

GREGORY A. DADDIS

Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 358 pages.

It is one of those good-news, bad-news stories. The good news is that two months of basic training could not turn young civilians into hardcore killing machines. The bad news? The military did not have to because their recruits and draftees came to them welcoming combat as a rite of passage to manhood. In *Pulp Vietnam*, historian Gregory A. Daddis argues that the so-called men's adventure magazines popular in the 1950s helped shape the attitudes about war and women for the generation of American men deployed to Vietnam.

With titles such as *Stag*, *Battle Cry*, *Man's Adventure*, and *Valor*, the magazines blended the themes of combat heroism and sexual experience that scripted the roles that boys followed on their way to manhood. Power was central to both the martial and sexual narratives: the power to dominate enemies in war and women in sex. Twined in that way, conquests in battle became sexy and performance in sex marshaled youthful virility for battle.

The magazines' lurid and brightly colored covers typically combined a guns-a-blazing soldier with scantily clad women cast as either damsels in distress awaiting rescue by the hero or femme fatale *others*—enemies threatening to betray the fighter and his mission—weaponizing sex for deployment against men's martial hardness. A 1959 *Valor* cover illustrates these tropes: a dark-haired woman in a short skirt and tube top with a flower in her hair hangs on the foregrounded redheaded warrior as his

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automatic weapon spews death from his hands. Above him, “Beat It Sister, I’ve Got a War to Fight,” announces a story inside. In the background, another fighter fends off a seducing figure with “The Rebel Bitch Who Stopped a Regiment: The True Story of the Nympho Spy” whetting the reader’s appetite.

The dozens of covers sprinkled throughout *Pulp Vietnam* make it a primary source for undergraduate students of culture, with Daddis’s analysis of the artwork an added value. But his major contribution is locating the pulps in the Cold War climate of the 1950s, a time when the fear of communism was palpable. The international status of the Soviet Union had soared after its defeat of Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front; the 1949 Chinese Revolution was inspiring peasant revolutionaries around the world; and in the United States, the Communist Party was well-positioned within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions it had helped organize. Was the United States up to the challenge?

The consumer culture that came with post-war affluence enabled the denial of the looming Red menace. City life had a particularly corrosive effect on the boys who would soon bear the burden of national defense. Compared with bygone years when farm boys grew up around their fathers, children now lived their early years at home with mothers as the primary parental figures. “Momism” threatened to produce a generation of “mama’s boys” who would wilt in combat. A dose of military masculinity was the prescription, and the “men’s mags,” as they were sometimes called, were the medicine.

The pulps went to Vietnam with the US troops. Using archival data, Daddis shows that the magazines regularly topped the sales lists in the post-exchanges (PXs) where troops shopped. In the early 1960s, however, World War II continued to dominate pulp contents—“Amazing U.S. Flyer Who Wrecked Hitler’s Bid for Atomic Weapons,” headlined a 1962 edition of *Men*. When Vietnamese themes began to creep in, they were about the war, not Vietnam or its people. Just weeks after US helicopters engaged in a major battle at Ấp Bắc, the March 1963 issue of *Brigade: Stories for Men* featured the “copter War’ on the Phantom Vietcong Guerrillas.”

Daddis, a history professor at San Diego State and retired US Army colonel, is at his best when analyzing the disparity between the war of the

Greatest Generation that boys saw in the men's adventure magazines and the war they would fight in Vietnam. The "good fights" waged against fascism in Europe and Asia bestowed dignity on the men who fought them. But there was no such glory in Vietnam, a place that most Americans could not find on a map, while many who could condemned US presence there. The triumphs of World War II combat that filled the pulps in the 1950s went AWOL, replaced by grunts bogged down in unconventional warfare in Vietnam. Consequently, the writers and editors faced a dearth of new material for their man-making storylines. Improvising, writes Daddis, "they . . . repurpose[ed] the soldier-hero image of World War II" (139).

Men exaggerate their military and sexual exploits; this is not news. But Daddis observes that Vietnam veterans' "war stories" have an eerie resonance with the WWII fantasies purveyed by the pulps, an inference that veterans' memories might be tangled with their imaginations of the wars they fought only vicariously through men's adventure magazines.

Memory or imagination? The conundrum is just as germane to studies of that *other* theater of war—sex. Disappointed and resentful about the failure of "their" war to live up to the expectations of pulp-war, some GIs sought satisfaction in the conquest of women. But how many of their "remembered" triumphs on that front, including rape, are also fantasies induced by the fictive fare they bought at the PX? Gaddis's skepticism about how much sex GIs had in Vietnam is evident in modifiers such as "impossible to say" and "no evidence exists" scattered throughout the chapter "War and Sexual Violence Come to Vietnam." He outright dismisses one claim that there were 400,000 sex workers in 1969, about one for every in-country American (200).

The thought that men might remember wars they never fought—wars on the ground, in the air, in the brothels—has implications for studies of war trauma, public commemoration of the war, and the state of American masculinity. It also prompts a new look at the way Vietnamese women are represented in American versions of the war. If veterans inflate their sexual résumés even to the point of claiming atrocities they never committed, what does that say about the representations of women in those tales?

Historians have documented the gallantry of Vietnamese women in home-front defense forces and as laborers and fighters on the Hồ Chí Minh

Trail; as mothers, wives, and citizens, they maintained families and hamlets under wartime privations. But those academic accounts are occluded by veterans' "war stories" portraying women as whores and abject victims; even Daddis draws on some notably sketchy veteran memoirs to vivify the sexual terror wreaked on women. Might it be that the disparagement of Vietnamese women in American historical memory is the flip side of the pulp-fiction-masculinity coin, a dialectic, of sorts, that enmeshes the study of either in that of the other?

Questions like these, raised by books like *Pulp Vietnam*, let us know that American memory of its war in Vietnam will be fertile ground for study for a long time.

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