series examines the dynamics of heritage and memory from transnational, interdisciplinary and integrated approaches. Monographs or edited volumes critically interrogate the politics of heritage and dynamics of memory, as well as the theoretical implications of landscapes and mass violence, nationalism and ethnicity, heritage preservation and conservation, archaeology and (dark) tourism, diaspora and postcolonial memory, the power of aesthetics and the art of absence and forgetting, mourning and performative re-enactments in the present.

Amsterdam
University
Press

Vietnam: A War, Not a Country

Ron Eyerman,
Todd Madigan and
Magnus Ring

Amsterdam University Press

Cover illustration: Ron Eyerman

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 308 4
e-ISBN 978 90 4855 639 7 (pdf)
DOI 10.5117/9789463723084
NUR 689

Amsterdam
University
Press

Table of Contents

Amsterdam University Press

Amsterdam
University
Press

Preface

Book production is always a collective effort; this book in particular. The process began in one of those busy cafes near the Yale University campus and is now drawing to a close with its three authors spread around the globe. What started as close interactive collaboration ends through internet contacts. How the work world has changed! Nonetheless, the underlying process reflects three researchers working with one accord to piece together the meaning and memory of a decades-long violent conflict from the divergent perspectives of its various protagonists. Adding to the timeliness—and poignancy—of a project focussed on the trauma of whole societies is the fact that it is being released in 2023, which marks the 50th anniversary of the withdrawal of American combat forces in Vietnam. We look forward to the reception of these efforts.

A book like this is not only a collaborative endeavor among three authors. As we researched this project, we visited a multitude of museums, monuments, memorials, and galleries scattered across the United States and Vietnam, sites whose creation necessitated the collaboration of vast numbers of people and considerable resources. These sites range widely in terms of the way they tell the story of the American-Vietnamese War and the degree to which they continue to impact their visitors. But even more moving than our visits to these sites were the interviews and conversations we had with countless students, scholars, artists, journalists, veterans, and other community members who have been touched in some way by the American-Vietnamese War. Without the generous insights, reflections, and vulnerability of these individuals regarding what for many remains a deeply personal—and often painful—topic, this book would simply not have been possible. It is to you, with gratitude, that we dedicate this work.

As this project has taken shape, we have had the opportunity to present various portions of it at academic conferences across Europe, North America, and Asia, and we wish to express our thanks to the scholarly community that has offered us substantial feedback during these presentations. In particular, our thanks extends to the anonymous reviewers who offered their detailed and nuanced comments on our manuscript, and to the editorial staff at Amsterdam University Press, all of whom have helped improve the book. And finally, for the support that transcends contributions focussed solely on scholarly production, we express our love and indebtedness to our families.

Given the presence of three authors and the academic tradition of marking individual reputation through publications, we feel it necessary

to describe the division of labor that made this book possible. Ron Eyerman assumed primary responsibility for Chapters 3 and 6, Todd Madigan for Chapters 1, 4, and 5 and Magnus Ring for Chapter 2. We all read and commented on each of these chapters and see the end result as collective and collaborative.

1 Introduction: Cultural Trauma and the American-Vietnamese War

Abstract
There is continuing conflict over how the American-Vietnamese War ought to be understood, represented, memorialized, and learned from, and this struggle over its memory has been waged within the communities of all those who were touched by its hostilities. And precisely how the war is remembered is of ongoing concern, for when a collectivity understands itself to have been fractured by some calamity, then if it is to persist *as a collectivity*, it must reconstitute its identity. This process of collective identity reconstruction is indicative of cultural trauma, the traumatization of an entire society. The present chapter develops the conceptual tools necessary to trace this process within the societies of each of the war's primary belligerents.

Keywords*:* Vietnam War, cultural trauma, collective memory, cultural sociology, Vietnamese American, narrative identity

One day, Vietnam may become a country; for now, it remains a war....
The Nation, 1990[1]

At the close of the twentieth century, Vietnamese-American novelist Monique T.D. Truong claimed that "For the majority of Americans, Vietnam as a self-defined country never existed," that its existence in the U.S. national consciousness emerged only when it became "defined by military conflict"—as the site of American warfare (1997: 220). Through the opening decades of the twenty-first century, little has changed to challenge this assertion. Twenty years after Truong made this statement, another Vietnamese-American

1 Cited in Kunzle, 1991: 23.

Eyerman, Ron, Todd Madigan and Magnus Ring, *Vietnam: A War, Not a Country*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2023
DOI: 10.5117/9789463723084_CH01

writer, Pulitzer-Prize winner Viet Thanh Nguyen, wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* where he asserted, "For most Americans and the world, 'Vietnam' means the 'Vietnam War,' and the Vietnam War means the American war" (*NYT*, 5/2/2017). This fact is also highlighted by the editors of a 2016 book on the war when they claim that "'Vietnam' is used as shorthand in the United States for the war, not the country" (Boyle and Lim, 2016: xv). And as if to illustrate this point, Karl Marlantes, the author of *Matterhorn* and a veteran of the American-Vietnamese War, titled an article in such a way as to make this equivalence of Vietnam-as-war explicit: "Vietnam: The War That Killed Trust" (*NYT*, 1/8/2017). Although we might take issue with the idea that a nation—an entire people—can by and large be reduced to a single, terrible event, the fact remains that in the broader American society, *it has been reduced in this way*; indeed, the very need for the oft-repeated slogan—"Vietnam: a country, not a war"—belies its own pronouncement.[2] And it is in recognition of this painful truth that we have settled on our book's title: *Vietnam: A War, Not a Country*.

Beyond the common understanding of this equivalence of Vietnam-as-war—where the war referred to is a shooting war—we want to suggest that there is another way in which *Vietnam* remains a war, not a country. From this alternative perspective, there is an ongoing battle over the *meaning* of the war. In an interview immediately prior to the release of his 2017 documentary, *The Vietnam War*, Ken Burns suggests that "with knowledge comes healing" (Kamp, *Vanity Fair*, 7/12/2017); but this raises the question: *Knowledge of what?* As his co-director Lynn Novick points out, when it comes to the American-Vietnamese War, "There's no agreement among scholars, or Americans or Vietnamese, about what happened: the facts, let alone whose fault, let alone what we're supposed to make of it" (ibid.). As we will show throughout this book, there is continuing conflict over how the war ought to be understood, represented, memorialized, and learned from; in short, there exists a war over its memory, a war that continues to be waged throughout the communities of all those who were touched by its hostilities. Viet Thanh Nguyen asserts that "All wars are fought twice,

2 To mention only a few examples of this slogan: the 1991 documentary, *Vietnam: A Country, Not A War*; Jack Payton's article, written 20 years after the capitulation of Saigon, "Vietnam: A Country, Not Just a War" (*Tampa Bay Times*, 7/16/1995); Harold Truman's 1999 travel commentary, *A Country, Not a War—Vietnam Impressions*; the home page of the Vietnam Embassy in the U.S. in 1999 and 2000 noted that Vietnam is "a country and not a war" (Schwenkel, 2009: 208); Hoa Pham's 2013 article on Vietnamese diasporic literature, "Vietnam Is a Country, Not a War"; Yen Le Espiritu's observation that "many Vietnamese proclaim that Vietnam is a country, not a war" (2014: 14); and Anh Pham's article, "Vietnam: A Country, Not a War" (4/27/2017).

the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (2013: 144). And it is on this second sense of "war" that we will focus our attention. Therefore, while we draw extensively upon the vast historiography of the American-Vietnamese War, it is not our goal to add something significant to this area. Instead, we understand our project as contributing to the ongoing discussions of collective memory, what it is and how it works, as well as to the more recent debates over cultural trauma, whether an entire society can be understood to have been traumatized.[3]

Beyond our focus on collective memory and cultural trauma, we hope also to contribute to the way in which the war's discourse is framed. One of the most interesting and significant developments in representations and analyses of the American-Vietnamese War has been the growing attention paid to voices "from the other side." A great many of the more recent American histories and cultural productions that take this war as their subject have incorporated Vietnamese sources and perspectives. This is the case in the pioneering 1991 collection of war-related artwork of 40 American and Vietnamese artists, *As Seen By Both Sides*; the acclaimed *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam*, a book that in 1997 broke new ground by exhibiting photographs taken by all 134 of the photojournalists who died or went missing during the war;[4] the 2001 *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era*, an anthology of 19 interviews with those providing "divergent, high-powered perspectives" on the war; the 2003 *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, a book comprising excerpts from interviews of 135 different people who were asked about their experiences of the war; and finally, it is also true of the much-discussed 2017 documentary, *The Vietnam War*. The problem so far with this movement to include the perspective of "the other side" has been the common assumption of a binary opposition between "us" and "them"—the U.S. and their Vietnamese foes. This simplification elides much, not least of all the people aligned with the anti-communist government of South Vietnam (formally known as the Republic of Vietnam). For example, in *Patriots*, just 13 of the 135 individuals interviewed are Vietnamese people who were in some way associated with South Vietnam; in *As Seen By Both Sides*, only one of the 40 featured artists

