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Kill Anything That Moves

The wartime horror inflicted on Vietnam

Review by Borzou Daragahi

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A meticulously researched account of the cruelty of US troops to Vietnamese civilians raises questions for today's conflicts

Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam, by Nick Turse, Metropolitan.

One atrocity among the many recounted in Nick Turse's searing and meticulously documented book about US conduct during the Vietnam war stands out for the gratuitous cruelty of the troops in their day-to-day interactions with often defenceless civilians.

In rural Quang Nam province in June 1966, four unarmed local people approached a group of Marines in an attempt to retrieve the body of an elderly man killed the day before by US troops. They wore white, carried a white flag bearing a red cross and brought a letter of introduction in English from an official of the pro-US south Vietnamese government. The troops blindfolded them, destroyed the letter and flag and ordered them to leave. Once they were about 40 metres away, the soldiers opened fire, killing two and wounding a third.

This account was among hundreds Turse found in 2001 while in Washington researching a doctoral thesis on post-traumatic stress disorder. He stumbled upon boxes full of forgotten archives

from the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, a once-secret US military project launched to document alleged American atrocities in order to keep them quiet.

Turse copied about a third of the documents before they were removed from public view the following year. Their accounts of civilian massacres, rapes and torture form the core of his book, which includes interviews with soldiers involved as well as victims and witnesses.

The book is a damning account of the horrors the US inflicted on civilians in its failed quest to keep Vietnam's south from falling to the communist north. But rather than single out a few bad apples, such as those tried and sentenced for the My Lai massacre, Turse aims to identify policy decisions and a military culture that led to what he describes as systematic, flagrant disregard for the lives and rights of Vietnamese people.

Despite America dropping more bombs on the north than it used in all of the second world war, the greatest victims of US firepower, and by the far the largest percentage of people killed, were the same civilians the US was ostensibly attempting to liberate. According to Turse, My Lai was but one of many such massacres in the south Vietnamese countryside; it seems every other village in certain provinces has erected a monument detailing US atrocities.

Students and contemporaries of the war recall "kill counts" and "free-fire zones" that were part of US tactics against guerrillas in the south. "Kill anything that moves" was a phrase that came up repeatedly in the case files and soldiers' recollections of their orders, epitomising a mindset that devalued Vietnamese life.

In 1968, the US army paid Vietnamese families about \$33 for each adult civilian killed unintentionally, half that for each child. MGR, an acronym commonly used by soldiers, stood for the "mere gook rule", hinting that no American would ever be punished for killing any Vietnamese.

The book zeroes in on the consequences of granting young men, deprived of sleep and creature comforts while heavily armed, wide latitude to pursue murky policy objectives against an elusive foe in a foreign land. Civilians navigating constantly changing rules of engagement to which they were not privy found little escape from the onslaught. Displaced peasants, terrified by bombing and "rural pacification" campaigns, descended on cities or squalid camps, only to be shot by soldiers. In detention centres, beatings and torture were common – including against pregnant women and the elderly, such as the 86-year-old grandmother beaten "mercilessly" by US Special Forces.

Whistleblowers were frequently left to twist in the wind, ignored, reassigned for speaking out or even – a fact that has echoes in today's National Security Agency scandal – placed under investigation. Even those convicted rarely received more than a slap on the wrist.

The writing at times fails to measure up to the powerful underlying research. A project that took a decade to research would have benefited from a few more months of literary tweaks. Nevertheless, as Turse himself occasionally notes, the stark, cool bureaucratic language in the accounts adds to the impact of the brutality.

The question for many readers will be how much has changed. Is the spectre of ultra-violence against civilians yet to be exorcised? Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan have displayed shades of the conduct recounted here, perpetrating atrocities that suggest disregard for foreign lives. But rarely with such impunity and not on the scale of what the author depicts in an era before the proliferation of real-time satellite and internet communications technology made covering up such crimes nearly impossible.