Vietnam: A War, Not a Country by Ron Eyerman, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring is an ambitious work which seeks to comprehensively and systematically examine the cultural trauma and memory discourses of what the authors call the “American-Vietnamese War.” Building on the contemporary sociological works of Jeffery Alexander, Jeffrey Olick, and Eviatar Zerubavel, as well as classic sociological studies by Maurice Halbwachs, Karl Manheim, Pierre Nora, the three authors of this volume contribute the concept of “arenas of memory” to the scholarship on collective memory. Adapting Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire, the authors emphasize the social and discursive spaces within which memory narratives are articulated, circulated, and contested. A sophisticated analytical tool, “arenas of memory” is deployed by the authors as a “heuristic device…[which] demarcate[s] the social spaces where different narratives of collective memory interact” (24). Addressing the cultural trauma of one of the most controversial and contested military conflicts in recent history, the chapters, which are written by the individual authors, rightly emphasize the conflicting and politicized nature of memory and how different social actors and groups organize and mobilize to advance particular interpretations and claims regarding the meaning and significance of the war. Extensive in scope and design, the book centers on the three main belligerents of the conflict, namely the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam during the war years, subsequently the Socialist Republic of Vietnam), the United States, and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam during the war years, subsequently Vietnamese Americans).

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1 I quote the authors’ term “American-Vietnamese War” throughout this work as it is a novel term. The Vietnam War (1963–1975) has been referred to as the Second Indochina War. In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, it is commonly known as Kháng chiến chống Mỹ (“Resistance War against America”).


For the authors, “arenas of memory” are social spaces within which social actors articulate, advocate for, and negotiate discursive interpretations of the conflict. The authors delineate four distinct “arenas” within which their analysis rests: politics, academia, the arts, and the community. These “arenas” are sites of contest and struggle over memory and interpretations of the war. By focusing on these social processes of contestation, the authors demonstrate how these competing narratives between and within the three groups emerged, and they highlight how these memory narratives lay the foundations for a sense of collective identity within these groups. In general, the authors maintain a balance treatment of these arenas among the three belligerents, although the most comprehensive application of their concept is found in their chapter on American cultural trauma and collective memory of the conflict.

Significantly, while the “American-Vietnamese War” was indeed traumatic for the individuals who experienced it, cultural trauma manifests not from direct experiences, per se, but rather in narrative form. As the authors argue, “the traumatic event in question, while typically correlated with some actual occurrence in the physical or social world...is in fact a construction—a narrative construction” (17).

Expanding on Alexander’s work, the authors theorize cultural trauma as a social process involving two interrelated moments: the sense of fracturing of a community’s self-understanding and when that social group “reconstitute or reconfigure” that fractured identity to form a new one (16). Trauma, as it exists in the cultural and social form, must be articulated by actors (groups, individuals, collectivities) and is consequential in defining a group’s identity and sense of belonging.

Moving across their three cases, the authors analyze whether each of these collectives experienced cultural trauma based on how the conflict is remembered, articulated, and narrated. Chapter 3, by Ron Eyerman, contends that for the United States, memory of the “American-Vietnamese War” was shaped by the Anti-War movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which embedded narratives about the conflict which went against official and governmental representation of the war. Locating this process within the “organized protest and political opposition [which] form an inherent part of what Americans means by democracy,” countervailing narratives spread through a social movement which brought together diverse contingents, including journalists, cultural producers, and intellectuals (330). The Anti-War Movement and the ambiguity of the war’s lessons molded post-war remembrance of the conflict, which played out primarily in American popular culture. Here, because “there was never a thoroughgoing government investigation into the causes or consequences of the war in Vietnam,” cultural trauma persisted as the nation came to terms with the political and social consequences of the conflict (334). On the one hand, the process rehabilitated the Vietnam veteran in the American nationalist narrative while refusing to interrogate the reasons why they fought. On the other hand, this memory is divided between those who emphasized its human costs and immorality versus those who “continued to believe in the righteousness of their mission” (335).