3 See Madigan (2020) for a detailed discussion of competing understandings of *cultural trauma*.

4 In the case of this particular work, the period covered stretches from the height of the French Indochina War in the 1940s to the capitulation of South Vietnam in 1975 and includes not only the territory of Vietnam but that of Laos and Cambodia as well. Many of the photos included in *Requiem* form a permanent exhibit based on the book at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City.

is from the South; similarly, in *Requiem*, only two of the 134 photographers represented in the book are from South Vietnam; and in *Legacy of Discord*, only a single interview out of the 19 included in the book is with someone associated with South Vietnam. In all these cases, the presence of those aligned with the anti-communist South barely registers in the mind of the reader/viewer. Comparable points have been made regarding the Burns and Novick film, *The Vietnam War*. Lan Cao, a Vietnamese-American law professor and novelist, observes that "In the section of the PBS series about the Tet offensive of 1968, for example, there were hardly any South Vietnamese soldiers whose voices were included…. But North Vietnamese and Vietcong voices were amply heard" (Lan Cao, *The New York Times*, 3/22/2018). Similarly, after watching the 18-hour documentary, Beth Nguyen, the Vietnamese-American author of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, wrote, "I kept hoping to see more commentary from those who fought, especially on the South Vietnamese side, but that hope was not fulfilled" (KQED, 10/10/2017). Likewise, after watching the same film, Sutton Vo, a former major in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, lamented that "The Vietnam War included the Americans, South Vietnam and North Vietnam. But in the 18 hours, the role of South Vietnam was very small" (Sanchez, *San Jose Mercury News*, 9/29/2017). This relative absence of those Vietnamese aligned with the Republic of Vietnam has been commented on by scholars as well. In Christina Schwenkel's book on the Vietnamese memory of the war, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, she writes that "a sustained focus on Vietnamese American memory is not included in this text but would be a project of great importance" (2009: 8). In light of this omission, one of our objectives in the present book is to be among the first to attempt this "project of great importance," to bring together in equal measure the collective memories of the war that persist within contemporary Vietnam, the Vietnamese-American community, and the broader U.S. society. And it is specifically through this tripartite comparative framing of the war's tangled knot of collective memories and traumas that we hope to play our part in the conversation.

The Theater of War

For most Americans, mention of "the Vietnam War" conjures up images of low-flying helicopters pitching in and out of combat zones, beleaguered G.I.s fighting an unseen enemy through dense jungle, and a handful of iconic, gut-wrenching photographs. Indeed, regardless of their opinions about U.S.

involvement in Vietnam, so powerful are these representations that it is difficult for most Americans to conclude anything other than *this was the war*. While we may disagree about the merit of the war or the manner of its prosecution, we are tempted to say that the facts are the facts, and they are well known; the rest is ideology. However, like most things concerning the American-Vietnamese War, it's not that simple. Even something as seemingly objective as the number of dead and wounded is complicated by how one counts and who is counting. The estimates of civilian and military casualties in Vietnam vary by hundreds of thousands. But beyond disagreement over the details of objective measurement, there are in truth numerous perspectives on the war that, while more or less factually accurate, differ substantially in terms of which facts are included or excluded, the extent to which they are emphasized or de-emphasized, and the ways in which one set of events are thought to have precipitated another; in short, the perspectives on the war differ in the ways they are narrated. And these differences in narration affect, among other things, when and why the war is said to have begun and ended, how culpability for the war and its aftermath is attributed, and ultimately the degree to which reconciliation between those involved is possible or even desired. The purpose of this book, then, is to explore how the American-Vietnamese War is understood and remembered. Specifically, we will analyze: (1) the ways in which the memory of the war is narrated, (2) the consequences of these narratives, and (3) the nature of the trauma suffered by the war's participants.

Because remembering entails a representation of the past from the vantage point of the present, we will focus our inquiry on the contemporary manifestations of what were the three primary belligerents: the Vietnamese communists, the Republic of Vietnam, and the United States.[5] The memory of this war, if it has been anything, has been contentious, and this contention bares its teeth at the outset of our project by problematizing the way we refer to the conflict and its participants. While Americans routinely refer to the war as the Vietnam War,[6] this is certainly not the way it is referred to by most of those in present-day Vietnam, where it is called the American War,

5 Of course, there were more belligerents beyond the three listed here. Again, the point of our project is to focus on the ways in which memory is contested within social groups, not to give an exhaustive historical account.

6 Shortly after independence from French colonial rule was declared in Hanoi by Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party of Vietnam, the First Indochina War was fought between the French and Vietnamese (the former being heavily subsidized by the U.S.). This war is typically said to have lasted from 1946 to 1954 (Kiernan, 2017: 385). For this reason, what can be seen as a resumption of hostilities between the Vietnamese communists and the U.S. is sometimes

the War of National Independence, the American War of Aggression, the Resistance War Against the American Imperialists, the Neocolonialist War, and many other names besides. Because it is *not* one of the intentions of this book to advocate any perspective in particular, we will endeavor to be even-handed—without sacrificing intelligibility—by using the slightly modified expression, the *American-Vietnamese War*. Of course, what is meant by this phrase will vary depending on which social group we are analyzing, which is the very reality our book sets out to explain. And this brings us immediately to a second terminological problem: how to refer to the three primary social groups under consideration. *North Vietnamese*, *South Vietnamese*, and *American* might seem sensible enough in that their usage has become familiar to an English-speaking audience, but it is important to note that these terms obscure some critical details, including the fact that many of those in South Vietnam—for example, members of the National Liberation Front and their People's Liberation Armed Forces[7] (collectively known by their opponents as the *Việt Cộng*, a derisive expression for "Vietnamese Communist")—were fighting along with the North Vietnamese (officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) in an effort to supplant the government of South Vietnam (officially the Republic of Vietnam). Therefore, when discussing the period prior to the capitulation of the Republic of Vietnam on April 30, 1975, we will—in a knowing simplification for the sake of clarity—typically use the term *Vietnamese communists* to refer to all those Vietnamese aligned with the National Liberation Front and Democratic Republic of Vietnam, *South Vietnamese* to refer to those Vietnamese aligned with the Republic of Vietnam, and *Americans* when referring to the United States government and military forces.

However, when discussing the period after April 30, 1975, the matter is complicated once again. At that time South Vietnam ceased to exist as a political entity, and on July 2, 1976 the entire territory of Vietnam was unified under a new name, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). What's more, the large Vietnamese diasporic community now living in the United States, a social group that began as refugees with ties to South Vietnam, is just as American as the rest of the population living in the United States. In another attempt at impartial simplification, when denoting the contemporary social groups that emerged from the war's principal belligerents, we will use the terms *Socialist Republic of Vietnam* (SRV) to describe the post-July 2, 1976

referred to in the U.S. as the Second Indochina War, but by the 21st century this has become less common.

7 Also known as the Liberation Army of South Vietnam (LASV).

government of Vietnam, *Vietnamese-Americans* to refer to those Vietnamese who relocated to the United States (along with their descendants), and *the broader American society* to generalize about Americans who do not have Vietnamese ancestry. For reasons that should be obvious, not all of the social groups we analyze in this book are coextensive with what we normally think of as nation-states (e.g., the wartime Vietnamese communists and the Vietnamese-Americans certainly do not qualify as such). Even so, the groups under consideration are no less cohesive and identifiable. They are, in the words of Benedict Anderson (1983), *imagined communities*. That is, they are bodies of individuals—individuals who will never meet most of the other members of the group—that are bound together by a shared sense of identity. As imagined communities, these social groups constitute collective actors that are capable of uniting in shared projects; the War in Vietnam was one such project and, as we will demonstrate, remembering the war is another.

