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The Vietnam War in Vietnamese Official and Personal Memory

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In 1986, just eleven years after the war, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN) kickstarted Đổi mới (Renovation) to revive its economy as much as to find for itself a place in the world. In the period leading up to it, the country seemed on the brink of economic collapse. A sense of foreboding already pervaded it in 1978, less than three years after the "guerilla republic" pushed south to unseat the Saigon government.[1] By then, galloping inflation, famine, plus "thievery and waste" big and small had exposed the shortcomings of collectivism. Subsidy – a system of rationing and price control set up during the war, when foreign reserves poured into North Vietnam – could now hardly cover basic needs. Aid had slowed to a trickle.[2] With war on the frontiers against China and Cambodia, the Vietnamese everyman had good reason to believe that his people had no more to give. All manner of rumors circulated, forecasting how the socialist state may have been "folding in upon itself."[3]

And yet the party–state not only stood firm, but grew steadily in the 1980s, becoming absolute, as Alexander Woodside would say, by being "more subtle."[4] Not about to cede power to market economics, the regime turned its territory into something of a "laboratory" to "redesign Vietnamese behavior."[5] This would come to mean a great many things. Economically, the people – their enterprising spirit blunted by long campaigns rolled out in the 1970s to teach the socialist way of life – now needed to break out of idleness and take daring steps. The country was opening its doors to foreign investors. To spur them on, the party–state turned to "the science and mystique

1 Alexander Woodside, "The Struggle to Rethink the Vietnamese State in the Era of Market Economics," in Timothy Brook and Hy V. Luong (eds.), *Culture and Economy: The Shaping of Capitalism in Eastern Asia* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 64.
2 David G. Marr, *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development* (Ithaca, 1988).
3 Woodside, "Struggle to Rethink," 65.
4 Ibid., 64, 73.
5 Ibid., 74.

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of management," retraining its managerial class by putting into place a set of financial incentives.[6] Wealth-creators, beaten down for decades, were given another go.

But market economics, as Woodside writes, "while requiring great trust in the state, does not show how to create it."[7] So, at some risk to itself, the government set about promoting socialist democracy as a way to broker "authoritarianism in a postcollectivist era."[8] This concept grants every man the right to ply his trade at the marketplace, so long as he respects the law, which makes the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) the people's only representative. Long spells of nonproductivity had to end, and socialist democracy gave the people what they needed: "faith in the rightness of rational action."[9] To that end, a corpus of laws was issued in the 1980s, beginning with the criminal code and bookended by two new constitutions, written in 1980 and 1992. This corpus had several names. Some framers called it socialist law, while others settled on transitional law, carrying forward the Soviet view that "law in the transitional period to true Communism" would be used to crush "enemies of the socialist order."[10]

Renovation would set in motion a campaign to teach the Vietnamese their rights and duties as many began to stake their fortunes in commerce. Through mass legal education, state officials sought to remake the Vietnamese into good socialist citizens, living and working by the letter of the law. No sooner was a new code passed than teams of legal advisors moved from town to town, handing out leaflets and unspooling propaganda films. The hope was that the average man would bring home with him a sense of the law, which he would put to use in everyday life. Much like China, which in the 1980s held its own "legal learning" drives to "transform consciousness," the Vietnamese government would recast its laws to tie the people to the state, and to give commerce a moral and political value.[11]

At no other point, before Renovation or since, was so much wagered on the success of mass legal education. As Woodside explains, the open-door policy needed a native business class for it to take off. Ethnic Chinese merchants,

6 Ibid., 67.
7 Ibid., 68.
8 Ibid., 71.
9 Peter Drucker, *The End of Economic Man: The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Ann Arbor, 2017), xxvii.
10 Alice Era-Soon Tay and Eugene Kamenka, "Marxism, Socialism, and the Theory of Law," *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 23 (1984–5), 217–49, 238.
11 Jennifer Altehenger, *Legal Lessons: Popularizing Laws in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1989* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 7, 22.

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who long dominated Vietnamese trade, had mostly been driven from the country. Persecution and the change in currency in 1975, 1978, and yet again in 1985 sapped them of much wealth and resolve. With little else to lose, they left.[12] Soon, it became clear that few among the Vietnamese had the know-how to implement economic reforms, predisposed as they were "to think of economics in terms of either a national planned economy or a family business but as little in between."[13] Large, private enterprises fell into the hands of state officials and cadres. This class, given a glimpse of changes still to come, was keen on keeping the "quasi-millenarian political consciousness that Hồ Chí Minh and other revolutionaries created fifty years ago."[14]

