

Svetlana N. Shchegolikhina

Military Component of American Historical Memory : "The Justice" of the Vietnam War

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MILITARY COMPONENT OF AMERICAN HISTORICAL MEMORY: “THE JUSTICE” OF THE VIETNAM WAR¹

SVETLANA N. SHCHEGOLIKHINA

The Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia

There might have never been written a real, objective world history, the history of a state or people.

The problem has a dual basis. The first is the one that Wilhelm Dilthey called “the hermeneutic circle”² -- the facts will not find their use until you understand the system. But this is impossible to create if you do not know all facts and details.

The second basis of the existence of the problem is associated with the subjective factor. Witnesses may not be truthful due to the fact that they are too emotionally involved in events and do not possess all information. And the next generations, in addition to lack of possession of

¹ The research is carried out by the grant of the Russian science Foundation (project No. 14-18-00390) in the Russian State Pedagogical University named after A.I. Herzen.

² Dilthey, Wilhelm. 1996. Selected Works, Vol. IV: Hermeneutics and the Study of History. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

full information, are influenced by their historical experience and are not able to convey the atmosphere of the events, as they did not live at that time. Then, there is the situation described in the theory of cognitive dissonance from 1950s³. According to the theory, when the opinions, beliefs and assumptions contradict the new incoming information, there is a mental conflict. Therefore, for the sake of its avoidance, it is a constant “rethinking history” in which the social practice of this period when history is written mainly determines the historical perspective of the past.

The military component occupies a significant place in the historical memory and there are several explanations. Firstly, according to polemology, war is the main driving factor in the development of mankind. War is the most notable of all conceivable forms of social life, it is the result and the source of the breach, and restores the balance in the individual society and the world in general. War performs the function of one of the main drivers of technological progress and the main factor of collective simulation (dialogue and borrowing crops), which plays a significant role in social changes. Secondly, war very quickly and dramatically changes the individual and collective psychology, self-image and worldview.

Like any other phenomenon, the military component of historical memory has both an external and an internal side which is reflected in the historical characters (images) and myths. Myth is based on the priority of ideas to facts. War in itself generates a certain kind of amnesia, or at least some numbness, because human psyche in a form of protection tries to forget something unpleasant. In turn, dosage information may become a means of forming a military component in historical memory.

The military factor has become quite a big place in American historical memory, which is reflected in the interest in military history in particular, and in the fact that American wars of the twentieth century have been the maximum revisions on all levels--state, public, private. Traumatic events, of course, must take place in memory of people, their cultural and social life. But sometimes creators of social memory prefer an event to be forgotten as it generates contradiction between what the society would like to see and what to show others, and the way the event actually is. So military historical memory like no other memory is full of myths and is constantly revised. This is true especially when it comes to controversial facts or events?, not achieving expected success of military companies. The Vietnam War, therefore, is a good example of such situation connected with memory.

³ Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

On September 10th, 1963 the National Security Council met on the issue of Vietnam. Major General Victor H. Krulak, the Joint Chief of Staff Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency, and Joseph Mendenhall, of the State Department Far East Planning Office who had been on a trip in Vietnam together were giving their analysis of the situation in Vietnam. After they had finished, president John F. Kennedy asked them:

Were you two gentlemen in the same country?⁴

There are many questions about the involvement of the USA into the Vietnam War. After the war, all main participants tried to explain mistakes and find the causes why the war was lost. There were explanations of politicians, soldiers, diplomats, journalists and civilians. If we compare all these explanations, we can find one obvious thing: all of the authors of the explanations named the same causes, but they ranged reasons in a different order and put different accents on them. After the Vietnam War, Colonel Harry Summers, Jr. carried out analysis of it, "re-fought" and won it in a short period⁵. The same thing happened with the memory of this war.

Participants of these events are still alive, and they bear a large share of the responsibility for the formation of the image of the American combatants, the attitude towards the war and military memory in society.

Veterans of American wars are characterized by three types of perception of their military experience. While some of them try to forget it, others think of stability, commitment and comradeship typical of the military period of their life, while others believe these tragic years as the happiest years of their life. The first category includes, generally, the professional military officers who graduated from the military Academy; the second one--privates and the third one--non-commissioned officers (sergeants, corporals etc.). Veterans of the second and third category are a large group and they are active in the formation of historical source base, so it is natural to expect unconditional glorification and mythologizing of the war. Myths about the war through the generations evolve towards the glorification and become more sentimental. The wish of a "happy ending story" inevitably leads to the repetition of the same war stories, again and again, which becomes a part of the public system of values⁶. And to explain the complex and

⁴ Young, Marilyn. 1991. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*. New York: HarperCollins; HarperPerennial. Pp. 100-101.

