

Review Article

Between Collective and National Identity: Vietnamese Servicewomen After the Vietnam War

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Article History	Abstract
Received: September 16, 2026 Accepted: October 08, 2026 Published: October 14, 2026	While the Vietnam War (1955-1975) is considered to be a war primarily fought by males, several million Vietnamese women served in the military and local militia. Yet, existing literature focuses largely on the collective memory among male veterans during the post-war era, often obscuring the presence of female servicewomen entirely. Women who fought for the revolution and women who served the Republic of Vietnam returned to differing versions of post-war Vietnam depending on their political loyalties. This present study takes a case-study approach to consider how the post-war championing of national identity compares with the collective memory of women who served in the revolution versus women who served the Republic of Vietnam. While the Socialist Republic of Vietnam eventually honored women—both the long-haired warriors and North Vietnamese women—who served the revolution as heroes, women who fought for the Republic of Vietnam often built a collective memory independent of the state-championed national identity. Overall, though both parties are underrepresented within broader veteran-related literature, women who served the revolution molded a collective identity that aligned substantially with the state's national identity in the post-war era, whereas this sentiment did not persist among women who fought for the Republic of Vietnam. Ultimately, this case complicates the notion that collective identity is simply a "smaller" version of national identity: collective identity can stand independently of national identity, though it may suffer from a lack of official visibility. Keywords: Collective Identity, National Identity, Vietnamese Servicewomen, Vietnam War, Women Veterans, Collective Memory.

"At no other time in Vietnam's history was the will of the people more necessary for national survival. When even the gentlest Vietnamese woman could be inspired to enter the male world of violence for her country and when she learned to do the job well, the war had become in reality a total people's war." —Duc Hoan (Turner, 1998).

Introduction

In his book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen countered the idea of wartime as a static event, claiming that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (Nguyen, 2016). Specifically, regarding Vietnam, in the 20th century, the state fought its most destructive proxy conflict: the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War is traditionally viewed as a conflict fought by males. Few scholars deeply acknowledge the instrumental role of women in taking on several combat and military roles, necessitating a historical and social reevaluation of the legacy of the Vietnam War through a gender lens. Hence, there is a need to comparatively analyze the historical memories of women who served on the revolutionary side versus the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)'s side to determine how subsequent state actions shaped their identities in present-day Vietnam. For the purposes of this paper, "revolutionary" women are those who served in the communist-led resistance (including the long-haired warriors of South Vietnam), whereas "RVN" women are those who served the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

This paper seeks to respond to the question: How did the championing of national identity in the post-war era of the Vietnam War (1955-1975) engender differences in collective memory between women who served in the revolution versus women who served the Republic of Vietnam? Incorporating a case study approach comparing the two groups of women, this paper will argue that post-war national identity shaped revolutionary and RVN servicewomen differently. While revolutionary women were eventually incorporated into the state-championed collective memory of the Vietnam War, RVN women reclaimed their collective memory independently from external institutions following exclusion from the Socialist Republic.

Historical Context

The Vietnam War began officially on November 1st, 1955, a result of ideological divisions with origins dating to French Indochina colonial rule. France largely controlled Vietnam throughout the earlier portion of the 20th century until WWII (1941-1945), when Japanese forces primarily occupied Vietnam. At this time, Ho Chi Minh, a communist leader, directed a national liberation movement, the Viet Minh, to reestablish Vietnam as an independent state. Following WWII, however, the Viet Minh saw further conflict with France, which strived to regain its hold on the nation, a conflict that culminated in the First Indochina War (1946-1954).

The Geneva Conference of 1954 divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel: North Vietnam harbored various communist sympathizers (and the broader communist bloc) and served as a regrouping location for the Viet Minh, while French loyalists and various anti-communist forces occupied South Vietnam (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, 1954). During the Vietnam War, global forces increased international involvement in Vietnam, with the United States being estimated to have spent over \$120 billion USD on its operations in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 and the Soviet Union mobilizing North Vietnamese forces with the technical expertise of the Soviet industry (Path, 2021).