To keep the proud epic of war in times "decidedly unrevolutionary," these statesmen turned to the commemorative arts. Renovation, it is said, ushered in a "commemorative fever," expanding the ceremonial practices observed in North Vietnam since 1947, when Hồ Chí Minh's government first publicly lauded martyrs.[15] Then, official ceremonies were nowhere so rich as in the heart of Hanoi. Here at the seat of political power lay the sprawling Ba Đình Square, Hồ's mausoleum rising in "lonely grandeur" at its center. Built in 1973 and completed just months after North Vietnamese soldiers pushed their way into Saigon for the last time, this complex structure of marble, boasting everywhere a socialist architectural language, exudes the triumphal air of the time.[16] From this mysterious marvel radiate roads named after patriots. Phan Đình Phùng Street, much like Nguyễn Thái Học Street, attests to the enduring anticolonial spirit. The path that cuts across Ba Đình – fittingly called Hùng Vương, ruler of a mythical kingdom thought to be the dawn of Vietnamese civilization – links the spartan leader to his earliest ancestors. This street is all the more symbolic with the mausoleum and the presidential palace situated to its left, while to the right stands the National Assembly building. Ba Đình's spatial layout proclaims the story of an ancient and free people colonized for centuries, then finally lifted out of despair by the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP), the CPV's precursor. For much of the 1970s, when statecraft was bound up with hero worship, the commemorative repertoire grew on

12 King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions, and Implications* (Stanford, 1987).
13 Woodside, "Struggle to Rethink," 66.
14 Ibid.
15 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Introduction: Situating Memory," in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley, 2001), 11, 1.
16 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Monumental Ambiguity: The State Commemoration of Hồ Chí Minh," in K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (eds.), *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts* (New York, 1995), 272–92, 280.

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this one narrative.[17] Memoirs, shrines, sculptures, paintings, and fiction, each in its own way, lent awe to the revolution. Stories of heroic sacrifice reached unexpected peaks in music, poetry, and drama.

The heady days of Renovation saw the state loosening its control over Vietnamese cultural life, allowing people from all walks of life to claim a piece of the past. It is not clear how the turn to market economics brought about a cultural renaissance that took on a momentum all its own. It may be that, to create the social order for each to test his luck in buying and selling, the state needed a small cultural elite to teach laymen how to use the law in their daily lives. So, as a matter of strategy, the government enlisted the press to translate "the plain text of any law into stories and images."[18] Publishers, writers, artists, producers, and others besides, each acting as middlemen, were left to sort out how to convey the law of the land to its citizens.

Between 1986 and 1990, the campaign seemed to have slipped from government control, spawning far deeper questions about the war. Reportage and fiction took readers back to the dark 1960s, when the party–state used socialist law to attack those thought to stand in the way of revolution. In a cinematic world still struggling to come into its own, newcomers like Đặng Nhật Minh shrank the mighty topic of war into a smaller compass – studying it through the affair of a North Vietnamese soldier with a prostitute. Vietnamese artists heralded Bùi Xuân Phái's return to the spotlight. Once seen as decadent, as out of keeping with the era's ethos – nature bending to the will of men – the early paintings of this nonconformist now spoke the deeper, and nobler, sensibilities of an artist grappling with the turbulence of his time. All the while, the state sponsored one project after another to commemorate that inspired and frenzied age. Hero worship carried on at a steady pace. And so, the many highroads to history cut across one another, the private ones sometimes merging with, at times breaking free from, the official one.

Fiction and the Press

The iconoclast Dương Thu Hương was one who did not shy away from saying her piece. She was born in 1947 to a veteran communist.[19] Turning 6

17 Uyên Huy, "Mỹ Thuật TpHCM trong thời kỳ đổi mới" [The Arts in Hồ Chí Minh City during Renovation], *Văn chương Việt* [*Vietnamese Literature*], September 26, 2007.

18 Altehenger, *Legal Lessons*, 15.

19 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Dương Thu Hương and the Literature of Disenchantment," *Vietnam Forum* 14 (November 1994), 82–91; Nicholas J. Karolides, *Literature Suppressed on Political Grounds* (New York, 1998), 352–7.

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years old, she saw the sure-footed republic enlisting young revolutionaries to name and try landowners. Many died. From time to time, when news of the campaign leaked, onlookers may have shuddered to think that here, in a new guise, was Mao's "jurisprudence of terror."[20] Dương Thu Hương's father was himself a land reform cadre. Her grandmother, a landowner at the time, escaped only just in time to South Vietnam. The budding patriot, much too young to have a sense of how long the fighting would last, remained in North Vietnam throughout the war. She abandoned her studies at the ministry of culture's art college, even turning down offers to study in the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Bulgaria to lead a women's brigade in the Central Highlands.[21] There, she performed for the troops, nursed the wounded in make-do hospitals, and buried the bodies of fallen men.[22] After 1975, to earn her keep, she ghostwrote a book. It was through this lesser task that she would come to learn how the official narrative was so much at odds with what she knew.