⁵ Schell, Jonathan. 2000. *The Real War: The Classic Reporting on the Vietnam War*. Boston: De Capo Press. P. 41.

⁶ Kinney, Katherine. 2000. *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

“unheroic” moments they use the formula “we were so naive, removing the responsibility from the participants.”

The veteran category includes not only soldiers, but also civilians who were at war; a special place among them is occupied by war correspondents. Their interpretation of the events of the past and the present vision of the situation in the country and the world strongly determines how it will be remembered in history. The perception of the military correspondents depends on many factors, among which their motive to go to war is important. Journalist's Paul Dean's (a former military officer who served in Germany, Korea and Vietnam) involvement into the war was divided into three categories by journalists in Vietnam: 1) serious observers; 2) those who have mainly described human drama of war; 3) those who arrived to Vietnam because they liked the war, and they thought to use it for their career⁷. The bulk of the work on the Vietnam War, that have read and watched the Americans, belonged to the third category of journalists. If we summarize most of the historical sources, the Americans largely perceived the war as it was seen by Michael Herr. He went to Vietnam with the aim to write something about the war⁸. Herr is a typical representative of the middle class, with education on the college level, not of militarist beliefs, emphasizing his Jewish origin (which on psychological level can be interpreted as an appeal to the images of Jerusalem and the Holocaust, and on social level it will be close to ethnic, non-Protestant minorities). So, his perception of the war was acceptable to most Americans. His book *Dispatches* (1977) is considered a classic history of the Vietnam War; Herr participated in the creation of scripts for popular fiction and documentary films about the war. In this example, there is a significant feature of American society that perceive only what they want, what corresponds with their views on themselves.

The Vietnam War was often called “the TV war” that was the most accessible directly from the events. And again, let's pay attention to the process of transformation of perception. Historian Oscar Patterson III and journalist Clarence R. Wyatt after analysis of 180 regular evening programs on ABC, CBS and NBC and 1800 articles from leading newspapers came to the conclusion that television audience is more attracted to unusual, and what was interesting, and TV did not show the dead, the dying, and wounds⁹. Initial inconsistency (documentary shots against interpretation, including art) gave a way to understanding, justification and glorification of the events. One example is the change of type of an American hero. When the reality was not like

P. 189.

⁷ Dean Paul. 1991. *The Role of the Press*. In: *The Vietnam Reader*. Ed. by Walter Capps. New York: Routledge. P. 232.

⁸ See his interview in the documentary: *The First Kill*. Director: Coco Schrijber. Lemming Film, 2001.

⁹ Wyatt, Clarence 1995. *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. Pp. 217-218.

in John Wayne's movies, when you could see the apparent contradiction between the ideal image in the *Green Berets* (1968) and in the staff of the chronicle with the terrible experience of the ordinary Americans, the solution was found in movies like Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). John Wayne did not match the image of the hero of the Vietnam War. Not a handsome hero, but a "guy from the neighbourhood", the same as everyone, becomes a symbol of this war. Sympathize with him, try to understand him psychologically, therefore he is right, he is a "good guy" who fought against the "bad guys". This is the basis of justification.

Reflection of American historical memory is connected with the widespread practice of consideration of possible alternatives in history. This approach is typical both for popular variants of historical knowledge, and for researchers.

Anti-war movement during the Vietnam War is usually associated with the student movement, members of which believed that educated USA was strictly against the policy of the American administration. It is fashionable to call the war "the war of the sons of blue collar" (which is actually true), and consider that the war was an example of the most striking manifestations of social injustice, totally unacceptable in American society. But the most people do not pay attention to the fact that about 80% of former Vietnam unprofessional soldiers (those "sons") went to war as volunteers, and to the problem of the impossibility of obtaining education or a job (which not often was the cause of volunteerism--veterans often talk about boring life in the United States, the desire to prove themselves as heroes, to leave home anywhere, the desire to prove their maturity etc.)¹⁰.

The second fact, which people try not to notice, is associated with the public opinion of that time, not the interpretation of it, which sometimes is more desirable. One example is connected with the My Lai Massacre. Journalist Peter Arnett said that almost nobody knew about this event before the military Tribunal¹¹. In January 1970, Brigadier General William E. Depuy spoke about Vietnam at Boston College. He encouraged students in the hall to ask any questions, and when no one answered, he tried to provoke: "Would you like to ask me about My Lai?". Only one hand went up and a student asked: "What is 'My Lai?'"¹². In 1971, according to the survey of Gallop about the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, 40% of people with education on the college level, were against (sic!) the withdrawal of troops. And in March 1973, only 7% of Americans viewed the Vietnam among the important issues¹³. In 1989, on the first

¹⁰ Appy, Christian. 1993. *Working-Class War*. Chapel Hill, Lnd.: Bruce Springsteen. Pp. 23, 47, 48.