However, due to widespread domestic anti-war protests, North Vietnam's guerrilla tactics, and the skyrocketing cost of financing the conflict, the United States officially withdrew from the Vietnam War in the 1973 Paris Peace Accords (U.S. Department of State, 2010). While America continued to fund a portion of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnamese troops quickly faltered without the backing of America. Ultimately, the Fall of Saigon occurred on April 30th, 1975, symbolizing the conclusion of a decades-long ideological and military struggle and the political victory of North Vietnam's communist forces (Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, n.d.; Blackford, n.d.). However, the newly reunified nation was not *truly* reunified (Dang, 2018). Instead, in the immediate post-war years, economic and agricultural devastation, political persecution, a mass exodus of perilous "boat journeys", and dire humanitarian crises defined the shaky Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Bui and Preechametta, 2016; Dang, 2018).

Humanitarian Impact

The humanitarian impact of the Vietnam War was devastating for both civilians and veterans— Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese troops—alike. In sum, though the exact death toll continues to be disputed, approximately 2 million individuals died during the civil war (Hirschman *et al.*, 1995). Widespread chemical poisoning from defoliants like Agent Orange, repeated bombings over Cambodia and the South Vietnam Border, and civilian warfare targeting non-combatants like in the My Lai Massacre precipitated mass deaths and catalyzed widespread campaigns to end the conflict throughout America (Owen and Kiernan, 2006; Allison, 2012; Stellman and Stellman, 2018).

The traumatic effects post-war endure as well. McFarlane (2015) acknowledges that veterans often suffered from exacerbated traumatic war stress that "extended beyond PTSD, to the increased risk for depression, personality disorders, suicide, and alcohol abuse" (McFarlane, 2015). With an exodus of an approximated 3 million individuals from the broader Indochina region during this time, including the estimated 800,000 "boat people" who evacuated following the Fall of Saigon, the trauma of resettlement and refugee camps permeated the legacy of the Vietnam War (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020).

Sun *et al.*, (2022) also posit that refugees continue to battle the trauma from migration, reinforcing that "refugees are disproportionately affected by health and mental health disparities as a result of experiencing distress and potentially traumatic experiences before, during, and after their migration processes" (Sun *et al.*, 2022).

A Fractured Nation

Considering how "a group or nation's history is essential to develop, establish and shape the collective self", national identity is defined as "a means by which culture is defined through these bounded, essentialized

notions of 'being'" (Tolia-Kelly, 2009; Mols and Jetten, 2014). Mols and Jetten (2014) additionally posit that a "shared collective history enhances ingroup cohesion, promotes a sense of common fate, and helps establish the content of group identity" (Mols and Jetten, 2014). Yet, because post-war Vietnam remained fragmented by the starkly differing ideologies during its civil war, it's possible that the "ingroup cohesion" vital for developing national identity was harmed. Even if the government attempted to promote a unified national identity, certain factors could obscure particular groups or communities' role in the state.

What it meant to be "Vietnamese" was largely shaped by political loyalty, military experiences, and geographic and personal experiences after 1975. But while the official narrative trumpeted national liberation and socialist unity, many South Vietnamese suffered loss, displacement, re-education, or exile, challenging national integration after internal civil war (Grossheim, 2021). This suggests that even after political reunification, the notions of national identity may have remained fragmented, influencing collective identity. While collective identity similarly operates at a group level, its principles are rooted more in personal, subjective belonging. Unlike national identity, which primarily operates on a state level, collective identity considers how an individual feels connected to others who share something meaningful and a shared lived experience. Particularly, collective identity is delineated as "the shared definition of a group that derives from its members' common interests, experiences, and solidarities" and can include indicators like a sense of belonging within a community; polarizing 'us' versus 'them' mentalities; and shared perspectives (Whooley, 2007; Snow and Corrigan-Brown, 2015). Because reconciliation may not have been universally understood or championed in post-war Vietnam, tension between national identity and collective memory may have been prevalent in the post-war era.