Once she stepped into her new role, Dương Thu Hương spent the better part of the 1980s completing *Những thiên đường mù* (*Paradise of the Blind*), a novel that would earn her the label of a subversive. The history of land reform drives much of the narrative, which revolves around three women. Hằng, only in her 20s when Renovation kicked into gear, is sent to work in a Russian factory. Quế, Hằng's mother, had lost her husband during land reform, when her own brother, Chính, denounced him as an enemy of the state. Then there is Tâm, Hằng's paternal aunt, vowing to exact revenge on those who had disgraced her family. The novel begins with Hằng, already in Russia, receiving a telegram from the sly Chính imploring her to meet him in Moscow. Though she is "loath to travel at his bidding, the pull of family ties propels her onto a long train journey during which she relives her family history."[23] The horrors that took place during land reform then unfold. Everywhere, "guerillas patrol the streets with glinting bayonets, their rifles pointed, ready for battle."[24] They look at every passerby, their weapons trained on any who could be called a nationalist, reactionary, or tyrant.

20 Yonghong Lu, *The Legal System and Criminal Responsibility of Intellectuals in the People's Republic of China, 1949–82* (Baltimore, 1985).
21 Alan Riding, "Vietnamese Writer Won't be Silenced," *New York Times*, July 11, 2005: www.nytimes.com/2005/07/11/books/11writ.html.
22 Long Dien, "Nhận định hiện tượng Dương Thu Hương" [Assessing the Dương Thu Hương Phenomenon], *Minh Triết Việt* [*Vietnamese Wisdom*], November 29, 2012: https://minhtrietviet.net/nhan-dinh-hien-tuong-duong-thu-huong-mo-dau/.
23 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Dương Thu Hương and the Literature of Disenchantment," 87.
24 Dương Thu Hương, *Những thiên đường mù* [*Paradise of the Blind*] (Vietnam, 1990), 66.

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Hằng describes how the cadres hunted down men, dragging them one by one before a mob to mete out punishment on the spot.

Paradise of the Blind may have done no more than put into literary form the grievances being aired, ever cautiously, in the magazines and newspapers at the time. For a brief while in 1987, men and women who had been wronged during the land reform wrote to *Văn nghệ* (*Literature and the Arts*), a newspaper the Vietnamese Writers' Union ran, to tell their stories. Those who read the December 1987 issue might remember the woman – a widow – who had her ancestral home taken from her. Though curses and threats buffeted her about, for years she called on the authorities near and far to help her reclaim what belonged to her family. The appeal had been only one more that went unanswered. Nevertheless, this woman's story strikes a blow at Renovation's new evangelism – to "look truth in the eye" (*nhìn thẳng vào sự thật*).[25]

It was left to Bảo Ninh to bring alive the later years of the war. Whereas *Paradise of the Blind* builds into memory the terror of land reform, evoking at last that sense of revolution gone awry, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*) presents a more ambiguous picture of the war. First appearing in 1990, the novel received a prize from the Vietnamese Writers' Union. It is said that the honor was given less in support of the book than for the autobiographical detail it contains. Like his antihero, Bảo Ninh took part in the Youth Brigade as a foot soldier fielded to conduct reconnaissance during the war and joined the Remains Recovery Team thereafter. He drafted his novel all the while, circulating it at first in mimeograph form. Then, in 1994, when a small publisher had the novel translated into English, the name Bảo Ninh caught on among readers in the West. He came to be known as the voice of the average North Vietnamese soldier, able to break past ideology, soaring above the fractious politics of the Vietnam War to come face to face with its dark legacy. Later that year, Bảo Ninh beat Italo Calvino and Isabel Allende to take home the Independent Award for Foreign Fiction. His name would appear next to Milan Kundera's.[26] Thanks to its author's fame, the novel has since been translated into fourteen languages, reaching far more readers than any other piece of Vietnamese fiction.

The Sorrow of War's popularity is due in part to its unusual form, in larger part to the way it boldly and searchingly reframes the Vietnam War. It takes the shape of a ruined manuscript, fragments of which have been preserved,

25 Trần Khắc, "Người đàn bà qùy" [Woman on Her Knees], *Văn Nghệ* [*Literature and the Arts*], December 7, 1987.

26 "Soldier's Tale Wins Foreign Fiction Award," *Independent*, May 30, 1994: www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/soldiers-tale-wins-foreign-fiction-award-1439604.html.

