

Review: Vietnam War Stories

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Xiaobing Li. *Voices From the Vietnam War: Stories From American, Asian, and Russian Veterans*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 279 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7392-0.

There is a difference, Alessandro Portelli once wrote, between storytelling and history-telling. The difference, if I understand him correctly, is between, on the one hand side, letting the stories stand on their own and, on the other hand side, questioning the stories. These different forms of talking about the past rest on two different assumptions. Storytelling rests on the assumption that stories speak for themselves, that they are inherently authentic – the narrators were there, they know best what happened. Thus, their stories do not have to be questioned and perhaps even ought not to be questioned. History-telling, however, rests on the assumption that the experiences people lived and the stories they tell never fully match up; in order to get a better sense of people's experiences, it is therefore important to question their stories. That is what oral historians do.

Stories of war are particularly prone to diverge from lived experiences – a lesson I first learned from Leo Tolstoy's otherwise rather boring philosophical musings on history in his *War and Peace*. Generals' stories will paint very different picture of a battle than those of foot soldiers, and the historian must take into consideration both stories to better understand what happened. And so it is a welcome addition to the oral history literature on the Vietnam War to find stories of South and North Vietnamese, Chinese, South Korean and Russian veterans next to those of U.S. American veterans.

Li, a history professor at the University of Oklahoma, spent seven years traveling around the world to interview veterans from all sides of the Vietnam War. He selected 22 stories, including eight stories from North Vietnamese, Russian, and Chinese veterans. Each story is introduced by a page-long summary of the story that is about to follow. While most of these stories focus on the war experience, some tell about life before and after the war as well, albeit mostly in a cursory way.

While Li presents multiple perspectives, it is – as is somewhat common in collections of edited oral history interviews – unclear whether he questioned the narrators beyond his standard list of questions about training and service experience, knowledge of their enemies, and combat effectiveness (p. 6). In some instances, we learn some details about the interview context, but we learn nothing about the editing process. We can therefore only speculate how much of Li's own

interpretation shaped the narratives he presents. It seems, however, that he mostly follows the storytelling model rather than the history-telling model.

Although short and extensively edited, the veterans' narratives are nevertheless revealing in many aspects. From the Russians we learn that Vietnam was "the war we are not supposed to remember" (72). The Soviet Union never acknowledged its involvement in Vietnam, and Russian soldiers did not receive any compensation. An interview with a former KGB agent reveals the strained relations between the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. The interviews with the US veterans are mostly with officers and NCOs whose stories of the war are mostly positive and shaped by sentiments that glorify the nation and the military. The interviews with South and North Vietnamese veterans tell us much about their experiences of training and service. Tran Thanh tells us about growing up in the Black Thai martial culture, his military training in his home village and later as a reservist in the North Vietnamese Army, and his service in an "ethnic minority division" made up of Tho, Miao, and Thai people from the mountainous regions in northwestern Vietnam (pp. 42-43). All stories seem well-rehearsed. It is not clear to what degree this may be a result of editing.

The introduction and conclusion provide historical context, but there is little analysis of the interviews. Li argues that "[t]he stories reveal how the American escalation put more pressure on the Communist coalition and worsened relations between Beijing and Moscow" (p. 223). This political historical analysis exaggerates what oral histories can tell us about the history of international relations; at the same time, Li does not use the opportunity to delve into an analysis of the social and mental experiences of soldiers that such narratives allow.

The book will serve well as a supplementary text in classes on the Vietnam War. It will also find an audience among specialists in the field as well as a broader public interested in military history.