¹¹ Gil, Dorland. 2001. *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era*. Washington, D. C.: Brassey's. P. 10.

¹² Loewen, James. 1995. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American Textbooks Got Wrong*. New York: The New Press. P. 240.

¹³ Hillstrom, Kevin, Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. 1998. *The Vietnam Experience*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group. P 153.

day of classes in one of American colleges students were asked the question “Who fought in the Vietnam War?”. One in four students said: “North and South Korea” (sic!).¹⁴

In connection with the 40th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the media were filled with discussions on the topic how contemporary history would have gone, if shot in Dallas had not happened. The main focus is of course on the Vietnam War. Again revive images of Camelot, frozen in 46 years of age, the image of the President is becoming more and more idealistic. John F. Kennedy is defined as one of the most influential presidents of the United States along with George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt¹⁵. Noteworthy, all three who are listed in addition to JFK were also associated with the wars: War for the Independence of the USA, the Civil War, the Second World War. This again suggests that in American historical memory association with the military history of the country is one of the basic points. It is, actually, not surprising: 1) the further an event is, the more it is decorated in a myth or object convenient for perception and therefore more distant events seem to be known better than recent ones, 2) civil memory is fully formed at the age of 10, so it was after this age, children are most susceptible to the perception of historical heritage—they say what they believe in¹⁶.

Thus, there is a gradual transformation of the concept of “victory”. Explanation and definition of it it is in the answer: “We have proven our creditability”. The latter can be everything from economic and technical superiority to confirmation of the reality of the actions of democracy.

Military events like no other give the opportunity for regular activation of historical memory to maintain a sense of national identity. A system of symbols—small material symbols, monuments and symbolic rituals—serves this goal.

A symbol represents a concentrated visible expression of basic ideas, phenomena or concepts based on structural similarity. The characters are also specific means of communication between people: a symbol helps to know belonging to a particular social community, to learn how to pervade this community’s central idea, etc. In the U.S., multinational, mobile community, a country of immigrants, a system of symbols (images) play much more significant role than in

¹⁴Loewen, James. 1995. Op. cit. P. 240.

¹⁵ Sabato, Larry. 2013. *The Kennedy Half-Century. The Presidency, Assassination, and Lasting Legacy of John F. Kennedy*. New York, London: Bloomsbury.

¹⁶ Mosse Mosse, George. 1990. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Winter, Jay, Sivan, Emmanuel, ed. 1999. *War and Remembrance in the Twenties Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;

Bramson, Leon, Goethals, George, ed. 1968. *War. Studies from Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.

many other countries. Language, appearance, way of life in this country cannot be unifying states and society factors. And therefore, in the formation of the American collective memory symbols become one of the main means.

Former medic George Evans, who was in Vietnam in 1969, recalled that on the sixth month of his stay in the war, he decided that he no longer wanted to be a soldier, so he stopped cutting hair, cleaning clothes, shaving, and generally looking like a soldier. The apotheosis of his symbolic denial of military service became a dispute over the given him by cap, by the first rescued wounded marine. When the commander demanded to lead the uniform order (otherwise he would arrest Evans for violating the uniforms, lack of discipline and insubordination), George Evans responded with a clichéd joke:

Well, go ahead. What are they gonna do, send me to Vietnam?¹⁷

Along with active cultivation of making military values, there are also opposite examples of the use of symbols to underscore opposition to the war, which is also a part of the military memory. In the movie *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) directed by Stanley Kubrick, the master of symbolism, one of the main characters, private Joker, has a badge of pacifism on his uniform.

Small material symbols are the most interesting and original part of American military material memory. It expresses the attitude of the Americans towards war, and their military experience; they can become the subject matter of the dispute and the symbol of the call to public opinion. Every organization of veterans or soldiers has its "original characters" which are used in various ways: from applying their clothes, ending with the images on playing cards and glasses. Veterans of the American Legion, veterans of foreign wars have their own form of service, the most remarkable part of which is a cap. Former military men decorate their caps with different badges and signs. In addition to traditional cap decorations, there is a lot of fun, containing phrases that appeared during the war (for example, on a cap of a Vietnam War veteran was attached a badge with the inscription: "When I die I know I'm going to heaven because I have spent my time in hell." Or on a cap of another veteran of the Vietnam War, there was a badge with words: "If you weren't there, shut up."). And it all began with their service in Vietnam. And nowadays, the veterans proudly use signs of their military past.

Thus, in a diverse American society, small material symbols function as personal identity in the socio-historical structure. They also express a personal historical experience and attitude that are basis of association with others having similar experiences in order to save it.