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8 Eyerman, “Conclusion: War, Trauma, and Beyond,” in Eyerman, Madigan, and Ring, Vietnam: 330.
9 Eyerman, “Conclusion,” 334.
10 Eyerman, “Conclusion,” 335.
Chapter 2, by Magnus Ring, discusses the cultural trauma and collective memory of the war in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the narrative on the war centered on the foreign enemy, the “colonialists,” (72) and indigenous forces which opposed the Communist revolutionary movement. Tightly controlled, the narrative was supported through state initiatives which mobilized the arts, songwriters, authors, and cultural producers who represented the Communist movement as an anti-colonialist, nationalist one that was undertaken in defense of the Vietnamese people and nation. Here, drawing heavily on the work of Heonik Kwon, the authors argue that memory of the war is less publicly apparent and is located at the familial and personal level. For the authors, the collective identity formed through the Democratic Republic of Vietnam resulted not in the fracturing of identity, but rather the formation of a new one which was built on national unification and resistance against a foreign enemy.

Chapters 4 and 5, by Todd Madigan, articulate the historical experiences of Vietnamese-Americans and their engagement with cultural trauma. For those Vietnamese who fled the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and relocated to the United States, collective memory of the war centers around the Fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. Colloquially termed “Black April,” annual commemorations of this loss are framed around the “lens of betrayal and collapse,” directed at not only South Vietnam’s former American allies, but also the South Vietnamese leadership, who are viewed as corrupt and cowardly (329). As the authors argue, this process of memory construction ran in parallel with the need to construct a “new collective identity” within a political environment of hostility and foreignness (193). In the Vietnamese-American context, memory narratives are carried through memoirs, novels, memorials, and cultural production, while also contested within the artistic realm and critical Vietnamese-American scholarship.

While the work deserves praise for demonstrating the intricate and complex nature of cultural trauma within the three contexts and contributes a robust, sociological framework for examination of collective memory, weaknesses are apparent in its treatment of the history of the Republic of Vietnam and the lingering historical legacies of this nation-state upon the Vietnamese-American cultural and political consciousness. Eyerman, Madigan, and Ring are correct in their effort to fill the void in the scholarship on the war and its aftermath that does not include the experiences and politics of neither the Republic of Vietnam nor Vietnamese refugees. As they rightly note, the history of Vietnamese Americans “is less well known outside of specialists and the community itself” (194). However, despite the two chapters dedicated to examining Vietnamese-American memory narratives and collective identity, they book does not fully rectify these omissions.

One of the book’s flaws is its inability to link the memory discourses that manifested in Vietnamese America with what transpired politically and culturally in the Republic of Vietnam. If cultural trauma is a form of narrative, that narrative does not exist within a historical vacuum. A traumatic event may compel collectivities to seek new narratives and modes of identifications, but these “new” narratives can build on

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* Ring, “Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese Arenas of Memory,” in Eyerman, Madigan, and Ring, Vietnam: 72.
* Eyerman, “Conclusion,” 329.
* Madigan, “Journey from the Fall,” 194.
those discourses which are preexisting. Old narratives can be “persistent”—how events are interpreted, framed, and articulated can be shaped by older narratives, which continue to be instrumental and relevant to contemporary social agents. Indeed, if the collective body is ruptured in the aftermath of the traumatic event, some focus must be devoted to what that “collective body” originally constituted and the degree to which a “new identity” was forged in the process of cultural trauma construction. The omission of these components is problematic as there is no historical foundation for the commemorative, narrative, and interpretative patterns that existed within the collectivity prior to the traumatic event itself and how these patterns may have shaped the collective’s interpretation after the event transpired. While the reproduction of narratives and practices is a contested and power-laden process, in the case of Vietnamese America, ideas about nationhood and national belonging, which were entwined with anti-Communist narratives and practices stemming from the Republic of Vietnam, informed Vietnamese-American (re)construction of cultural trauma.

*Vietnam: A War, Not a Country* regrettably misses the opportunity to theorize on the dynamism of these collective narratives, historicize the process of cultural trauma, and comprehensively interrogate contemporary Vietnamese-American collective memory. A poignant example is Black April itself. Madigan shows this practice to be foundational for Vietnamese-American cultural trauma and the articulation of the community’s identity (298-301). Otherwise known as “Ngày Quốc Hận” (day of national resentment), this commemorative holiday in Vietnamese America, however, is politically and ideologically entwined with the annual commemoration of 20 July in the RVN, which too was called “Ngày Quốc Hận,” but marked the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954. Similar to its transmogrification in the Vietnamese-American context to “mourn the death of the nation” (299), this state-sanctioned holiday was marked to condemn the rupture of Vietnam into two separate parts, demand the restoration of the Vietnamese nation, and mourn the victims of Communist atrocities.