Cultural Trauma

While the memory of the War in Vietnam has been contentious, one point of broad agreement is that the war and its legacy have been traumatic for many of the individuals who were directly involved. In the U.S., the articulation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a unique mental health condition was developed in the 1970s in large part due to the war-related distress experienced by many veterans of the war on their return home, and the long-term mental health effects of the war and resettlement of Vietnamese immigrants is a growing area of research (e.g., Tieu, "First-of-Its-Kind Study to Delve into Wartime Trauma on Vietnamese Americans" ABC10, 5/1/2022; also see Sun et al., 2022). However, less obvious is the idea that the war might have been traumatic for the *societies* embroiled in the hostilities, that their *cultures* themselves might have been traumatized. This notion of cultural trauma is motivated by a theoretically insightful extension of the concept of *trauma*, the Greek word denoting "wound" that was historically reserved for *physical* injuries. As is well known, in the late 19th century the concept of *trauma* was extended to a species of *psychic* injury. In the case of physical trauma, the wound consists of damage to the integrity of the physical body caused by a literal blow. In the case of psychic trauma, the blow is figurative; the wound consists of damage to the integrity of the psyche caused by the "blow" of an overwhelming experience. Taking this concept one step further, in cases of *cultural* trauma the injury is to an entire social group

and consists of damage to the integrity of the group's collective identity. In its seminal formulation, cultural trauma

> occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander, 2004a: 1)

An episode of cultural trauma, then, has two interrelated moments: first is a sense of the fracturing of a community's self-understanding, a grave disruption that is seen as "a threat to a culture with which individuals in that society presumably have an identification" (Smelser, 2004: 40). When members of a group believe the group itself has been fractured, as when a religious community experiences a schism, they are traumatized not in terms of their personal identity but in their sense of identity as members of the group; that is to say, individuals are traumatized *as* Catholics or *as* Muslims. However—and this is essential to the theory of cultural trauma—no event is inherently traumatic (Alexander, 2004a: 8). Instead, "a narrative that frames the event as catastrophic must emerge as the most widely accepted way of understanding the event" (Madigan, 2020: 47).

Once this traumatic *event* has been integrated into the collective memory of the group, the cultural trauma itself must be constructed as such by the members of the group. Cultural trauma emerges only when a social group regards an experience as so injurious that it must re-narrate its collective identity in order to make sense of it. And this brings us to the second moment in an episode of cultural trauma:

> It is a process that aims to reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity, as in repairing a tear in the social fabric. A traumatic tear evokes the need to "narrate new foundations" (Hale, 1998: 6), which includes reinterpreting the past as a means toward reconciling present/future needs. (Eyerman, 2004: 63)

In other words, in order to count as an episode of cultural trauma, a shared experience must be understood as catastrophic *and* the identity of the social group—the imagined community—must be re-narrated in light of this catastrophe. But we must hasten to point out that this re-narration is not an inevitable outcome whenever a social group has understood itself to have experienced catastrophe. It is conceivable, for example, that in the aftermath of a catastrophic event, a collectivity might disintegrate completely. In

this case (e.g., perhaps the erstwhile members of the shattered collectivity are simply absorbed into other collectivities after the traumatic event), no cultural trauma has occurred. We would argue that a more appropriate analogy for this social dissolution is *cultural death*. Instead, if we are to apply the diagnosis of cultural trauma, there must be some recognition of continuity between the pre- and post-traumatic collectivity among its members; the collectivity must survive the troubling event if it is to be considered traumatized.

It follows, then, that just as not all harrowing events experienced by individuals cause psychic trauma, neither do all calamities experienced by societies result in cultural trauma, even when the collectivity is acknowledged to have survived the event. This explains, for example, why in the U.S., despite the lack of a clear victory and the extraordinary human toll—nearly 40,000 American deaths and over 100,000 casualties—the Korean War did not result in a cultural trauma. Americans continued on after the war much as they had before the war; they simply did not understand the war as having fractured their collective identity. As we will demonstrate throughout this book, the three contemporary social groups under consideration—the SRV, Vietnamese-Americans, and the broader American society—have diverged in the ways they have come to understand and narrate the American-Vietnamese War, leading to divergent results in terms of cultural trauma.

When we remember events collectively—even recent events—there is much that is left out or forgotten, while the remaining details tend to settle into a particular order; or rather, because our role in this process is an active one, it is more correct to say we *impose* order onto the content of these shared memories. This is sometimes a conscious, intentional formulation and other times an entirely unconscious process. And the form that these memories take is that of a narrative: a verbal representation of a sequence of actions, significantly related to one another, that constitutes a unified whole (cf. Ricoeur, 1990). It is because of this active process that we (i.e., the authors of this book) maintain, somewhat counterintuitively, that the traumatic event in question, while typically correlated with some actual occurrence in the physical or social world (e.g., a political assassination, a genocide, a schism, a natural disaster, a war), is in fact a construction—a narrative construction. An event can only be considered a cultural trauma when its specific narrative is woven into the more comprehensive narrative of a society's collective identity, a collective identity that is broken and reconfigured in response to this jarring insertion. That the traumatic injury is to the culture and not just to the subset of individuals who directly experience the event explains how a historical reality such as the American institution of slavery or Hurricane

Katrina, which devastated the American Gulf Coast in 2005, can be traumatic to Americans who were either not yet born during the period or not present in the vicinity where it occurred. While many Americans might not have experienced these painful events as they happened, they will still tend to experience their troubling effects through the ways in which they understand themselves to have been injured *as Americans*.

Collective Memory

In order to better round out the theory of cultural trauma—a theory pivotal to the analysis offered in this book—it will be helpful here if we elaborate on another concept central to our purposes: *collective memory*. It should be noted immediately that while the term "collective memory" might suggest the rather nebulous idea of a "collective mind" or "shared consciousness," this is not an idea we mean to endorse. In fact, it is precisely in the modern context of a diverse and differentiated society, along with its wide-ranging individualism, that the concept of collective memory has its origins and salience. By *collective memory* we mean a narrative about the past that is held by a social group, a narrative that provides its members with an emotionally powerful identification with the collectivity. This concept can be traced back to the early twentieth-century writings of Maurice Halbwachs, who, building on the foundational work of Emile Durkheim, brought the term *collective memory* into prominence within the social sciences.

In his 1912 work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995), Durkheim developed the concept of *collective representations*, symbols carrying the ideas, beliefs, and values held by social groups that enable the group to order and make sense of the world. A paradigmatic collective representation in the aboriginal groups Durkheim studied was the totem, an object—such as a plant or animal—onto which a social group projected the source of great power and sacrality. Indeed, to these traditional cultures, the totem was its deity. However, Durkheim argued that it is in the totem's nature to be mis-recognized, that unbeknownst to the social group the true referent of their veneration is actually *the group itself*. That is, while the totem is believed to represent an ultimate cosmic power, it is in fact the members' experience of the group's own power, authority, and import that the totem represents. This felt power of the group is the sense within every member that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of life, that some actions are good and others are evil, that some people inspire our love and some objects evoke our disgust. These feelings exercise a tremendous force over

group members, binding them together by enabling certain thoughts, emotions, and behaviors while constraining others. Indeed, so strong are these feelings and their effects that individuals routinely ascribe them to something external to themselves. Durkheim attributed the true origin of these passions to the group, itself. When early communities came together for a common purpose, such as a religious ritual, the excitement in the air, their *collective effervescence*, was palpable (today, we need look no further than the experience of fans at a major sporting event or political partisans at one of their candidate's rallies to understand this reality). And this felt power of the group, according to Durkheim, was habitually misplaced—in the case of so-called primitive societies—onto its totem.

Far from a mere anthropological curiosity, a principal point of Durkheim's work is to show that these collective representations persist in modern societies in ways similar to those of so-called primitive societies. While religious beliefs are paradigmatic examples of collective representations, they are merely a "special case of a very general law" (Durkheim, 1995: 228), a law dictating that social groups imbue the physical world with powerful meaning and value. Durkheim gives the example of a national flag as an equivalent to the primitive collective representation: soldiers on the battlefield give their lives to keep what is otherwise a mere scrap of cloth from falling into the hands of the enemy. Why? Because it is imbued with the power, authority, and import of the whole society—the passions and sentiments associated with what gives the society its unique character and identity. This emotionally charged nature of the flag is not, of course, empirically perceptible: we could never discover the power held by the flag with a microscope or through chemical analysis of its thread. Yet its power is just as real as any physical force. It is a power that is felt to be within us, yet not of us, a force that applies pressure on group members to treat the object as worthy of the greatest reverence.

While religious beliefs and national flags are powerful collective representations, their special form of social power does not reside in all representations of the social group: the force of a collective representation is absent from a mundane token of the group, such as a church bulletin or a patriotic beach towel; no one would risk their life for one of these. That said, in addition to certain specific representations of entire social groups, Durkheim extends the concept of collective representation to include other symbols of collectively held ideas and values. Human blood, he asserts—the sight of which fills most of us with a certain degree of horror—is a collective representation, as are certain very rare postage stamps: in both cases, the objects—while clearly not representing an entire social group—are held

to command a certain level of respect: many shudder at the sight of spilt human blood, just as the world of philately would shudder at the destruction of a 1918 *Inverted Jenny* postage stamp.

