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Review of *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*

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Comments

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Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam. By Nick Turse. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt Co., 2013. ISBN 978-0-8050-8691-1. Map. Illustrations. Notes. Index. Pp. 370. \$35.00.

In the Vietnam War constructed by investigative journalist Nick Turse, nearly every American soldier was a remorseless killing machine wielding unlimited firepower against a hapless civilian population. Violence, murder, and civilian suffering were the norm, war crimes a natural outgrowth of US command policies. In short,

this work puts the carnage of war center stage. Turse has done valuable service in forcing his readers to consider violence against noncombatants in wartime, while challenging postwar narratives which portray atrocities like the My Lai massacre as an aberration. For its subject matter alone, this is a taxing read.

Relying on the records of the Army's Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, and supplementing his research with interviews of US veterans and Vietnamese victims, Turse aims to demonstrate how atrocities became routine for Americans fighting in Vietnam. A constant emphasis on body counts permitted young soldiers to unleash destructive impulses far beyond the scope of acceptable behavior. Turse thus moves from one brutality to the next in workmanlike fashion—the killing of unarmed civilians, the burning of hamlets, the sexual exploitation of women, and the purposeful generation of refugees. So debased had Americans become that “Gang rapes were a horrifyingly common occurrence” (p. 168). Worse, U.S. officials at the highest levels suppressed evidence of these atrocities to combat allegations that criminality had become the norm.

Questioning the conduct of armies in war is a legitimate endeavor, as is focusing one's historical lens on the civilian population. Too many American accounts of Vietnam lose sight of the very object of a “people's war.” In hoping to correct this error, Turse underscores the unnerving state of existence in which local villagers faced unpredictable foreigners armed with modern, lethal weapons. “At every turn, the onus was put on Vietnamese civilians to actively demonstrate that they were indeed noncombatants” (p. 55). For a population Americans were supposed to be protecting, such relationships clearly worked against larger US goals in South Vietnam.

Unfortunately, Turse's laudable aim of bringing civilian anguish to the fore is undermined by significant methodological shortcomings. The author loses sight of the political and military context of the war, likely because of his single-minded exploitation of the War Crimes Working Group files. Turse highlights American transgressions in Binh Dinh province, for instance, without acknowledging its role as a revolutionary stronghold. This is not meant to excuse atrocities but the reader is left without any understanding of why US forces were conducting operations in Binh Dinh or the difficulties posed by an elusive, intelligent, and equally violent enemy. In this story, the Vietnamese are little more than victims. Moreover, Turse evaluates none of the vital non-military programs and neglects the role of those Americans involved in civic action. Even if violence eroded their moral principles, not all soldiers were involved in “industrial-scale slaughter” (p. 204).

Turse's accounting thus raises questions about using a narrow body of evidence to make broader generalizations about one of America's longest wars. While he substantiates the horrific acts performed by some US soldiers and marines, Turse sees in his research acts representative of American behavior writ large. Discounted are the voices of countless Americans who genuinely believed—based on experience and doctrine—that protecting the population offered the surest path to a stable, independent South Vietnam.

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Civilian suffering is a serious and most certainly understudied aspect of the Vietnam War that merits discussion. We should do so in a way, however, that values the Vietnamese population as more than just “collateral damage,” while at the same time allowing for the possibility that not all American soldiers were bent on laying waste to the South Vietnamese countryside and its people.

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