Furthermore, the narratives around Black April exist within a broader discursive universe which predates the Fall of Saigon and continues to be recrafted and expanded in the Vietnamese-American community. Alongside the Geneva Accords, these crucial events include land reform in North Vietnam (1953–1956), the subsequent exodus of northerners to the South from 1954–1956, the assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963, the Huế Massacre during 1968 Tết Offensive, and the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1973. Indeed, these historical events are commemorated and remembered through memoirs, oral history, political tracts, and community-publications, though are largely made available only in the Vietnamese-language. Land reform:
if arenas of memories are the social spaces within which these narratives are articulated and contested, scholars must also attend to how these distinct social spaces emerged and the discursive universe within which these narratives are located.

If the historicization of Vietnamese-American memory is wanting, the authors do detail how prior social movements and narratives shape American memory of the war. Eyerman, in chapter 3, demonstrates that the antiwar movement in the United States was “built upon previously existing pacifist and antinuclear organizations” and that postwar American memory was significantly shaped by how different contingents of the American public interpreted the conflict during the war (my emphasis, 129).13 If American collective memory of the “American-Vietnamese War” remains a site of contestation, this contestation originated in debate, controversy, and competition over the definitions and interpretations during key events of the war itself. Similarly, post-war representation under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam drew upon narratives, interpretations, and representations which already existed under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the chapter by Ring shows at length the role of state-mediate cultural producers in managing the image of the conflict both during the war and after.14 However, when it comes to Vietnamese-American memory, traumatic representation appears ahistorical, shaped not by the complex political, discursive, and ideological processes within South Vietnamese society during the war, but only by what came after the Fall of Saigon and subsequent refugee migration.

This inability to conceptualize the lasting effects of South Vietnamese political culture upon Vietnamese-American memory results, in part, from the way in which the authors describe the history of the Vietnam War itself. Scholarship on the Vietnam War has long viewed the Vietnam War through the lenses of American interventionism and the Communist revolutionary movement. In much of this scholarship, the war is depicted as one in which a peasant guerrilla force was able to defeat the most powerful and modernized armed force in the world. The Vietnamese Communists are represented as inheritors of a Vietnamese nationalist tradition of resistance against foreign invaders who successfully mobilized the peasant population against both an unpopular South Vietnamese regime and its American benefactor.15

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14 Ring, “Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese Arenas of Memory,” 85-90.

Within such a construct, little of the historiography address the history of Republic of Vietnam, let alone examines the ideals, society, and legacies which arose out of the existence of this nation-state. When represented, the Republic of Vietnam is shown as corrupt and incompetent as best, or as an American “puppet” at worst.

In recent years, a number of scholars, including Edward Miller, Geoffrey Stewart, Olga Dror, Nu-Anh Tran and recent volumes by Tuong Vu and other scholars of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American history, have sought to address this historiographical distortion.6 Little of this new scholarship is mentioned in the book or its footnotes; the narrative repeats many outdated interpretations of the conflict, particularly with respect to the administration of Ngô Đình Diệm.6 Throughout their historical narration the authors emphasize the illegitimacy of the Republic of Vietnam as a nation and the impoverishment of its politics, particularly vis-à-vis Vietnamese Communism. The authors do not discuss the possible loyalties, commitments, and idealism that those who would eventually become Vietnamese refugees in the United States once placed upon South Vietnam as a nation. This prevents an exploration of the extended legacies of the “American-Vietnamese War” upon the Vietnamese-American collective memory of this conflict.