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sorted, then set to print. The disjunctive quality, the air of straying prose, and the spectral motifs all convey the sense that the work is built as a play of images, a montage reflecting the mind of a war veteran teetering on the edge of madness. Allusions swarm around descriptions of fighting men, showing how each one behaves during the war. The stark details are all there. These formal features, it has been said, "textually give shape to trauma," mirroring the author's own "struggle with war memories."[27] Others have argued that the storehouse of images and vignettes, taking on the force of fact, gets at the truth of the revolution at a time when Vietnam was not yet ready to examine its past.[28]

Despite its unusual structure, the novel has a coherent storyline. Kiên, the protagonist and narrator, is tough and militant, a literary image of the revolutionary. His childhood sweetheart, Phương, who later becomes a prostitute, is much closer to a social parasite than a patriot. Brought up in the arts, the sensibilities she inherits from her father suggest a certain worldview that Kiên and others see as "bourgeois." To the young Kiên, her statement that "war crushes everything in its path" breaks with the ethos of his time. He believes in revolution. Patriotism has swept him along, so he volunteers to fight.

Phương, on the other hand, is quickly turned into "a whore type" (*loại đĩ*).[29] *The Sorrow of War* gives the impression that theft presaged her transformation. This is conveyed in an episode in which Kiên and Phương try to board a train heading to the battlefront. It must be the late 1960s, as air raids turn the station into a desolate scene. Kiên, out of an indomitable will to catch up to his battalion, plots with Phương to steal a Phoenix bicycle. Air raids throw the surroundings into chaos, so no one seems to mind. Soon after, the novel introduces an old man exchanging rations, a canister, a gun, a flashlight, and some banknotes for the bicycle Kiên and Phương have just taken. As if completing a purchase, the man rides off while Kiên "calmly pockets the money" without giving the matter much thought.[30] He then devours the ration.

27 Andrew Ng, "Visitations of the Dead: Trauma and Storytelling in Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 6 (1) (summer 2014), 83–100, 84, 98. See also Jane Robinett, "The Narrative Shape of Traumatic Experience," *Literature and Medicine* 26 (2) (2007), 290–311; Heonik Kwon, "Rethinking Traumas of War," *South East Asia Research* 20 (2) (2012), 227–37.

28 Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge, 2008); Duy Lap Nguyen, "The Image of Death, Redemption and Play in Bảo Ninh's *Sorrow of War*," in "The Postcolonial Present: Redemption and Revolution in Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Culture and History," Ph.D. thesis (University of California, 2012), 211–15.

29 Bảo Ninh, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* [*The Sorrow of War*] ([United States], 1992), 267.

30 Ibid., 156.

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The transfer of bicycles without permission from the state, so central to this scene in the novel, is in fact a violation of North Vietnam's property regime at the time.[31] It flouts Directive 217-NT, issued in 1962 to outlaw anyone buying or selling the vehicle and its parts on the open market.[32] In essence, only the state could produce and distribute this valuable property, which was used not just for postal and communication services, but above all to move military supplies across battlefields, and later into the South, through the Hồ Chí Minh Trail.[33] Lê Trọng Hà, a judge on the Supreme People's Court, made the point in 1967 that violating the policies and laws of the party–state amounted to breaching the revolution's moral code.[34] Bicycle theft fell within the range of offenses that could weaken the property system, undermining socialist ethics and party authority all at once. In this light, by establishing Phương and Kiên as economic delinquents, the novel also shows them to be morally corrupt.

Descriptions of theft end abruptly, giving way to a dark account of Phương's transformation. Unable to catch up to his battalion, Kiên leads her to an abandoned school where they can rest for the time being. He awakens hours later to find Phương bathing in a nearby lagoon. From behind the bushes, Kiên watches, noting how something of her earlier beauty has faded. Before him is "an experienced woman" coming into her own, with an air of "indifference to herself, to him, to the past, to the wretched plight of an entire people."[35] To Kiên at that moment, the signs of her callousness have been there all along. He remembers Phương laughing when they took off on the stolen vehicle, as though she found some thrill in the act.[36] Moments before, Kiên encountered some men who describe Phương as "a seasoned whore" (*đĩ thập thành*).[37] By the time Kiên finds her bathing in the middle of a bombing raid, the sexual desire he has long shown for her has disappeared. Kiên resolves in that instance to leave her behind. He joins his battalion and would not know anything about her – whether she was dead or alive – until after the war.

31 Hoàng Quốc Thịnh, "Chỉ thị 217-NT: Về việc tăng cường quản lý thị trường xe đạp" [Directive 217-NT: Strengthening the Management of the Bicycle Market], *Bộ trưởng Bộ nội thương* [*Ministry of Internal Trade*], Hanoi, April 2, 1962.
32 Ibid.
33 Christopher E. Goscha, *Historical Dictionary of the Indochina War (1945–1954): An International and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Honolulu, 2011), 60–1.
34 Lê Trọng Hà, "Phẩm chất, đạo đức xã hội chủ nghĩa của người cán bộ tòa án" [Socialist Virtues and Ethics of Court Officials], *TSTP* 3 (1967), 2–6, 4.
35 Bảo Ninh, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh*, 271.
36 Ibid., 189.
37 Ibid., 267.