In the generation of French sociologists that succeeded Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs augmented the former's work on collective representations by turning his attention toward memory. Halbwachs begins by pointing out that individual memory, left unaided, tends to dissipate. In order to remember, individuals require publicly available prompts, such as conversation, texts, objects, and images. He points to recollections of our own childhood as a clear case of this phenomenon. These autobiographical memories—the quintessential "individual" memories—are largely recalled to us by discussions with our parents and siblings; the sight of a toy or article of clothing we had when we were young; family photographs; or bodily marks, such as scars from childhood injuries. Surprisingly, then, even my personal memories "are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them" (Halbwachs, 1992: 38). However, this process of external prompting by one's group is not a neutral retrieval of past events; it also has the effect of teaching us what is important *for us* to remember and what is appropriate *for us* to filter out or forget. When a parent asks their child to recount their day at school, the child is prompted to relate certain events (e.g., what they learned in class) while discouraged from dilating on others (e.g., the color of the coat worn by each child on the school bus). More specifically, the child is taught what is important *for us—for our family*—to remember (e.g., our parents' birthdays), and what is appropriate *for us* to filter out or forget (e.g., the birthdays of our city council members).

In the example above, the family is the group facilitating memory, but our group membership obviously extends beyond the family to include a whole constellation of national, religious, ethnic, political, and other organizational collectivities. And like the memories recalled to us by our families, we have memories that are recalled to us by the other groups to which we belong. These collective memories work in the same way as many of our personal memories in that they are prompted by external objects and discourse and are tied to a vital sense of group membership. Similar to the ways in which Durkheim's collective representations serve to carry the emotionally compelling ideas, beliefs, and values held by social groups, Halbwachs argues that *collective memories* "express the general attitude of the group … [and] define its nature and its qualities" (1992: 59). And it is this close connection to the group's identity and interests that led Halbwachs to differentiate a group's collective memory from its history. In Halbwachs,

the goals of professional history—regardless of whether they are actually achieved—are that of a rational, objective, static, and neutral description of the past. In stark contrast, he maintains that collective memory is an ever-changing representation of the past that is filtered through the group's present needs, a representation that provides the group with a unique set of shared characteristics and experiences that creates a boundary between "us" and "them."

Drawing on these ideas of Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, a scholar of collective memory, argues at length for a sharp distinction between memory and history. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition" (1989: 8). While we believe the distinction between history and collective memory is an instructive one, we do not see the two concepts as mutually exclusive in the way Halbwachs and Nora do. Rather, as the contemporary theorist of collective memory Jeffrey Olick suggests, it is more fruitful to understand the concept of collective memory as comprising a broader set of "*mnemonic products and practices*" (2010: 158; italics in the original) that includes historical studies as well as oral reports, journalism, memoirs, textbooks, political speeches, drama, film, photography, painting, sculpture, literature, music, museums, monuments, memorials, commemorative events, and so on. It is through all of these modes of expression that a somewhat coherent story of collective identity takes shape, although more often than not the story is simplified and told piecemeal. In the U.S., for example, the Thanksgiving holiday in November commemorates the arrival of the first English settlers in what would become the United States, a single chapter in the American collective memory as well as a historical simplification in that the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 were preceded thirteen years earlier by the Jamestown settlement in the colony of Virginia. In the same way, the American Independence Day holiday commemorates and simplifies yet another chapter of the American collective memory. While the holiday is thought of as a celebration of the country's birth as an independent nation on July 4th, the vote for independence from Britain was actually cast on July 2, 1776, and the war for independence was not won until 1783 (what's more, there is no evidence that one of the most recognizable symbols of American independence—the Liberty Bell—was rung on July 4, 1776). Each of these holidays has its own congeries of images, objects, foods, and traditional activities that represent their respective portions of the American narrative of collective identity.

While neither Plymouth Rock nor the Liberty Bell is a narrative per se, each is a collective representation of both its particular narrative (i.e., that

of the first English settlers in America and the birth of the United States of America, respectively) and the broader narrative of which they are a part (i.e., the *whole* story of the United States of America). Each exists external to any one individual's brain and calls to nearly every American's mind its respective narrative; as collective representations, they serve to perpetuate the collective memory of American identity across succeeding generations of Americans. Moving closer to our subject matter, the images of harried G.I.s fighting in muddy jungles, helicopters swarming just above the surfaces of rice paddies, a naked nine-year-old girl running down a highway, flesh burning with napalm—these are some of the collective representations of America's collective memory of the American-Vietnamese War. And these collective representations exercise extraordinary power over social groups, for "it is never the past itself that acts upon a present society, but *representations of past events*" (Assmann and Shortt, 2012: 3; italics in the original). Indeed, it is the braiding of these representations of past events into a narrative of collective identity that gives them meaning and potency. In the case of the American-Vietnamese War, we can look at its collective representations and wonder, Was Saigon liberated or did it fall? Was South Vietnam a puppet regime or an independent nation? Did the U.S. suffer ignoble defeat in Vietnam, or did it achieve peace with honor? And all of these sorts of questions—not questions of objective fact but powerful, value-laden questions of meaning—are best answered by referring to collective memory, the narrative reconstruction of a social group's past. What's more, the answers to these questions of meaning will vary greatly depending on whom you ask, whose memory you interrogate. It is this set of distinctions that makes this book primarily an exploration of collective memory rather than a history of the American-Vietnamese War.

This perspectival and conflictual nature of collectively held memories and beliefs was developed by a younger contemporary of Halbwachs, the sociologist Karl Mannheim. In 1928, Mannheim argued that collectively held beliefs are "rooted in and carried by the desire for power and recognition of particular social groups who want to make their interpretation of the world the universal one" (Mannheim, 2011: 405). The struggle resulting from this desire for narrative control is apparent in the conflict *between* the three social groups that emerged from the American-Vietnamese War, but the collective memories *within* these three social groups are also far from harmonious. It is another one of the goals of this book to reveal the heterogeneity of collective memories not only between these groups but also within them. And in order to better describe and delimit the disparate narratives of collective memory that circulate within each

of the three principal people groups, we examine the social processes through which these narratives are created, maintained, and transformed. This analysis shows that far from a congenial operation, these processes are often fraught with conflict, and instead of a single collective memory, we discover numerous competing narratives, each with its own set of advocates. Eviatar Zerubavel calls these contests *mnemonic battles* (1999: 99), and how—or whether—a particular past experience is woven into the narrative of collective identity is contingent upon these trials. In some cases, after a period of struggle, these competing narratives achieve a degree of cohesion, whereas in other cases one of the narratives will emerge as dominant while its competitors are marginalized or abandoned altogether.

Narratives provide a basic cultural structure that unites a collectivity by linking together collective representations into a coherent story, one that can be transmitted across generations and facilitate the incorporation of new members into the group. Founding narratives tell the story of how the collectivity came to be, weaving together historical facts and myths in such a way as to consolidate and perpetuate a group's identity. This process is the same for collectivities ranging from families and ethnic groups to nations and religious communities. These origin stories are told and retold; they are inscribed in memory and embodied through rituals, including such mundane mechanisms as schoolroom practices and holiday traditions, until they become incorporated as the taken-for-granted foundations of individual and collective identity. These are precisely the foundations that rupture in the process we have identified as cultural trauma. The story of the American nation, for example, can be thought to begin with the Revolutionary War, a war of national liberation from the British colonial empire; this is inscribed in textbooks and celebrated every year as Independence Day. Indeed, the valorization of war more generally—and the sacrifice it entails—is a core aspect of American collective memory and stems from these origins. At the same time, America's founding narrative can also be read as celebrating the exact opposite set of circumstances: the establishment of a successful colonial enterprise by the British, one that is commemorated every year on Thanksgiving Day. There is no acknowledgement of this paradox in official celebrations of these holidays, but the tension between them has sometimes been articulated, not least by the intellectuals and activists who participated in the anti-Vietnam War movement. In stark contrast to other wars, the incorporation of the American-Vietnamese War into the American narrative of collective identity has been, as we will discuss, problematic.

The victorious Vietnamese of the SRV have also fashioned a founding narrative that celebrates the collective struggle against colonial domination, one that includes the war against the Americans. As we will discuss, the Vietnamese of the SRV have created memorial sites and ceremonies to represent this narrative of national liberation through violent struggle against more powerful enemies. Their narrative focuses on the forcefulness of long-term resilience and collective will. Those Vietnamese who opposed them and fought alongside the Americans—i.e., the South Vietnamese—are almost entirely absent in this narrative; and when they do make an appearance, they do so as "American puppets"—mere instruments of a foreign enemy. This invisibility and its resulting struggle for recognition permeate the attempts by exiled Vietnamese to re-found their community in the United States and elsewhere. Arriving for the most part as unwanted refugees in the United States, they were met with a combination of silence and hostility, for they were the symbolic reminders of what many Americans considered a lost war. While the first generation of these refugees looked backward, succeeding generations have more or less become successfully assimilated Americans. Their founding narrative begins on April 30, 1975, which is commemorated within the Vietnamese-American community as *Tháng Tư Đen* ("Black April"). It remains to be seen how long this commemoration will continue, but even as the personal memories of the war fade into history, the celebration does function to distinguish Vietnamese Americans from the broad category of Asian Americans to which the U.S. Census Bureau and others have relegated them.