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6 This is articulated within the “Historical Background” upon which the authors’ analysis of collective memory would rest. In Chapter 2, “Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese Arenas of Memory,” Ring argues that Diệm’s government was “unpopular, ineffective, and had the clear markings of a dictatorship” while “the North Vietnamese regime was much more stable and popular” (52). Ring argues that Diệm was a “Catholic mystic” who “oppressed the Buddhists, favoring those of his own faith” (51), and who “never built a political party or movement” (ignoring the existence of the Cán Lao Party); his philosophy was “traditionalist” and Diệm’s failures was due to his “feudal understanding of nation-building” (53). South Vietnam following Diệm’s assassination is represented through American eyes, emphasizing South Vietnamese military failures, corruption, and incompetence. “French-educated military men were largely in control in South Vietnam” and military coups and rivalry dictated domestic politics in the country (Eyeran, “The Trauma of Vietnam,” 142-143).
Additionally, despite the “many hundreds of relevant books, articles, and individual artistic productions” (36) which the authors consulted, and their interviews with Vietnamese Americans, ethnographic work around Black April, and visits to numerous museums in Vietnam and the United States, there is a distinct lack of Vietnamese-language sources in the book. Apart from the English-language scholarship of “critical” Vietnamese-American scholars, the Vietnamese voices which feature here originate in translated memoirs, biographies, secondary literature, and quotations from English-language newspapers.7 Despite their availability, Vietnamese language periodicals journals, texts, and archival documents, which were produced both during the war and after, were not consulted. The lack of Vietnamese-language sources in the book’s research highlights the limits to which the authors can make an authoritative claim about the constitution of Vietnamese-American collective memory, identity, and representation—a community in which only 48 percent of the adult population are proficient in the English language.8

In 1966, while reflecting on the social and political turmoil that had transpired across the interregnum years, the South Vietnamese intellectual and historian Đoàn Thêm wrote the following:

Time for the Vietnamese is as a curtain of night falling upon this land, or more accurately, a stream breaking through a dam of rocks to flow into the sea, dragging with it the chaos of life and forcing the rowers riding upon the tides to always look forward if they wish to not be capsized and submerged under the unending waves.9

For Đoàn Thêm, the “multifaceted and complex events” of the recent past have led to a tendency amongst the Vietnamese to forget the important lessons of these events. Đoàn Thêm argues that remembering is a necessity, calling for historical preservation of documents, images, and newspapers during these chaotic times to ensure that history remembers what had transpired to the Vietnamese people.10 In contrast to what Đoàn Thêm feared, his contemporaries did, in fact, engage in extensive documentary preservation, including governmental papers, journals, and periodicals—many of which are now contained within a number of archives in both Vietnam and the United States.11 In existence, too, are Vietnamese-language

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7 Quotation in Madigan, “Introduction,” 36. There are also an unusually high number of misspelled non-English names. For example, in Ring, “Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese Arenas of Memory,” Đông Phước is misspelled as “Don Puhoc” (69), Nguyên Ái Quốc as “Nguyen Ai Quac” (73), Lim Khim Katy as “Lihm Kim Kathy” (88), and, in Madigan, “Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese-American Arenas of Memory,” Nguyễn Trung Toai as “Nguyen Truong Toai” (197). Diacritical marks are also inconsistently applied to Vietnamese-language words and names, with some including the marks while others do not.

8 Abby Budiman, “Vietnamese in the U.S. Fact Sheet,” Pew Research Center, 29 April 2021. English proficiency within the foreign-born Vietnamese American population is even lower at 35 percent.


11 The National Archives in Vietnam, particularly Archives II (documents from the Republic of Vietnam) and III (post-1945 records from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam) are particularly relevant. Microfilm collections of
documents and materials which capture the diverse experiences, debates, and conversations within the Vietnamese-American community, particularly during its formative years. Ironically, despite the existence and accessibility of these invaluable sources, the problem of (un)remembering history is not due to the inability to preserve historical documents, but rather the fact that they are not always consulted by scholars who write on the topic.


Chính Luận and Tự Do (two major newspapers in South Vietnam) and a host of other Vietnamese-language periodicals from the era can be located at a variety of US universities.

* Key Vietnamese American newspapers include Việt Báo, Người Việt Daily News (a digitized collection is available at Univeristy of California, Irvine), Trưng Đồn (published in La Crescenta, California and considered the first Vietnamese American newspaper, though ending in 1979), Văn Đồng Daily News and Vietnamese-language reporting by BBC and Voice of America. Large collections of Vietnamese American periodicals from the 1980s are housed at Cornell University.