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Things take a turn in this scene, so that Phương, erstwhile the symbol of bourgeois sentimentality, embodies the kind of hard-bitten individualism thought to be common among social parasites. One theme that resonates in this scene and that runs subtly through the novel is the conversion of sexual desire into political awakening. In proletarian novels, the hero develops political consciousness when he considers his female companion a prostitute and finally overcomes his desire for her. It does not matter if she is not an actual prostitute: so long as she is coded as such, "she quite seamlessly starts being [one]."[38] *The Sorrow of War* appears to borrow this master plot to develop Kiên and Phương's relationship. Several times it has minor characters describe Phương selling herself, so that Kiên finally believes it to be true. And so he chooses to go to war, assuming the morally superior position as a revolutionary while she functions as "a trope in the literature of men coming into class consciousness."[39]

Because so much of *The Sorrow of War* seems to reflect the author's own experience as a combatant, scholars have tended to see it as a story about trauma. In his book and standalone essay, Heonik Kwon, for instance, identifies Bảo Ninh as someone who uses literary forms to explore the "long-held wounds of war."[40] Andrew Ng goes a step further. Placing it at the crossroads of spectral aesthetics and trauma theory, he presents *The Sorrow of War* as a work that edged Vietnamese fiction out of realist aesthetics toward something more postmodern.[41] All the same, the novel represents to both a "break with the conventional, official narrative of war based on the paradigm of the heroic revolutionary struggle."[42]

By pairing the revolutionary with the prostitute, though, the novel does not stray all that far from the official narrative. Already in 1948, Trường Chinh, General Secretary of the VWP, wrote that it would take no other than the revolutionary – defender of the home soil who is committed in every way to global warfare – to restore "the Vietnamese character and soul."[43]

38 Heather Bowen-Struyk, "Sexing Class: 'The Prostitute' in Japanese Proletarian Literature," in Ruth Barraclough and Elyssa Faison (eds.), *Gender and Labour in Korea and Japan: Sexing Classes* (London, 2012), 19.

39 Ibid., 21.

40 Kwon, "Rethinking Traumas of War," 230.

41 Ng, "Visitations of the Dead," 92; Ryan Skinnell, "The Literature of Trauma: Reading the Sorrow of Love in Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*," in Mark Herberle (ed.), *Thirty Years After: New Essays on Vietnam War Literature, Film and Art* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), 256–64; Steven P. Liparulo, "'Incense and Ashes': The Postmodern Work of Refutation in Three Vietnam War Novels," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 15 (1–2) (2003), 71–94.

42 Kwon, "Rethinking Traumas of War," 230.

43 Trường Chinh, *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt-nam* [*Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*], 2nd ed. (Hanoi, 1974), 72.

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The prostitute, by sharp contrast, embodies "the superficial, materialistic, artificial, and commercial orientation of the decadent capitalist West."[44] She stands in the way of the revolution – materially by wasting resources, and symbolically as a reminder of capitalism's corruptive influence and resilience. In this sense, the revolutionary fighter, supreme defender of socialism, stands outside of the law as an exception. Though both characters commit theft, Kiên effectively redeems himself. Phương, on the other hand, is condemned in the court of public opinion as a prostitute. She symbolizes the baser tendencies of a bourgeois artist, thief, and whore – a criminal virtually impossible to reform.

Where the novel could be said to complicate the official narrative is in a later scene, when North Vietnamese soldiers, the fighting at last behind them, confront Saigon in the figure of a dead whore. They come upon her body as they root through the airport for "antiques" – a euphemism for food, drinks, and commonplace objects they could loot. In a dialogue between the soldiers, one lashes out at "the fucking whore lying sprawled for everyone to see."[45] He trips over her body while scampering around for his share of the booty. Indignant, this lout throws the corpse out onto the pavement. Meanwhile, others around him get on with looting. Officers and soldiers "run to and fro, looting and plundering, as if on a shopping spree." With the whore – a metaphor for South Vietnam – out of sight, they "bustle about as if at the market," sharing in the plunder.[46] No sooner is the very symbol of capitalism tossed out than a new market takes shape. This is the irony that the novel seems to work toward when it shows fighting men putting away what they could find, guessing among themselves the worth of the spoils. Later, by having the girl reappear as a ghost – capitalism in a new guise – the novel drives home the point that it is not possible for Vietnam to do away with capitalism, just as Kiên, the revolutionary, cannot be without the impure Phương. Though it once promoted total revolution, the party–state came to rely on market economics as a lifeline. In this context, *The Sorrow of War* narrates, as Corey Robin would say, "the struggle of political men and women to get on top of their world, and the economic forces that bested them."[47]

44 Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley, 1994), 15.
45 Ibid., 108.
46 Ibid., 109.
47 Corey Robin, "Eric Hobsbawm, the Communist Who Explained History," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2019.