Arenas of Memory

In order to expose the often impassioned mnemonic battles between competing versions of collective identity, we develop the concept of *arenas of memory*, a heuristic device that allows us to demarcate the social spaces where different narratives of collective memory interact. These arenas of memory are distinct discourses that are tied to specific individuals, organizations, and institutions that advocate specific narratives through specific forms of media. For the purposes of this study, we have identified four cardinal arenas of memory: the political, the academic, the artistic, and the community. In each of the three social groups we examine, the contests between competing narratives of the American-Vietnamese War (and the war's place within the group's collective identity) occur both within and between these arenas of memory. A society's arenas of memory—the

distinct conversations in which specific individuals and groups use specific media to create, perpetuate, and contest specific narratives—could of course be diced up in any number of ways, but the four we have identified here have a certain level of institutional coherence and durability that facilitates the following analysis. For example, American politicians have narrated the war in different ways depending on their present needs, and these needs have differed not only over time but also by party affiliation. Even so, throughout the changing times and circumstances of the past half century, there have been certain constants within the American political arena such as the general prohibition of disparaging the U.S. military, a prohibition largely absent from the relatively independent academic, artistic, and community arenas. In the SRV, this prohibition against disparaging the nation's military has been largely extended to all the arenas, revealing a much tighter integration of their arenas and a more thorough control of cultural production by the Communist Party of Vietnam.

It should be noted that each arena of memory is a more-or-less discrete discourse that has three interrelated components: (1) the individuals or groups that are involved in producing the arena's set of narratives; (2) the specific narratives, themselves; and (3) the particular media through which the narratives are produced and propagated. For example, the artistic arena includes novelists, poets, sculptors, screenwriters, and painters who offer up a certain set of (potentially incompatible) narratives about the American-Vietnamese War, narratives that are objectified in novels, poems, sculptures, films, and paintings. Similarly, in the political arena, elected and appointed officials as well as government bureaucrats and candidates for office will pass laws, negotiate treaties, make speeches, and write op-ed pieces that will be carried in the news media or recorded in government archives. Occasionally, however, the boundaries between arenas will be blurred, such as when a national monument or memorial is created or an exhibition at a national museum is curated (projects through which at the very least the political and artistic arenas are brought together). In these cases, we will need to look at the ways in which different arenas—and their various versions of collective memory—interact.

Running through each of these arenas of memory, of course, are both personal memories and generational memories. Personal memory—what Halbwachs calls autobiographical memory—consists of the memories of what we ourselves have directly experienced. Although Halbwachs is at pains to show how even our autobiographical memory is largely framed by social factors, he nevertheless distinguishes between it and collective memory proper. That said, autobiographical memory can in some cases

become part of collective memory, and in terms of our book's subject, that is precisely what we find. In fact, sociologist Thomas DeGloma developed the concept of *mnemonic alignment* to theorize this phenomenon, arguing that it is not only that autobiographical memory parallels and reinforces collective memory, but the reverse is also true: collective memory parallels and reinforces autobiographical memory (2015: 160). In order for this transfer from the personal to the collective to take place, autobiographical memory must first be objectified—it must somehow be brought into the public discourse. This can be accomplished in numerous ways, including giving interviews, making speeches, or writing autobiographies and memoirs, such as Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir* (1986) or General Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports* (1976). It can be used to inform artistic productions, such as Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* (1986) or Bao Ninh's novel *The Sorrow of War* (1987); to build political capital, like that of U.S. Senator John McCain and U.S. Secretary of Defense John Kerry; or add depth to academic work, such as that of Vietnam veterans who spoke at university teach-ins throughout the 1960s and early 1970s or popular scholarly publications like Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016).

Once these autobiographical memories have become objectified, they enter an arena of memory, one of the ongoing social conversations about the American-Vietnamese War. These memories can offer powerful rhetorical weight to their narratives by the special claim of an individual to have "really" experienced a particular event, but more often than not these "real" memories turn out to be far from mutually compatible and anything but straightforwardly accepted; they are still subject to the same level of contestation as any other form of memory. Every autobiographical memory is potentially countered by the charges of misrepresentation, ulterior motives, mistaken perception, and faulty memory and is subject to alternative interpretations and discrediting. Such was the case with the dramatic 1971 Winter Soldier Investigation, three days of hearings on the U.S. Armed Forces' massacres of Vietnamese civilians and torture of prisoners of war that was followed by additional testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. These hearings were organized by the U.S. Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and prominently featured the testimony of 109 U.S. servicemen who were in many cases present at the various atrocities they described. While the soldiers who testified to these events provided a powerful attack on the official narrative of the U.S. government, their attestations were nevertheless vehemently contested by the Nixon administration. Among other things, the president authorized the "Plan to Counteract Viet Nam Veterans Against the War" in an attempt

to locate material that would discredit those who offered testimony, and the president encouraged the formation of the Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace (VVJP), a group dedicated to supporting the American war efforts in Vietnam and countering allegations of atrocities with its own set of autobiographical memories directly opposed to those of the VVAW.

While the case of the Winter Soldier Investigation exemplifies how a confrontation between agents from the political arena and those from the community arena can be augmented by autobiographical memory, it does not in itself reveal much about the concept of generational memory. For this latter form of memory we will turn to Mannheim, the scholar most responsible for its conceptual spadework. One of Mannheim's important theoretical projects was describing how collectively held beliefs and memories are largely influenced by the social position of the group that holds them, and one of the principal elements of social position is that of the *generation*. More than a mere aggregate of individuals born in the same historical period, the sort of generation Mannheim was interested in was a concrete social group on the same level as other collectivities that share a set of values, beliefs, and memories. This sort of concrete generation forms only when a birth cohort is exposed to some significant social destabilization (Mannheim, 2007) such as those caused by wars, revolutions, or natural disasters. And naturally, different birth cohorts will experience and remember the same historical events differently; children and adults are affected differently by social destabilization, something Mannheim attributes to the "stratification" of our lives into different stages (e.g., first impressions, childhood experiences). However, even members of the same birth cohorts do not all experience socially destabilizing events in the same way. And this fact leads Mannheim to differentiate each actual generation into separate "generational units," subgroups that "work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways" and participate in a shared response (ibid.).

At this point in his analysis, Mannheim is very close to defining generations in the same way we are defining arenas of memory. He states that "within any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units. Together they constitute an 'actual' generation precisely because they are oriented toward each other, even though only in the sense of fighting one another" (ibid.). Indeed, one could certainly define both autobiographical memory and generational memory as unique arenas of memory, but for our purposes, these modes of memory run orthogonal to our chosen array. That is, autobiographical and generational memories run through all the other arenas of memory instead of forming complementary, independent categories; each arena of memory holds within it members from

each birth cohort. We will have occasion throughout our analyses to point out how individual and generational memories affect positions within our arenas of memory, but for all the reasons above, we will not consider them as constitutive of their own arenas.

Historical Background and the March Toward War

In order to better understand the collective memories of the groups we analyze, it is helpful to keep in mind both a general picture of Vietnam's history and some of the immediate antecedents of the American-Vietnamese War. In what follows, we attempt to highlight a number of the principal events and historical trends that motivate the narratives promulgated by the collectivities we discuss. While we have been at pains to argue that all narratives of the past are told from particular perspectives, we believe this brief bit of scene setting will not be overly contentious from the standpoint of our three main collectivities and will provide an important background against which to understand the various collective memories considered in subsequent chapters.

One of the major themes of Vietnamese collective memory shared by those who would later be divided by the war is the people's long history of foreign domination coupled with their equally long struggle for independence.[8] This narrative was prevalent throughout Vietnam during the early twentieth century, and only during the mid-twentieth century did it begin to bifurcate between broadly accepted communist and anticommunist versions.[9] The Vietnamese trace their origins to the first millennium B.C. in the region around what would someday become the city of Hanoi, but already by the second century B.C., China had invaded and occupied their land. Despite a number of celebrated rebellions against the Chinese, including that led by the two Trưng sisters in 40 A.D., this domination would last for one thousand years. It was not until 938 A.D. that Vietnam at long last regained

8 The people living in the territory of what is today the Socialist Republic of Vietnam comprise some 50 different ethnic groups; the purpose of this present section is to discuss the specifically *Vietnamese* collective identity, not that of all the other groups who share this region.

