

BAO NINH, THE SORROW OF WAR: A NOVEL OF NORTH VIETNAM

Reviewer: John Andreas Olsen

There are many impressive studies on different aspects of the Vietnam War, but there are comparatively few that account for the North Vietnamese perception. There are stories of Vo Nguyen Giap, the legendary general, strategist and statesman who led the Vietcong army to several victories, biographies of Ho Chi Minh and details about the Tet Offensive, but it is nonetheless difficult to imagine events from “the other side of the hill”. Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* is a book that helps contemplate the psychological experience of war from a soldier’s perspective: it is an emotional debrief of immense proportions about individual and collective sacrifice, compromised youth and lost love.

The book is not about politics, ideology, strategy, tactics or even combat, but about the true face of war, courage, the mental struggle of purpose and how the momentum of events leads from one situation to another without rational explanations. The protagonist is Kien, an infantryman of the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade who has to go back to the battlefield after Victory Day to collect and count the dead. He is one of the few survivors, and as he is sitting in his humble apartment in Hanoi, writing his memoirs after eleven years of war, the mystical journey floats in time and place. One is witness to an innocent youngster who becomes coldly indifferent to killing, where fear and anger is substituted with depression. Kien experiences fellow officers raping his girlfriend Phoung, South Vietnamese soldiers raping young girls near their camp, and

American soldiers raping his college Hao. Kien suffers a personal trauma where illusions and reality are blurred, as these humiliations are combined with the reality of warfare in the “Jungle of Screaming Souls”. According to the author justice was never served in the war, only cruelty and inhuman violence, and as such fighting would result in nothing but inevitable defeat despite success in battle. Within the reality of napalm, malaria and desertion, the only escape at times was drugs, and by the late 1970s he had become an alcoholic with sporadic violent outbursts. Kien sees writing this book as his last duty as a soldier, and paradoxically, he can only find relief by recollecting the reminiscences of the sad past.

Bao Ninh has been heavily criticised by fellow countrymen for this book, and the publication was banned for several years, since it did not acknowledge the heroism of defending North Vietnam. It could be nothing but controversial as it discloses the illusion of the high morale so often associated with the people’s war. The author does not see any glory in killing the South Vietnamese brothers or even Americans: “In all my time as a soldier I’ve yet to see anything honourable”. Bao Ninh humanises and dehumanises war at the same time in what is essentially a lyrical, bleak, intense, gruesome, sarcastically humorous emotional report on the psychological scares of military realities. The book is both a bewildering and sobering account of the true horrors of war, and for those reasons highly recommendable reading.

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