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Film and the Visual Arts

On screen, the hapless pair – revolutionary and prostitute – function as metaphor for North and South Vietnam more than anything else. *Cô gái trên sông* (Girl on the River), a 1987 film directed by the now fabled Đặng Nhật Minh, would turn to these same images to make sense of the war. The movie has hardly begun when Nguyệt, a prostitute who plies her trade on the Perfume River, is found in a hospital. There is an air of hopelessness about her, as though the taste for life has lost its hold, and she is left putting her trust in fate. Before long, Nguyệt begins to reflect on a life that has had little to offer her.

A great deal of the film takes viewers back to central Vietnam during the war. There, living on almost nothing at all, Nguyệt hires herself out on a small boat to men in the South Vietnamese army. She might have carried on in this way if a communist guerrilla, Thu, had not turned up one day, seeking refuge on her boat. He is wounded. Swept up in the pursuit, Nguyệt hides the fugitive from prying eyes, dresses his wounds, and, to throw his pursuers off the scent, takes him downriver. Before stealing away, the fighter recites "Trên dòng Hương Giang" (On the Perfume River), a poem penned by the revolutionary poet Tố Hữu in 1938. On the surface, this poem describes the plight of those in Nguyệt's lot, working on the sly as ladies of the night. Only in the last stanza does it become clear that the fallen woman stands for South Vietnam – corrupted by the West and thus in need of redemption. The meaning of Thu's recitation is hardly lost on Nguyệt. She understands, more perfectly than Thu is ready to admit, that he would return at last to free her, helping her to become a proper woman of her day.

By calling into use the highly symbolic image of the prostitute, the film harkens back to a familiar depiction of South Vietnam as a victim of her patron, the United States. This prejudice held sway during the war. Whereas prostitutes during the colonial era worked mostly in secret, their industry driven underground by strict regulations put in place to keep the racial divide intact, socialist discourse on prostitution since the 1950s often registers anxieties about the West.[48] After the war, the same image was used to shore up a campaign to destroy the "reactionary and depraved" culture of the South.[49]

48 See, among others, Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, "Between Stigmatisation and Regulation: Prostitution in Colonial Northern Vietnam," *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 12 (2010), 573–87 and Christina Firpo, "Sex and Song: Clandestine Prostitution in Tonkin's Á Đào Music Houses, 1920s–1940s," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 (2) (summer 2016), 1–36.

49 Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Crows Nest, Australia, 2001), 43.

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The goal, it seems, was to stamp out traces of the *ancien régime* that still found their way into "the conscious mind, psychology and daily life" of the Vietnamese.[50] Blame was placed not so much on the South Vietnamese government as on "the imperialist West." The city's energy, its wealth, all the political one-upmanship and surface bonhomie were dismissed as depraved, still more when compared with the North, which stood tall on ideals.

The 1980s spawned far wider representations of South Vietnam as impure – with her people as lowlifes and scammers, her culture vile, crass, and unwholesome. Built into the militant prose of such official publications as *Lao Động* (*Labor*), *Nhân Dân* (*The People's Daily*), and *Quân Đội Nhân Dân* (*The People's Army*), these metaphors serve to highlight a master narrative of revolutionaries as liberators, as guardians of biological and cultural purity. "Thúy họa mi" (The Nightingale), a 1988 story serialized in the newspapers, draws on the usual cast of characters thought to overrun South Vietnam – capitalists, reactionaries, prostitutes, and small-time crooks. Thúy, the eponymous heroine, is a criminal with a pure heart. Pushed by circumstances beyond her control, she drifts into the underworld. She joins Quán Xồm's circle of highwaymen, grows disillusioned, but continues to work with them anyway. It is not clear how Quán Xồm came into his own as a gang leader, but "he longs for a large sum of money so he could run off to the free world with Thúy."[51] More than once the police arrested him and sent him for reeducation, only to see him rebuild his criminal networks fencing stolen goods. The story in fact opens with Quán Xồm and his men stealing valuable textiles from the state's warehouse and passing them on to underground dealers.

When Hải Cá Kình – a ruffian Quán Xồm came across in a reeducation camp – devises a money-making scheme, the boss is all ears. Their target is a reputed trafficker of drugs, gold, and dollars; his wife is said to be from a whorehouse. Though bound together by a solemn oath of brotherhood, Quán Xồm and Hải Cá Kình distrust each other all the same and end up in a nasty brawl just as their plan is about to succeed. In the last of eight installments, Thúy emerges as the greater mastermind. She informs the police of the scheme, all the while encouraging Quán Xồm to go through with it so

50 Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, *Policing Economic Crime in Russia: From Soviet Planned Economy to Privatization*, trans. Roger Leverdier (New York, 2011), 15.

