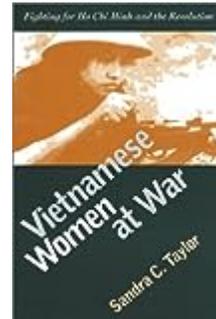




Sandra C. Taylor. *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. xii + 188 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0927-7.



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Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution

Taylor describes the quickly disappearing history of Vietnamese women's participation in the Vietnam War. Using Taylor's own oral interviews, Rand Corporation interviews and a variety of archival sources, the author explores women's contributions to and sacrifices for an independent Vietnam. While Taylor focuses mainly on armed women, she does not ignore women's other contributions nor does she sugarcoat the dangers faced by these women. Despite the pain this war caused many women, Taylor views Vietnamese women as active participants in their own history and not as victims.

Taylor provides the reader with a brief history of Vietnam from the dynasties to the French period. Traditionally, women enjoyed few rights in Vietnam. They were bound by Confucius' teachings which demanded women's obedience to their fathers, husbands, and sons. The French colonial government did not challenge women's subordination to male relatives. Instead, the French added to their misery by mistreating and sexually exploiting women laborers. Like Vietnamese men, women would have many reasons to oppose French rule. Communists appealed to them by advocating indepen-

dence from foreign dominance and supporting women's rights. Still, women were bound by traditional gender roles and feared accusations of immorality if they "consorted freely with men" (p. 23).

Surprisingly, Vietnam has a long history of women fighters. Taylor briefly describes the historical and symbolic importance of the Trung sisters, who defeated the Chinese army in 40 C.E. During the twentieth century, Vietnamese women fought the Japanese, French, and later, Americans. According to Taylor, women played an increasingly important role in defeating the Japanese during World War II and seizing power from the French. Yet, the bulk of this work focuses on women who fought against the United States and South Vietnam. She explains who these women were and is careful to identify regional variations in the tasks women performed. Taylor notes that many of these women were young women or girls. They were a valuable asset because they were easy to train and were not as likely to be burdened with family responsibilities. The fact that American soldiers did not regard women and girls as threats increased their value as guerrilla fighters.

Not all female supporters of Vietnamese independence fought. Women made excellent porters because they could carry heavy loads over long distances. In addition, they freed men to fight by taking men's places in the fields. In South Vietnam, urban elites, Buddhists, and other Non-Communist women contributed to the "third force." These women advocated peace, participated in demonstrations, and in a few cases, immolated themselves. Although Americans had once advocated the third force as the best alternative to colonialism or Communism, Taylor blames the U.S. entry into the war for eliminating this alternative (p. 92).

After examining the lives of today's Vietnamese women, the reader may wonder if the result was worth women's sacrifices and suffering. From the beginning, women risked capture, torture, and death. This war also took a personal toll on female participants. Many women were torn between their duties to their families and their duties to their nation. The Communist Party encouraged women to hold off on love and marriage until after the war ended, which proved too late for many. Although the war is over, the Vietnamese are still struggling with malnutrition, disease, and environmental destruction. Women face additional burdens such as limited educational opportunities and domestic violence. Moreover, Vietnam's official histories ignore women's contributions to independence.

Although many women paid a hefty price for their involvement in this war, Taylor cautions readers against viewing these women as victims. Throughout the book, Taylor depicts women's creativity. For example, women compensated for the scarcity of weapons by making their own (p. 89). Vietnamese women also are actively preserving their past and aiding other women. For example, the Vietnam Women's Union encourages reunions for "long haired" warriors and has trained women in new technologies. Taylor leaves the reader with an image of women helping women in Vietnam.

When analyzing her sources, Taylor is her own biggest critic. Throughout this work, Taylor questions the accuracy of statistics provided by Communist sources. She also identifies some of the problems pre-

sented by her interviews with surviving "long-haired warriors" from Dinh Thuy. Some of these women were quite old and did not remember certain events. Other interviewees may have remembered their deeds as particularly heroic because of "their sense of selves," Vietnamese gender roles, and women's position in the history of their country (p. 18). Taylor also makes no claims that her interviews are representative of the entire Vietnamese population. She states that her interviews did not "cover the entire country" and that she was unable to "interview people at random on the streets" (p. 7). After reading this book, it is easy for the reader to assume that most of Taylor's interviews were from Dinh Thuy. If this is not the case, Taylor should have included a table or footnote with the number and locations of her interviews.

This work does suffer from some minor organizational errors. For example, readers may find Taylor's use of the term "long-haired warriors" confusing because different definitions appear throughout the text. Taylor initially uses "the appellation given to women who had fought for their country during the war with the United States" as a definition (p. 2). Yet, this reviewer got the distinct impression later in this work that long-haired warriors were women from the Mekong Delta (p. 72). Fortunately, she eventually explains the different definitions and uses of this term (p. 79). For future editions, Taylor may want to move this information into one of the first chapters of the book.

Despite these minor criticisms, this book is definitely worth reading. While the oral histories may not be 100 percent accurate, they provide insight into Vietnamese women's lives. Readers will gain a greater understanding of women's struggle against their nation's enemies and the cultural constraints placed on their lives. Indeed, this work will make a valuable contribution to women's and military history.

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