9 Many of those who would eventually side with South Vietnam and join the Republic of Vietnam Military Forces (RVNMF) actually spent their early military careers with the Viet Minh ("League for the Independence of Viet Nam") fighting for Vietnamese independence from the French. The Viet Minh was actually a front organization set up in 1941 by Ho Chi Minh and the Indochina Communist Party. Not the least of these was Nguyen Cao Ky, the eventual Premier of South Vietnam (Ky, 2002: 19).

its independence. Flush with its hard-won freedom, the newly liberated kingdom proclaimed itself *Đại Việt* ("Great Viet"). In the ensuing decades, *Đại Việt* developed a highly organized administrative system run by mandarins who were promoted based on competitive civil service examinations. By the eleventh century, the Vietnamese had a postal system, an efficient network of roads, a stable monetary system, an imperial college, annual literary competitions, and a standardized penal code. Under this strong centralized government, *Đại Việt* began a centuries-long conquest southward along the coast. However, while the Vietnamese gradually overwhelmed various peoples to the south, they were continuously harassed by their old foes to the north. Throughout the second half of the thirteenth century, *Đại Việt* repelled three separate Mongol invasions. In the fifteenth century, however, China succeeded in once again briefly subduing Vietnam. But this time the Chinese occupation did not last. With a "mixture of guerrilla and attrition warfare" (Fall, 2000: 41), the Vietnamese threw off the yoke of their imperial nemesis and gave birth to a new dynasty, the Lê, that would reign for the next three centuries.

While the Lê dynasty busied itself with shoring up its defenses to the north and conquering ever more territory to the south, it was during their rule that a new influence arrived, this time from the sea. In the mid-sixteenth century, Portuguese traders and priests began arriving in Vietnam, and the first Catholic Church was erected in the region in 1615. Shortly afterward—at about the time the Pilgrims were landing at Plymouth—one of the first Frenchmen to visit Vietnam, Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes, arrived in Hanoi. He was sent by the Pope to lead the first permanent mission in Vietnam. By the time he was banished in 1649, his imprint on the culture was indelible; tens of thousands of Vietnamese had embraced Catholicism. He had also transliterated the Vietnamese language from Chinese characters to the *quốc ngữ* script, with its Latinized alphabet and added diacritical marks to signal the multi-tonal character of the language. The *quốc ngữ* script remains in use to this day.

Much of the seventeenth century in Vietnam was marred by a protracted civil war between the South, led by the Nguyen clan, and the northern Lê dynasty supported by both the powerful Trinh clan and the Chinese. After a truce was called in the 1670s, the southern Nguyen expanded still southward into the Mekong Delta. This uneasy century of north-south division finally gave way when the whole of Vietnam was thrown into political turmoil by the Tây Sơn brothers, three young men who gathered followers among the disenfranchised by preaching a message of social justice. The brothers, aided by landless peasants and a disgruntled merchant class, led

a rebellion and defeated the Nguyen and Trinh clans—as well as the Lê dynasty—by 1778. However, the short-lived hegemony of the Tay Son was subsequently defeated by the remnants of the Nguyen, who had appealed to and were aided by the French. In 1802, with the backing of the French, the sole surviving Nguyen prince proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long of Nam Viet, unifying the territory of Vietnam from the border of China in the north to the Gulf of Siam in the south—a greater expanse than had ever before been under Vietnamese control, and largely the territory comprising the present state of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Gia Long, who derived his name from *Gia Định* (Saigon) and *Thăng Long* (Hanoi) to represent the unification of north and south Vietnam, moved the capital south from Hanoi to the centrally located Hue. In 1803, he sent envoys to Peking to establish diplomatic relations with China. However, China objected to the name of the newly stabilized realm—with its invocation of the rebellious Chao T'o's fiefdom of antiquity—and in 1804 pressed for the country to be renamed "Việt Nam," (i.e., "Southern Viet"—i.e., the Viet people to the south of China) (Taylor, 1983).

With the death of Emperor Gia Long in 1820, Vietnam's relationship with France soured. In 1825, Long's successor issued an edict against Christianity, and over the next three decades an estimated 130,000 Catholics were put to death. During this time, the U.S.S. *Constitution*, under the command of Captain John "Mad Jack" Percival, passed through the region while in the process of circumnavigating the globe. Learning of the American Navy's presence, the French bishop Dominique Lefebre, who was being held prisoner in Hue and was due to be executed, sent a plea for succor to Percival. On hearing of Lefebre's plight, Percival put into port at Da Nang. On May 10, 1845, he marched a Marine detachment ashore, captured several high Vietnamese officials, and held them hostage for many days. Percival also captured numerous Vietnamese ships and in the process fired upon them, killing several Vietnamese individuals.

Four years after the incident with Percival, the U.S. issued a formal apology for the incident. However, the French had other ideas: "the Vietnamese court had to be punished for its persecution of Catholics and to be jolted out of its obstinate refusal to permit adequate trade" (Jamieson, 1995: 43). In 1858, the French navy attacked Vietnam and temporarily occupied Da Nang, moving south the following year to attack and ultimately occupy Saigon. In November, the French dispatched Admiral Page with instructions to secure a treaty protecting the Catholic faith in Vietnam but not to obtain any territory. With the bulk of the French navy in Southeast Asia diverted to China during the Second Opium War, Vietnam besieged the

occupied Saigon for nearly a year until the French received reinforcements. By 1862, the Vietnamese government was forced to sign the Treaty of Saigon, which ceded Vietnamese territory to the French. In 1867, the combined French acquisitions in southern Vietnam were pronounced the colony of Cochinchina, subject now to direct rule by France. By 1883, the remainder of Vietnam—Annan (the central territory) and Tonkin (the northern territory)—became French protectorates. French Indochina was officially formed in 1887 when these territories were united with Cambodia and Laos.

Vietnam remained a French colony for the next half century, and French companies—such as the tire manufacturers Michelin and Dunlop—developed and capitalized on large rubber plantations worked by the local Vietnamese population under harsh conditions. The French also—through Vietnamese labor—harvested tea and coffee and extracted coal and a variety of minerals to be sent back to France; levied burdensome taxes on the local population; controlled monopolies on opium, salt, and alcohol, and set minimum quotas for the consumption of these goods; maintained an unequal pay structure for civil servants (e.g., the lowest paid French bureaucrat was paid more than the highest paid Vietnamese); and prohibited the Vietnamese from positions of power. Rebellions and attempted assassinations were common throughout this period, and during the early years of the twentieth century, Vietnamese nationalism increased substantially, encouraged by the example of Japan, an Asian country that had modernized to the level of many advanced European nations and proved its prowess by defeating Russia militarily in 1905. But these rebellions did little to shake the French control of the country at the time; they were met with summary repression. It was not until the severe conditions brought on by the global economic depression of the 1930s, followed by the massive political instability of World War II, that a sustained movement for independence took hold.

In 1925, Ho Chi Minh, having spent time traveling and studying in France and the Soviet Union, founded what would eventually become known as the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). Headquartered in southern China in order to evade French authorities, the ICP began organizing and training cadres in Vietnam, and in 1930, as the onset of the global depression coincided with bad harvests in Vietnam, the group was able to initiate labor strikes and mass demonstrations. However, these movements were put down with overwhelming force by the French authorities, a repression that led to a temporary weakening of the ICP. For the next several years, Ho Chi Minh continued to travel and play an active role in promoting Vietnamese independence and communism. In 1941, he was able to reorganize the dormant League for the Independence of Vietnam (a.k.a., the Viet Minh), a

militant Vietnamese anti-imperialist organization that aimed for a national revolution against the French and Japanese (Kiernan, 2017).

Throughout most of WWII, France's Vichy government—while still technically retaining its Indochinese colonies—allowed Japan to station troops in Vietnam. Under fascist rule, a far more aggressive effort was made to eradicate communist activity. At this point, the Vietnamese communists found common cause with the French Popular Front, the French group fighting against the Vichy collaborators, as well as the U.S. in their fight against Japan. In fact, in 1942 the anti-communist Chinese authorities arrested Ho Chi Minh, and the U.S. joined in the negotiations for his release the following year (Kiernan, 2017: 378). In turn, the Viet Minh had numerous occasions to rescue U.S. service personnel who parachuted into or were shot down over Japanese-controlled regions of northern Vietnam (Goscha, 2016: 196). As the war dragged on, and Japan became involved with fighting the U.S. in the Pacific theater, communication between Vietnam and France was cut off. Emboldened, Japan began dictating the policies of Vietnam, demanding vast quantities of food and other material from the colonial administration. Indeed, the situation became so dire that among a population of 25 million, famine claimed more than one million lives by the end of the war in 1945 (ibid.: 187).