51 Trần Thanh, "Thúy Họa Mi, số 7" [Thúy Họa Mi, Installment 7], *Tiền Phong* [*Avant Garde*], March 29, 1988.

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that he could spirit her away to freedom. She has strayed, she has killed, and exposing the gangland head is how she remakes herself. Where Quán Xồm represents anarchy and danger, Thúy is the fallen woman who believes in the revolution's power to redeem.[52] Through them, the conflict between cultural purity and a certain capitalist–criminal mentality plays out figuratively.

Cô gái trên sông (Girl on the River) at first seems to follow this principal theme, then quickly breaks fresh ground by upending the stereotype. After the war, Nguyệt by chance finds out that the man she once helped now occupies a prominent position as a government official. The system has carried him to the top. On one occasion, she tries to see him at his office but is turned away because her papers show her to have been a prostitute, with time served in reeducation camps. Never expecting to meet him ever again, Nguyệt one day finds Thu sitting in a car, looking past her as she approaches, scarcely paying her any attention. So touched to the quick is she by his treatment that Nguyệt staggers on and is hit by a truck. Coming to in the hospital, she finds herself speaking to Liên, a journalist keen on interviewing her. Presumably acting on no more than trust, Nguyệt recounts her life to Liên, not knowing that Thu is Liên's husband – and Liên is unaware that Nguyệt and Thu had a brief encounter during the war. Nguyệt certainly does not expect, nor does Liên, that Thu will dog her every step as she tries to have her story printed. At the last moment, when Thu realizes that Liên, without any hope of the story seeing print, has threatened to resign, he reveals that he is the erstwhile fugitive and blames her for putting his career at risk.

Whereas the revolutionary is expected to forsake his personal vanity for the greater good, Thu comes across as a cold, self-serving functionary. In him, the virtue of a revolutionary has all disappeared.[53] Nguyệt, in stark contrast, turns out to be a "self-sacrificing patriot."[54] For no gain whatsoever, she saves a resistance fighter when he is in danger, keeping alive his image as a warrior until their very last encounter. Without reverting to type after the war, she marries a former South Vietnamese soldier just released from reeducation. He appears briefly in the background; his face never comes into clear view. The film's subtle critique of the official narrative of war is nowhere so

52 Elizabeth A. Wood, "Prostitution Unbound: Representations of Sexual and Political Anxieties in Postrevolutionary Russia," in Jane T. Costlow, Stephanie Sandler, and Judith Vowles (eds.), *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture* (Stanford, 1993), 124–35.

53 Quang Đức Nguyên, "Cô gái trên sông và Thằng Bờm – hai bộ phim đang làm xôn xao dư luận" [Girl on the River and Bờm – Two Films Causing a Stir in Public Discourse], *Tiền Phong* [*Avant Garde*], January 9, 1988.

54 Mark Philip Bradley, "Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema," in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory*.

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poignant as in the closing scene. After learning the truth from her husband, Liên tells the trusting Nguyệt that she has been wrong all along. The man Nguyệt helped, she says, died long ago. In the final frame – a scene conveying what Nguyệt believes may have happened – the young Thu, gun in hand, is shown running alone across a battlefield before meeting his death. Through this shade of light irony, the film brings official memory into question, recasting it as out of keeping with the postwar era. With market reforms touching a high-water mark, the party–state, balancing the nation's economic health against the old ideals of revolution, has its journalist peddle a romance of heroic sacrifice.

Besides films, art exhibits have also met the call to reexamine the war's legacy. Vietnamese artists who came onto the scene in the late 1980s saw art as having the power to reshape national consciousness. They chose to "remember the past in a new way," embracing artists who had once closed the door on the political mainstream.[55] The impressionist Bùi Xuân Phái seems to fit this bill. A graduate of l'Ecole des Beaux Arts d'Indochine, this master of landscape paintings briefly taught at the Hanoi College of Fine Art. In 1957, already a prescient critic of the world around him, he took part in the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm reformist movement to call for greater artistic freedom.[56] In no time at all, the authorities spirited him off to a remote town, where he was meant to reform himself through labor. Becoming from then on a recluse, but visionary, artist, this man cut himself from the art world. He withdrew into himself, his studio curtains shut tight against the poets and artists of his day, and there gave over to his palette, driving only shades of brown and gray into his canvases.