¹⁷ Appy, Christian. 2003. *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*. New York: Viking. Pp. 452-453.

There are some positive traits that distinguish American military historical memory, and the ways of its formation. Among them are: a clear view of historical ideas of society and the state; respect for past, which manifests itself in action, not just words; the formation of patriotic ideas in the twentieth century that was delivered as one of the important state and public tasks, which involved substantial material and moral means. Despite the fact that in the twentieth century the United States won almost none of the war, the country managed to maintain in society the idea of “heroic and victorious” historical past. The formation of military heritage is through repression or restitution for the loss, penalties or amnesty. Memory shapes the foreign and domestic policy, legitimizes the actions of modern political leadership and social activities.

Thus, the American military experience fully reveals itself in the conclusion of George L. Mosse, who studied mainly the formation of European military memory. Indeed, the reality of military experience is transformed into what might be called the Myth of the military experience which depicts war as a meaningful and even sacred event. This myth masks the war and legitimizes it, provides the nation with a profound religious sense by creating modern saints and martyrs, places of worship, and the desire to repeat this experience¹⁸.

The way out is the artificial formation of historical memory of the society, representing more or less acceptable system for the identification of the living generation. Undoubtedly, the most famous monument is the Memorial to Veterans of the Vietnam War, or Wall. Small copies can be found in many American cities. Behind the construction of the Wall was not just an abstract symbol, but a part of living memory, which is expressed, for example, in the tradition to bring to it what is important and seems to be necessary for young people, and characters from their own relationship to history and modernity. Modern technology has enabled us to make a mobile Wall. On the website of the Memorial to the veterans of the Vietnam war¹⁹, a virtual Wall provides information on each one, whose name is engraved on it. There is also an interesting topic: the death toll in Vietnam every day of every year from 1961 to 1970. Using the above tools, everyone can find out where these combatants come from, their age, branch of service, where they died, etc. That is, the Vietnam War has ceased to be nameless, as it was, and what the whole war informally adhered to in the army.

On November 11th, 2003 at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Washington, D.C) a memorable meeting took place. Many different people, sometimes surprising and funny types, gathered together. Among this crowd, there were six Vietnamese men dressed in camouflage. They kept aloof from other veterans, they were not laughing or talking. It seemed that they were

¹⁸ Mosse, George. 1990. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 7.

¹⁹ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Wall – USA. <http://www.thewall-usa.com/>.

too wary. Unlike American veterans who were easily engaged in conversation, the Vietnamese ones were laconic. They are from South Vietnam, and have lived in the United States since the early 1970s. This year only one young Vietnamese boy came to the wall. Almost all of these people had been in Vietnam, and now are becoming American citizens. Two things seemed surprising: firstly, after almost thirty years of their life in this country, they still felt like strangers; secondly, they were not considered as "associated" American veterans. How to be with them? They are still not included in American historical memory of the Vietnam War.

Summing up, historical memory can be divided into three main levels: collective (national), mass and individual. The ratio between them can be different: the same, overlap or contradicting each other. So when forming the collective historical memory should be made of the three main factors: political order, their own interests' agents, the desire not to offend or not to initiate an active disagreement from those who have personal experience that has formed an opinion on this period, or event. Memory is expressed in signs and symbols, affecting both the mind and the subconscious mind; it constantly recharges sense of national identity, loyalty lifestyle and righteous actions. The history of society during war clearly identifies basic principles of nature as an individual and society as a whole. The military component is one of the most accurate tests of justice and legality, correctness of life as individuals, social groups and the whole society. Therefore, the study of the formation of national memory, using military experience, allows high accuracy to determine the major features of mentality. For the history of formation of the memory of the American society, exactly the Vietnam War can be called the most striking example of the use of memory about it to prove its creditability.

SUMMARY

Military Component of American Historical Memory: “the Justice” of the Vietnam War

Historical memory can be divided into three main levels: collective (national), mass and individual. The ratio between them can be different: the same, overlap or contradicting each other. So when forming the collective historical memory should be made of the three main factors: political order, their own interests' agents, the desire not to offend or not to initiate an active disagreement from those who have personal experience that has formed an opinion on this period, or event. Memory is expressed in signs and symbols, affecting both the mind and the subconscious mind; it constantly recharges sense of national identity, loyalty lifestyle and righteous actions. The history of society during war clearly identifies basic principles of nature as an individual and society as a whole. The military component is one of the most accurate tests of justice and legality, correctness of life as individuals, social groups and the whole society. Therefore, the study of the formation of national memory, using military experience, allows high accuracy to determine the major features of mentality. For the history of formation of the memory of the American society, exactly the Vietnam War can be called the most striking example of the use of memory about it to prove its creditability.

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KEYWORDS

War, justice, memory

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