In March of 1945, Japan terminated French colonial control over Vietnam altogether. They imprisoned French authorities and declared Vietnam's independence, installing Emperor Bao Dai as head of state. But this was not exactly the independence the Viet Minh had been fighting for. It did not provide for a Vietnamese ministry of defense and split the country in half, with independence going only to the northern protectorates of Annan and Tonkin. Cochinchina—the southern part of Vietnam that was strategically important to the Japanese war effort—was to be left under Japanese control. During the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of French colonial authority, the Viet Minh took advantage of the disorder by seizing French weaponry. Then, with the help of American OSS officers, the Viet Minh trained the dispossessed peasantry and began raiding public granaries. By the time the Japanese surrendered to the U.S. on August 15, 1945, there was a power vacuum: the Japanese were present in Vietnam but were simply awaiting their repatriation to Japan; the French colonial authorities were still in prison; and the new independent government of Emperor Bao Dai, without a ministry of defense, was impotent. This left the Viet Minh in a prime position from which to seize control. On August 16, the People's Congress elected Ho Chi Minh as chief minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, and on August 19, the Viet Minh seized Hanoi, forcing the governor to abdicate and to transfer

authority to Ho Chi Minh's government. A few days later, the agitation by the Viet Minh spread through Saigon in the south and the imperial city of Hue in central Vietnam, and by the end of the month, Emperor Bao Dai abdicated authority to the Provisional Revolutionary Government as well. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh read the Proclamation of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—a document that in some cases quotes verbatim the United States Declaration of Independence—and announced the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to the crowds gathered for the occasion. While U.S. President Roosevelt had been sympathetic to Vietnamese independence, President Truman, who assumed the presidency only a few months before Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence, was more sympathetic to France in light of his eagerness to forestall Soviet influence in postwar Europe. In the months following the establishment of the DRV, Ho Chi Minh sent a half dozen letters to President Truman requesting recognition by the United States; they went unanswered.

The newly independent Vietnam would remain unchallenged for a total of four days. France was still too weak to immediately intervene, so on September 6, 1945, British troops landed in Saigon to begin the restoration of colonial order. They charged the defeated Japanese soldiers with keeping order while at the same time releasing and arming the French soldiers that had been detained by the Japanese. On the night of September 22, the newly liberated French soldiers took control of the major public buildings throughout Saigon, forcing the fledgling Vietnamese leaders to flee underground. Shortly thereafter, fresh troops arrived from France and began their reconquest of Vietnam. The Viet Minh were no match for direct engagement with the well-armed and well-trained French, so they abandoned the urban centers and engaged in guerrilla tactics. By early 1946, the French had solidified control over Cochinchina—southern Vietnam.

Meanwhile, in the period following the end of WWII, China had moved into the northern part of Vietnam to disarm the Japanese. But while there, they began to behave as if they were a conquering army, engaging in looting, replacing government personnel, and dictating policy with no clear timeline for withdrawal. At the same time that southern Vietnam had been reclaimed by France, an agreement was reached between France, China, and the DRV: the Chinese were to vacate Vietnam, and the entirety of Vietnam was to be recognized as once again under French control. For obvious reasons, large parts of the movement for Vietnamese independence were incensed by this treaty and called Ho Chi Minh a traitor. French troops moved into Hanoi and installed pro-French elements into the DRV government, and Vietnam was to remain divided; French-recognized "Vietnam" was to consist of

Annan and Tonkin—the area of Vietnam north of the 16th parallel—while everything south of that line was to be determined by a referendum by the people of Cochinchina themselves. This division was in part because of Cochinchina's historic status as a true colony, whereas the northern territories had technically been protectorates. In short, the southern part of Vietnam was to remain French.

This situation did not last long before simmering hostilities turned to armed conflict. By the end of 1946, skirmishes took place between DRV and French troops, and the DRV government under Ho Chi Minh was forced to abscond to the countryside of northwestern Vietnam as the French seized control of Hanoi. From hiding, Ho Chi Minh called on the entire Vietnamese population to rise up, and for the next four years, the Viet Minh was limited to battling the French occupying forces with guerrilla and terrorist tactics. In order to pacify the north, France worked to politically isolate the DRV by declaring Vietnam united under its former Emperor, the French-educated Bao Dai. In August 1949, Bao Dai commissioned the new government of the Associated State of Vietnam (ASV). However, although unified, Vietnam was still not truly independent. It was part of the French Union, and the DRV viewed the ASV as collaborators with the French.

The guerrilla war between the DRV and French continued unabated after the creation of the ASV, but the situation changed when at the end of 1949, Mao Zedong defeated Chiang Kai-shek in China, establishing the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) and promising support to the harried DRV. At the start of 1950, the PRC recognized the DRV as the legitimate government of Vietnam, and the USSR followed shortly thereafter. At the same time, the U.S. and other European allies recognized the ASV. Now, with the significant backing of her communist neighbors to the north, the DRV was able to begin contesting the full force of the French occupying forces. These attempts met initially with defeat, and as the war progressed, more and more Vietnamese of the ASV were pressed into service on the side of France. The Vietnamese soldiers eventually accounted for half of the entire French fighting force. The U.S. materially supported the French war effort but refused to engage in combat. In 1954, as the French suffered a major defeat at Dien Bien Phu, negotiations were getting underway regarding a political resolution to the conflict in Vietnam. On July 21, 1954, the Geneva Accords were signed. The accords stipulated that France recognize Vietnam's independence and sovereignty, a demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the territory of the DRV and ASV located at the 17th parallel, and a general election be held in 1956 when all of Vietnam would decide on a single government over a free, independent, and unified Vietnam. A ceasefire

arrangement was signed by representatives of France and the DRV, while the People's Republic of China, the USSR, and Great Britain were among the major negotiating powers. However, the ASV flatly rejected the document, for they had no official input into the agreement (France had negotiated on its behalf). In 1955, the newly appointed Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem "publicly announced that as a non-signatory to the Geneva Agreement his government was under no obligation to support the 1956 elections and would in fact not participate in them" (Asselin, 2007: 122). Going even one step further, Diem, a former provincial governor and minister of the interior in Vietnam who had spent the past several years studying at a Catholic seminary in the U.S., ordered the flag to be flown at half-mast and decreed that the signing of the Geneva Accords be memorialized annually as a "day of shame" (ibid.: 122 n.103). The other noteworthy power that refused to sign the treaty was the United States.

At this time, the United States was growing evermore concerned by the spread of communism. China had been "lost" in 1949, then the northern half of Korea, and now the northern half of Vietnam. And the U.S. was fearful that in a general electoral contest between Ho Chi Minh and Diem, the latter would be defeated. Therefore, with the backing of the U.S., Prime Minister Diem consolidated his power not by means of the 1956 general election mandated by the Geneva Accords but through a referendum held only in the south to decide on a single head of state: Diem received 98.2 percent of the vote compared to Bao Dai's 1.1 percent—an embarrassment to the U.S. in its flagrant electoral fraud. Three days after the referendum, in October 1955, the Republic of Vietnam—"South Vietnam"—was founded, and Diem was its president. With the American promise of support, Diem felt emboldened to reject the agreement laid out in the Geneva Accords, including the call for a general election. The stage had been set, the lines had been drawn, and the sides had been chosen for the American-Vietnamese War.

The Book's Approach

The American-Vietnamese War "was a war of many perspectives, a Rashomon[10] of equally plausible 'stories,' of secrets, lies, and distortions at

10 *Rashomon* is a 1950 film by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa in which a murder is described in mutually contradictory ways by various witnesses. Performance theorist Richard Schechner notes that "A 'Rashomon effect' occurs where the same data are woven into many different narratives according to cultural bias, editing, and individual interpretation" (2008: 325).

every turn" (Burns and Novick, 2020: 2). To best make our way through this labyrinth of conflicting narratives and identify how the war is understood and remembered throughout the several arenas of memory[11] we have identified, we will have recourse to the whole range of mnemonic products and practices of the three primary social groups under consideration: the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Vietnamese-Americans, and the broader American society. Each one of these collectivities will have a chapter dedicated to its particular arenas of memory. We will identify the competing memories within each arena when they are spelled out in narrative form as well as point to the objective representations of these narratives when they occur in non-narrative modes, including paintings, museum installations, monuments, cemeteries, anniversaries, festivals, fraternal organizations, commemorative events, etc. The combined role of these narrative and non-narrative carriers of memory has been theorized at length by Nora (1989, 1996). He calls these memory-laden stories, objects, places, and institutions *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") and asserts that they are the places where "memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (1989: 7). They serve as the exterior scaffolding and outward signs of not only our collective memory but ultimately our group membership. In fact, more than mere signs, Nora argues, these *lieux de mémoire* play a critical role in fortifying our sense of collective identity, an identity that would otherwise be in constant danger of disintegrating (ibid.: 12-13).