This refusal to bend to the cultural wind would come at a cost. For much of his life, Bùi Xuân Phái seemed to carry on as a superfluous man, a dreamer type out of Russian *belles lettres*. A romantic, a misfit, a dispossessed and rebellious loner, "he wants to, but cannot, play an active role in changing society."[57] So he resigned himself to depicting Hanoi streets in cold palettes. His paintings from the 1960s and 1970s capture the ancient city as everywhere somber and desolate. Houses and shops appear empty, their canopies hang over sidewalks with no signs of human activity. Just as other artists trimmed

55 Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu, 2009), 75.
56 See Peter Zinoman, "Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese 'Reform Communism' in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13 (2011), 60–100 and Peter Zinoman, "Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm on Trial: The Prosecution of Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Thụy An," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11 (3–4) (summer–fall, 2017), 188–215.
57 Ellen Chances, "The Superfluous Man in Russian Literature," in Neil Cornwell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (New York, 2001), 111–22, 114–15.

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Figure 23.1 A veteran places joss sticks on graves at an official cemetery in Hanoi, on Vietnam's National Day for war martyrs and invalids (July 27, 2017).
Source: AFP Contributor / Contributor / AFP / Getty Images.

their sails – using their brushes to depict the triumphs, hopes, and high spirits of the revolution, as if to step up the pace of history – this outcast's instinct for gloom roused the government's ire. Unflaggingly and well into the 1980s, he painted the capital in a range of bleak colors. He kept his artworks from public view until 1984, when, on the cusp of Renovation, the authorities finally allowed a small collection to be shown.

By then, Bùi Xuân Phái had brought Hanoi back to life in a more vibrant palette. Shops and houses are set against a blue sky, their windows a brilliant red and orange. There are in every corner people in colorful clothes, carrying shopping bags.[58] In another artist, this might be mistaken as a tested spirit buckling at last. Bùi Xuân Phái, though, had paid a high price to live as he chose. His paintings, each so hard-won, bear witness to an era as much as to his own place in it. Through them, those who had not been in North Vietnam during the war could now see how that past bore down on the nonconformist.

58 Dinh Quoc Phuong and Derham Groves, "The Aesthetics of Hanoi's Architectural Sense of Place through the Eyes of Local Painters," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (1) (winter 2011), 133–42.

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Conclusion

In the heart of Hanoi, just half a mile from the Hồ Chí Minh mausoleum and a stone's throw from Lenin Park, a heap of military junk sprawls around the courtyard of the Military History Museum. Engines and fuselages of American war planes, piled upon metal scraps and still more fighter parts, crumble under the weight of a B-52 set upright on its nose. In front of this hulking mass is a photograph of a Vietnamese woman, rifle slung across her back, pulling at the wreckage of an American airplane.[59]

This sprawling mound, splayed out in dramatic fashion, has long been the museum's centerpiece. The rippling story of a people's revolution unrolls around it. Set up in 1956, two years after the Điện Biên Phủ curtain-fall, the Military History Museum is today one of many sites that lay out the events of twentieth-century Vietnam as seen by the party–state. The meandering galleries in the main building, strewn with objects in glass cabinets, recount the uprisings against French rule. Here, the artifacts are thin, like breadcrumbs. It is the newer wing that teems with exhibits of the 1955–75 period. More than the tanks, more than the jeeps, more even than the helter-skelter collection of images, a diorama of low-tech jungle warfare is what brings home the spirit of the North Vietnamese, who had been made to fight so hard, and for so long.

The War Remnants Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City could just as easily be another Military History Museum. Once named the "Exhibition House for US and Puppet Regime Crimes," this building first opened its doors in September 1975, only months after North Vietnamese forces swept into Saigon. It took on its current moniker in 1995, when the United States renewed diplomatic ties with the socialist republic. Today, the display of American aircraft – a Huey, a Skyraider, and a Dragonfly, among others – in the courtyard is familiar enough. They will remain there for a long time. In every other way, the museum conveys with a heavy hand a different story, one in which the Vietnamese are victims. Floor by floor, American military vehicles and unexploded ordnance are set beside graphic images of children touched by Agent Orange. Never once judging themselves one-sided, the curators press-gang visitors into a lesson on American war crimes.[60] Only those who had lived through the war can measure what they see against what they themselves know.

59 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 166.

60 Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington, 2009), 165.

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Out in Saigon's hinterland, meanwhile, off Highway 1A, lays untended what used to be the National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Beaten, neglected, vandalized, the tombstones here are nearly level with the earth, some covered in graffiti, some defaced.[61] Many were dug up or razed to make room for a water plant.[62] Despite "all the creaking of [her] old bones," the SRVN – uniting forevermore her destiny with the rest of the world's – lays to waste other South Vietnamese cemeteries, replacing them with Isuzu and Mercedes-Benz factories.[63] How will this shape the Vietnamese psyche – at home and abroad – as the country's past bears down on its future?

61 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 37.
62 Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, 217.
63 Fosco Maraini, *Meeting with Japan*, trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York, 1959), 70.

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