A Woman's Role

The Long-Haired Warriors

While men made up the vast majority of active combatants during the Vietnam War, several million Vietnamese women served in the military and local militia. Particularly, South Vietnamese women also fought for the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) (Taylor, 1999). Known as the "long-haired warriors", South Vietnamese women who supported the revolutionary movement operated closely under the slogan "when war comes, even women have to fight" (Ngo, 2024). In particular, these women took on diverse active roles during combat, including maintaining supply lines across the Ho Chi Minh Trail, serving in local militia units, handling communication and administrative work, and providing frontline medical treatment (Boczar, 2024; Ngo, 2024). They also continued to serve in domestic household roles, sustaining local communities and agricultural production (Ngo, 2024). Broadly, the long-haired warriors, led by the revolutionary figure Nguyễn Thị Định, worked to mobilize rural and urban women against the South Vietnamese government and U.S. forces (Ngo, 2024).

The Three Responsibilities Movement in the North

In 1965, the Vietnam Women's Union launched the Three Responsibilities Movement in North Vietnam, where "women across the North took on household duties, economic production, and even combat roles when needed" (Vietnam Women's Union, 2025). Turner describes the patriotic Three Responsibilities Movement as "aim[ing] to mobilize women for production and other tasks in place of the men who have gone to the front", including a "daunting" list of household, combat, and educational duties (Turner, 1998). Beyond simply combat missions, North Vietnamese women upheld "the spirit of 'rice fields are the battlefield, hoes and ploughs are weapons'" (Vietnam Women's Union, 2025). Another countrywoman remarked that "when one speaks of a 'peasant', it is important to bear in mind that nowadays she is usually a woman of many roles. She is a producer, a housewife, a technician, and a combatant" (Turner, 1998).

Gender Roles

Interestingly, this shift marks a stark difference from traditional gender roles in pre-war Vietnam. Historically, Vietnamese women operated under norms of obedience and submission and primarily led domestic life, as largely supported by traditional Confucian norms about domestic and gender roles (Turner, 1998). Yet, the revolutionary women endured torture, such as "sticks shoved underneath fingernails and electric shock to their sexual organs", redefining Vietnamese womanhood (Ngo, 2024). In breaking out of expected domestic roles, the revolutionary women became fighters on the battlefield. Women's expanded role beyond the home was not met without criticism, however. While Ho Chi Minh himself championed equal capability and women's role in social emancipation and national liberation, many men who fought for North Vietnam opposed these ideals, convinced that Vietnamese women should only manage household roles like "cleaning, farming, and taking care of children" (Turner, 1998; Taylor, 1999). Yet, beyond this disapproval, during the Vietnam War, the revolutionary women challenged their stereotypical roles, stressing that "gender roles would not define them

during a period in history fraught with division" (Taylor, 1999).

Women of the Republic of Vietnam

While the role of South Vietnamese women in active combat roles is comparatively understudied, many served in formal military units, most notably the Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC). These services surrounded primarily administrative and clerical tasks in the military bureaucracy to free up men for direct combat; other specialized duties, like communicating with American forces, required South Vietnamese women to be fluent in English (Boczar, 2024).

Alternatively coined the "daredevil girls", the South Vietnam Women's Armed Forces Corps was an all-female unit of over 2700 to provide logistical and social welfare aid throughout the Vietnam War. Instead of fighting on the front lines, these women supported families of South Vietnamese men who had left their homes to fight for the South Vietnamese cause, focusing particularly on "providing child care, basic health care and pharmaceutical services" (Stur, 2017). Defying the viewpoint of a woman as merely "passive", the corps defied the ideal that women were to be "kept in the background...feminine and dependent, to stay at home caring for husband and family" (Stur, 2017). Though the work of the Women's Armed Forces Corps is often framed as more similar to "women's work" compared to revolutionary women's active role in armed conflict, the Vietnam War led RVN "women into a man's world, partly by necessity, partly by choice" (Stur, 2017; Boczar, 2024).

In sum, by assisting in combat, the identities of Vietnamese women shifted throughout the Vietnam War. Given that Vietnamese women experienced a radical transformation in their expected societal role during the Vietnam War, it is of great interest to investigate how their newfound identities were sustained in the post-war era, and how this change was supported or dismissed by emergent institutions.