This method of inquiry, with its attention to narratives, cultural codes, and the objects, places, and institutions that instantiate them, is grounded in cultural sociology, an interpretive approach that aims to comprehend complex social phenomena by connecting them to the cultural frameworks through which they are made meaningful to members of particular social groups (Eyerman, 2011). These frameworks code individuals and organizations—as well as their actions and ideologies—as good and evil; they define group membership; they frame events in terms of perpetrators and victims; and they connect not only the present to the past but also in some cases the past to the future.

In addition to the many hundreds of relevant books, articles, and individual artistic productions we reviewed for this project, we made several trips between us to Vietnam. There, we visited and collected data from

11 We pioneered this approach in our article, "Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory and the Vietnam War": "In order to provide a coherent account of how the Vietnam conflict is remembered we distinguish several arenas of memory, the social spaces where the various narratives which form collective memory interact" (Eyerman, Madigan, and Ring, 2017: 13).

numerous war-related museums, monuments, and memorials throughout the country. We also worked with a number of Vietnamese scholars based in Vietnamese universities. Likewise, we collected unique data from within the United States. We conducted over 50 one-hour, semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese-Americans across seven states, and our interview subjects ran the gamut from painters to writers, journalists to university professors, and groups of broadcasters, students, professionals, and veterans of the Republic of Vietnam Military Forces (RVNMF). We visited and collected data from the Museum of the Boat People and the Republic of Vietnam in San Jose, California, the Vietnamese-American Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, California, and the Peace Mural Foundation in Miami, Florida. We were also present during Vietnamese-American commemorative practices, including Black April (*Tháng Tư Đen*) observances and the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam in Westminster, California.

Through primary and secondary sources, as well as the original data we ourselves collected, we have worked to identify the various collective memories operative in each of the book's three principal collectivities. In doing so, we have enabled the further exploration of whether these collective memories reveal evidence of cultural trauma, a distressing break in the narrative of collective identity that leads to a re-narrating of that identity. The nature of these collective memories and the diagnosis of cultural trauma provide a powerful explanation for the ways in which the American-Vietnamese War continues to impact the present. For Americans, most particularly those authorities in charge of foreign affairs and national defense, the collective memory of the war has continued to cast a shadow over any deliberation of military engagement, particularly that which could lead to "boots on the ground." In the Vietnamese-American community, certain versions of the war's collective memory have led to the opposite result: a strong desire for armed re-engagement with forces on the ground. In all cases, as we will show in the book's final chapter, these competing collective memories affect how culpability for the war and its aftereffects is attributed as well as the likelihood of reconciliation between the erstwhile belligerents.

Supplementing these three chapters focusing on the arenas of memory—and the concluding chapter examining themes of reconciliation—we have included an additional chapter (Chapter four) that offers a synoptic narrative of the fall of Saigon and the mass movement of people from Vietnam to the United States. Without a general picture of the events that followed the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, it would be impossible to understand the ways in which the various groups within the Vietnamese-American

community remember the war and its place in their narrative of collective identity. While this summary is meant to be a general one in that it does not hew closely to any one particular narrative, the chapter is based largely on Vietnamese-American sources, for it remains an integral part of this group's collective identity.

Finally, while we have highlighted the uniqueness of our approach to the American-Vietnamese War, many of our academic colleagues will be interested in its generalizability. To these concerns we would say that the broader implications of our project are those of argument rather than representative in terms of data. Our way of analyzing the construction of narratives, which aims at representing and reconciling the trauma of war, might well be applicable to other cases such as in the Balkan region of Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. The theory of cultural trauma on which we build our analysis has proven useful in a diverse array of comparative historical cases (Alexander et al., 2004; Eyerman, 2011; Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese, 2013). Our study aims at expanding the application of this theory through more nuanced attention to the competing memories of an event, the narratives in conflict both between and within collectivities.

References

Alexander, Jeffrey (2004a) "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." Pp. 1–30 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Alexander, Jeffrey, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, eds. (2004) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Anderson, Benedict (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Appy, Christian (2003) *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides.* New York: Penguin Books.

Asselin, Pierre (2007) "Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954–1955." *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2007): 95–126.

Assmann, Aleida, and Linda Shortt (2012) "Memory and Political Change: Introduction." Pp. 1–16 in *Memory and Political Change*, eds. Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt. New York: Palgrave.

Boyle, Brenda M., and Jeehyun Lim, eds. (2016) *Looking Back on the Vietnam War.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Burns, Ken, and Lynn Novick (2017) *The Vietnam War* [film]. PBS Documentaries.

——— (2020) "Introduction." Pp. 1–6 in *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, eds. Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns. New York: Vintage Books.

Cao, Lan (2018) "Vietnam Wasn't Just an American War." *The New York Times* (March 22).

DeGloma, Thomas (2015) "The Strategies of Mnemonic Battle: On the Alignment of Autobiographical and Collective Memories in Conflicts Over the Past." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 3(1): 156–190.

Dorland, Gil (2002) *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam Era*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's.
Durkheim, Emile (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
Espiritu, Yen Le (2014) *Body Counts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Eyerman, Ron (2004) "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Foundation of African American Identity." Pp. 60–111 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
——— (2011) *The Cultural Sociology of Political Assassination.* New York: Palgrave.
Eyerman, Ron, Jeffrey Alexander, and Elizabeth Breese, eds. (2013) *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*. Boulder: Paradigm.
Eyerman, Ron, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring (2017) "Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory, and the Vietnam War." *Croatian Political Science Review* (54): 11–31.
Faas, Horst, and Tim Page (1997) *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina*. New York: Random House.
Fall, Bernard (2000) *Last Reflections on a War.* Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books.
Goscha, Christopher (2016) *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books.
Halbwachs, Maurice (1992) *The Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Jamieson, Neil (1995) *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Kamp, David (2017) "Why *The Vietnam War* Is Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Most Ambitious Project Yet." *Vanity Fair* (July 12).
Kiernan, Ben (2017) *Viet Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kunzle, David (1991) "Two Different Wars." Pp. 23–32 in *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*, ed. C. David Thomas. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.
Ky, Nguyen Cao (2002) *Buddha's Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
Madigan, Todd (2020) "Theories of Cultural Trauma." Pp. 45–53 in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, eds. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja. New York: Routledge.
Mannheim, Karl (2007) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
——— (2011). "Competition as a Cultural Phenomenon." Pp. 399–437 in *From Karl Mannheim*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
Marlantes, Karl (2017) "Vietnam: The War That Killed Trust." *The New York Times* (January 8).
Nguyen, Beth (2017) "Definitive For Americans: A Refugee's Review of 'The Vietnam War'." KQED (October 10).
Nguyen, Viet Thanh (2013) "Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance." *American Literary History* Vol. 25, Issue 1 (Spring 2013): 144–163.
——— (2016) *Nothing Ever Dies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
——— (2017) "The Great Vietnam War Novel Was Not Written by an American." *The New York Times* (May 2).
Ninh, Bao (1987) *The Sorrow of War.* London: Vintage.
Nora, Pierre (1989) "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." *Representations* Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989): 7–24.
———, ed. (1996) *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Olick, Jeffrey (2010) "From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products." Pp. 151–161 in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Jeffrey Olick. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Payton, Jack R. (1995) "Vietnam: A Country, Not Just a War." *Tampa Bay Times* (July 16).
Pham, Anh (2017) "Vietnam: A Country, Not a War." *Asia Matters For America* (April 27).

Pham, Hoa (2013) "Vietnam Is a Country, Not a War." *Creative Industries Journal* Vol. 6, No. 1: 17–27.
Ricoeur, Paul (1990) *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Sanchez, Tatiana (2017) "Veterans Frustrated by Ken Burns' [sic] Film on Vietnam War." *San José Mercury News* (September 29).
Schechner, Richard (2008) *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge.
Schwenkel, Christina (2009) *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Smelser, Neil (2004) "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma." Pp. 31–59 in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Stone, Oliver (1986) *Platoon* [film]. Hemdale Film Corporation.
Sun, Mengxue, Duyen Tran, Anna Bach, Uyen Ngo, Tiffany Tran, Thuy Do, and Oanh L. Meyer (2022) "Impact of War and Resettlement on Vietnamese Families Facing Dementia: A Qualitative Study." *Clinical Gerontologist* 45(4): 798–807.
Taylor, Keith (1983) *The Birth of Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Thomas, C. David, ed. (1991) *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.
Tieu, Van (2022) "First-of-Its-Kind Study to Delve into Wartime Trauma on Vietnamese Americans." ABC10 (May 1).
Truman, Harold (1999) *A Country, Not a War—Vietnam Impressions*. San Diego: Pale Bone.
Truong, Monique T.D. (1997) "Vietnamese American Literature." Pp. 219–248 in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Truong, Nhu Tang (1986) *A Vietcong Memoir*. New York: Vintage.
Westmoreland, William (1976) *A Soldier Reports*. New York: Doubleday.
Zerubavel, Eviatar (1999) *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.