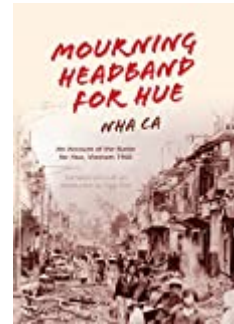


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Nha Ca.** *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. 378 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-01417-7.



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**Published on** H-War (February, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In her terrifying and important memoir of the Battle for Hue (January 30–March 3, 1968), Nha Ca describes her experience being caught in the crossfire of American and communist forces during the Tet Offensive. Nha Ca attended her father’s funeral in an outlying community of Hue when she and her family were suddenly pulled into a chaotic battle between North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces and the US Army and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Nha Ca wrote *Mourning Headband for Hue* in 1969, soon after she escaped from Hue on an American helicopter, capturing the raw violence of the battle and painting, at the time, a controversial anticommunist and anti-American portrait of the battle, showing how Vietnamese civilians tried to navigate the Charybdis of Viet Cong “Liberation” squads and the Scylla of US Army infantry and artillery.

The memoir is a mixture of Nha Ca’s recollections and several oral histories that she incidentally took in the midst of the fighting. One chapter, “A Person from Tu Dam Comes Back and Tells His Story,” recounts the testimony of a young man named Lã who hid from the Viet Cong in an underground shelter and then found safe haven in Phan Boi Chau’s ancestor-worshipping house in Tu Dam hamlet. A young man, Khâm narrates chapter 7, “Story from the Citadel;” Khâm was mortally

wounded during his flight from Hue and died shortly after telling his story to Nha Ca. All other chapters tell the story of Nha Ca and her immediate family, while conveying three stages of Viet Cong occupation: the public executions and kangaroo courts that accompanied the first days, the growing count of assassinations and violent suppression during the siege, and finally the systematic murder of suspects and political dissidents who witnessed Viet Cong war crimes.

Caught amidst all this violence were Vietnamese civilians who, by and large, remained neutral during the conflict. Nha Ca primarily captures their experiences. The book opens with a powerful metaphor that unites the disparate chapters into a unified whole. Nha Ca writes: “The city of Hue, and perhaps our entire suffering homeland as well: how does our fate differ from that of the small dog floundering in the water?” (p. 10). Nha Ca develops this metaphor throughout the book. Its essence conveying the dark story of civilian experiences, framed within the historical context of the Viet Cong violently suppressing and re-educating Vietnamese noncommunists, or those civilians who remained politically neutral, or who opposed communism. These neutral civilians, in Nha Ca’s best estimation, bore the brunt of the Viet Cong’s vicious tactics that included theft and burglary, vio-

lent retaliation, and torture. At the same time, Nha Ca describes how American soldiers fundamentally misunderstood Vietnamese neutrality and therefore remained deeply suspicious of the civilian population. Nha Ca's objective was not to catalogue American war crimes, nor to explain why American soldiers expressed hatred and brutality toward civilians. Rather, the American presence enters the story in complicated ways that alienated the Vietnamese; at times, Americans offer the promise of relief and at other times deal indiscriminate death with their artillery and air power.

Nha Ca envisions the dog as a powerful symbol for the Vietnamese experience, because both dogs and civilians in her narrative were dependent on another's good will and powerless to shape their own destiny. Dogs appear poignantly near the end of the memoir, especially during Nha Ca's remembrances of a chaotic gunfight between the Viet Cong and American forces. She recalls that people and dogs alike fled from the violence. One dog was unfortunately trampled upon by the jostling feet rushing, and another dog took to the Perfume River in its fright (p. 268). Then Nha Ca witnessed American soldiers shooting at the young dog floundering in midstream; these men did not shoot to kill, but merely to keep the dog in a panicked frenzy, trapped in the river's current and unable to make it back ashore. The dog drowned. Nha Ca believed that the dog's death in midstream paralleled the experience of Vietnamese civilians, kept at arm's length from safety by American airstrikes and artillery and the Viet Cong's checkpoints and indiscriminate killing.

Nha Ca does find moments of humanity amidst the depravity of war. She writes that Khâm, during his escape from Hue, encountered the body of an American G.I. in a burned out house, his fair hair ... smeared with stagnant blood (p. 222). The American clutched a picture of his wife and child in his hand. Khâm's companion, Tam, who could read English translated the note scribbled on the back of the picture: "My husband, I implore

God to send you our words of prayer and best wishes.... The war will be over and our family will be reunited" (p. 222). Khâm and Tam empathized with the dead man who, like them, wanted nothing more than reunion with his loved ones. Nha Ca deploys many similar anecdotes to convey how the American War in Vietnam, generally, and the Battle for Hue, specifically, brutalized all of its participants, noncombatants and combatants alike.

Olga Dror, the memoir's translator, has done scholars an invaluable service by rendering this rich memoir in English. Dror provides an instructive introduction covering how Nha Ca's memoir and subsequent oeuvre intervened in, and provoked, various historical and historiographical debates in Vietnamese literature. For example, Nha Ca's anticommunist persuasion in *Mourning Headband for Hue* warranted public book burnings and bans after the political reunification of Vietnam. Lê's story, mentioned above, indicted a prominent postwar Vietnamese scholar with various war crimes, causing a public and scholarly debate that remains unresolved today. Dror's introduction provides the historical context necessary to understand the memoir, even for those with scant background knowledge of the war.

On the whole, scholars will find this memoir invaluable for understanding the American War in Vietnam as an internal civil war between the Vietnamese. Nha Ca unpacks other subjects worthy of scholarly consideration, not fully treated in this review, such as how the divergent, American-influence culture of Hue infuriated Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers, the Viet Cong use of female soldiers to win the hearts and minds of Hue civilians, and the ways in which the Viet Cong tried to shore up its political and cultural legitimacy through re-education programs, symbolism, and propaganda. Instructors might consider using Nha Ca's volume in undergraduate courses on the American War in Vietnam, modern Vietnamese literature, or memoir and wartime journalism.

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**Citation:** Joshua Akers. Review of Ca, Nha, *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2015.

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