Women Who Served the Revolution

On the surface, the memory of women who served the revolution postwar seems like an unambiguous celebration. Particularly, several groups have posthumously honored the long-haired warriors. The all-female force in Ben Tre Province received the Hero of the People's Armed Forces in August 2018, 40 years after the war's end (Vietnam News Agency, 2018).

The Vietnam Women's Museum commemorated Nguyen Thi Dinh, a female general of the Vietnam People's Army, for her bravery and leadership (Nhân Dân, 2023). In this way, women's wartime sacrifice acted as an official, state-authored narrative of "being" Vietnamese. These struggles became characterized as evidence of a unified, patriotic nation liberated through the collective efforts of both men and women.

Yet, this official narrative sits in tension with the collective memory constructed by the women themselves, exhibited in oral history interviews conducted by Turner (1998) with female veterans of North Vietnam's volunteer youth corps and militia units several decades after the war. Thousands of female veterans received little to no government benefits because service was seen as a patriotic duty rather than a paid service (Boczar, 2024). While these female veterans often dedicated multiple years of their youth to physically demanding service (particularly on difficult terrain, militia service, or on the Ho Chi Minh Trail), many returned unable to marry or bear children (Lamb, 2003). One Vietnamese woman claimed the jungle "aged" her and had difficulty finding a marital partner because she suffered from "malaria and malnutrition" (Lamb, 2003). These women were unable to meet the most basic marker of Vietnamese womanhood at the time: namely, being a wife and mother.

Further, Turner (1998) indicates that women who served in the revolution were quickly demobilized from positions of military and political leadership following the Vietnam War (Turner, 1998). Instead, the state primarily expected women to return to subordinate domestic and social roles from years before and during the Vietnam War (Turner, 1998). Even the later national titles and awards of these women echo this sentiment: for 40+ years, the state withheld many forms of official recognition, concealing these female veterans' sacrifices from widespread state acknowledgment.

While state support and national identity overlooked the treatment and role of these veterans during the Vietnam War, the collective identity in the *ingroup* among these women remained profound. Built from shared circumstantial hardship and mutual respect, the bonds between these women engendered a collective identity that did not solely depend on national narratives. Specifically, as former militia sisters, the long-haired warriors often turned to localized group networks like the Vietnamese Women's Union to build community, celebrating reunions and anniversaries while engaging in educational symposiums to reflect on the military

force (Turner, 1998). During these events, many of the long-haired warriors would gather in their black pakamas, checkered khăn rằn (bandanas), and hats to visually communicate shared collective identity (Vietnam News Agency, 2025). As a result, Mols and Jetten's (2014) earlier remarks of the "ingroup cohesion" in shared collective identity did form, at least partially, among the long-haired warriors.

Overall, while national identity was not directly contested by these women (they did not jointly reject the political legitimacy of the socialist state or the victorious state of the conflict), the collective lived experience of their postwar years remained unresolved for many years. Though the nation does presently recognize these women as heroes, for decades, their experiences and postwar reintegration remained underrepresented.

Women Who Served the Republic of Vietnam

Though the North Vietnamese women and long-haired warriors' collective identity eventually reconciled with the state's national identity, after 1975, this same national identity often obscured the experiences of the South Vietnamese women's role in the Vietnam War. As mentioned earlier, the Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC) expanded to more than 6000 servicewomen and 600 officers by 1975 (Nguyen, 2009). Yet, Nguyen (2009), whose research is the most substantial body of work on this population, argues that the Vietnam War's historiography largely ignores RVN servicewomen and their histories (Nguyen, 2009).

Particularly, what contrasts these cases is that the post-war Socialist Republic had no incentive to commemorate service to a defeated regime. After the war, the state often forced RVN servicewomen into large-scale reeducation internment camps, effectively sealing their identities as veterans from the broader nation (Nguyen, 2022). What's more, while the broader South Vietnamese experience postwar is documented through extensive research on "boat people" refugees and resettlement, accounts specifically from RVN servicewomen remain primarily absent from the historical record. Nguyen (2009) cites multiple avenues for this reason: cultural and domestic constraints on public speech among women postwar, pressure of focusing on resettling and reintegrating families into the new regime, and a tendency to bury memories of such circumstances (Nguyen, 2009).

Without a state willing to integrate RVN servicewomen's service into official narratives, South Vietnamese women suffered a reduced sense of belonging and national identity immediately following the war's conclusion (Nguyen, 2009). These veterans built much of their belonging on localized and personal memory platforms through diaspora communities, veterans associations, and oral history projects to preserve their memory (Nguyen, 2009). In turn, RVN servicewomen developed their identity away from the nationally championed narrative and in direct opposition to the Socialist Republic's post-liberation accounts. In this sense, RVN servicewomen built their collective identity and "ingroup cohesion" independent of national support or even later recognition.

Comparison

The relationships between revolutionary and RVN Vietnamese servicewomen with state-championed national identity reveal structural differences. In the case of the revolution, the women actively fought to build the victorious state; as a result, their post-war collective identity largely centered on this. While delay and disappointment characterized the early postwar decades due to lack of support for the revolutionary women, the same government later retroactively cast them as national heroines (Turner, 1998; Vietnam News Agency, 2018). As such, the eventual national identity championed by the state aligned considerably with the collective identity that the long-haired warriors fought to maintain. Put simply: the two parties did not ideologically or conceptually conflict considerably.

On the other hand, for RVN women, the state with the authority to narrate post-war national identity diverged from the original state they had fought for. These women, therefore, acted as complicit in a defeated regime. Although the Socialist Republic never fully denied the stories of North Vietnamese women, South Vietnamese women's stories often contrasted with state-championed narratives (Nguyen, 2009). Admittedly, the post-war state did not immediately integrate the women who fought for the revolution. Regardless of later appreciation, Turner (1998)'s interviews indicate underlying bitterness that remained with these women for decades. Both cases included female veterans who endured suffering; however, the state-supported national identity was still at least nominally on the North Vietnamese and long-haired warriors' side.

Conclusion

Regardless of political side, the Vietnam War transformed Vietnamese women's collective identity, but differently. The Socialist Republic eventually supported revolutionary women's collective identity through

belated state recognition, channeling memory into official historiography (Turner, 1998; Vietnam News Agency, 2018). Contrastingly, having been excluded from official narratives and seen as illegitimate, RVN women did not adopt similar channels. RVN servicewomen constructed their collective memory independently from external institutions, relying on interpersonal and often unofficial networks to sustain traditions (Nguyen, 2009). Only much later did researchers like Nguyen (2009) begin to shed light on their plight.

Turner (1998)'s interviews and other literature documenting the women who fought for the revolution exist both institutionally and personally through oral histories and recordings of narratives in national historiography. Alternatively, the underrecognition of RVN servicewomen demonstrates how the WAFC's history persists as a difficult subject to reconstruct. Nguyen (2009) herself had to personally collect much of the oral histories through interviews with exiled servicewomen. Even so, both parties are underrepresented within broader veteran-related literature, indicating the continual difficulty of preserving such narratives under circumstances of decades of exclusion.

This divergence suggests some implications. First, this case complicates the notion that collective identity is simply a "smaller" version of national identity. Often, collective identity can stand independently of national identity, though it may suffer from a lack of official visibility. Methodologically, scholars should continue to consider oral histories and state archives distinctly: frequently, oral histories might be the only record available, and the lack of state records does not necessarily entail a lack of relevance or credibility. Broadly, considering how, without state-sponsored institutions, RVN servicewomen relied on other methods to preserve their collective memory, these findings indicate the importance of diaspora institutions and independent organizations in prioritizing shared memory. Ultimately, the postwar experiences of Vietnamese servicewomen are an important case study of both wartime service through a gender lens and how outcomes of a civil war can determine whose collective memory gets fused with the state's and whose must survive independently of it.

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