

REVOLUTIONARY WAR IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM 1954-1975: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The War of Liberation in Southern Vietnam, known in Western scholarship as the Vietnam War and in Vietnamese historical records as the Anti-American Resistance War for National Salvation, stands as one of the most protracted and fierce armed conflicts of the 20th century. Spanning from 1954 to 1975, this war not only reshaped the political landscape of Southeast Asia but also profoundly impacted the foreign policies of global powers and the principles of worldwide military thought. The complexity of this conflict lies not merely in its scale and military intensity but also in the profundity of non-military factors, particularly culture, which played a pivotal role in shaping its trajectory and outcome. While numerous in-depth studies have explored the Vietnam War from diverse angles military, economic, political, and diplomatic approaching and analyzing this war through a cultural lens remains a field with great potential, requiring deeper exploration. This research endeavors to re-contextualize and analyze “The Revolutionary War in Southern Vietnam 1954-1975” through a “cultural perspective”, thereby illuminating the role, influence, and interplay of spiritual cultural values in the Vietnamese people's struggle for independence and national reunification.

Keywords: Cultural perspective; war; revolution; Vietnam; 1954-1975.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War, recognized in international scholarship as the Second Indochina War (1954-1975) and recorded in Vietnamese history as the Anti-American Resistance War for National Salvation, constitutes one of the 20th century's most momentous and intricate military conflicts. This war, which lasted nearly two decades, not only reshaped the political landscape of Southeast Asia but also had a profound and systematic influence on the foreign policies of global powers and contemporary military strategic thinking. (George C. Herring, 1983). The multi-faceted nature of the conflict, woven with interwoven political, economic, military, diplomatic, and social elements, has rendered it a compelling subject of study, continually captivating the interest of the international academic community. Most research efforts typically focus on seeking adequate and comprehensive explanations for the historical triumph of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam, concurrently elucidating the core reasons leading to the strategic defeat of the United States of America and the Republic of Vietnam government (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000).

Within the ambit of traditional historical and international relations scholarship, the prevailing tendency has frequently gravitated towards analyzing quantitative and tangible factors, often termed “hard power”. Scholars have delved into examining the overwhelming military might of the United States, encompassing its troop strength, high-tech weaponry, superior logistical capabilities, and colossal war expenditures. Concurrently, its formidable economic potential and technological military supremacy have often been adduced as primary arguments when assessing the balance of forces between the two sides (Dang Phong, 2008). Detailed statistical data concerning the number of bombing sorties, tons of ordnance unleashed, or total war costs are meticulously and scientifically presented. Nevertheless, a historical paradox persists, remaining unaddressed in its entirety by these quantitative analytical models: how could a nation, deemed geographically diminutive and demographically small such as Vietnam, with an army founded upon the principle of “from the people”, considered “unprofessional” in terms of conventional military organization by Western scholars, and possessing clearly far more antiquated armaments compared to the advanced military technology of the United States, steadfastly confront and ultimately secure a decisive victory against a superpower possessing nearly absolute superiority in all aspects from economic potential, technological military prowess, to political diplomatic influence on a global scale (Van Tien Dung, 1976)? This immense disparity in material capabilities poses a thorny question, indicating that reliance solely on “hard power” analytical methods is insufficient to grasp the full unfolding, depth, and especially the extraordinary outcome of the war. This

impels the necessity of seeking other “variables” less tangible yet profoundly formative elements to account for the “mystery” of Vietnam's triumph.

It is precisely from this explanatory void in current approaches that this article, entitled “Revolutionary War in Southern Vietnam 1954-1975: A Cultural Perspective”, aims to propose, exploit, and elucidate a crucial factor, sometimes underestimated or not systematically analyzed in depth: the role of culture. We contend that culture was not merely a secondary backdrop, a passive collection of spiritual values, or a minor component within the overall tapestry of the war. On the contrary, culture has truly become a strategic “weapon”, a decisive endogenous driving force, permeating and shaping the entire process of progress as well as the final result of the resistance war against America to save the country. We posit that culture performed a dual function, mutually reinforcing and amplifying one another: *Firstly*, culture nurtured and fortified the spirit of resistance, transforming traditional patriotism into an indomitable will to fight. *Secondly*, culture forged unwavering faith in the revolutionary ideal and the justness of the struggle, thereby engendering immense spiritual strength, surpassing the adversary's material advantage (Ho Chi Minh, 2011; K. Marx and F. Engels, 2002). This spiritual strength emerged as a pivotal factor, explaining the extraordinary endurance, resilience, and adaptability of the Vietnamese people.

Through an in depth analysis of specific cultural manifestations across various facets of the war from the formation and development of the distinctly Vietnamese “people's war” strategy, the innovative organization and mobilization of the masses, to the application of cultural values in unique military artistry and revolutionary diplomatic and “enemy proselytizing” campaigns (Luong Viet Sang, 2004; My Lai, 2007) this article aspires to provide a more comprehensive and profound perspective on the war. We hope that readers will be able to more clearly perceive the dialectical, intricate, and reciprocal relationship between the resistance activities of the Vietnamese people and the core cultural values, transmitted from generation to generation. These cultural elements, though seemingly discrete “segments” or “parts” of the vast Vietnamese culture, were effectively mobilized and promoted, forming a steadfast foundation, an inexhaustible resource, continuously providing “energy” and “direction” for the entire arduous yet glorious struggle for independence, freedom, and national unification. This study not only enriches the historical and theoretical body of knowledge about revolutionary wars but also provides invaluable lessons about the power of spiritual and cultural factors in conflicts, especially in the context of struggles for self-determination, social justice, and the defense of national identity in a turbulent world.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of culture's role in the Revolutionary War in Southern Vietnam, the research team employed a diverse and systematic methodological approach. The flexible integration of traditional and modern research methods ensured the study's objectivity, scientific rigor, and depth.

Regarding Research Methods

Historical Method: This serves as the foundational and core method, utilized to comprehensively survey the formation process, continuous evolution, ceaseless development, and crystallization of national historical cultural values throughout Vietnam's long history of struggle. This method places special emphasis on analyzing the causal relationship between events, cultural factors and war developments in the specific research context from 1954 to 1975. It permits tracing the origins of cultural values, identifying the process by which they were forged and brought to bear in each phase of the resistance, thereby elucidating their role in shaping the will and actions of the belligerents.

Logical Method: This method was deployed with the aim of rigorously distilling and clarifying the unique transformation of spiritual culture an intangible element into tangible and concrete “material strength” on the battlefield. Specifically, it helps explain how spiritual values such as patriotism, self-reliance, solidarity, and endurance were transformed into concrete actions such as creative tactics, combat resilience, self-sufficiency, and courageous sacrifice. Through this, the logical method highlights the superior capacity of this spiritual strength in overcoming the adversary's superior “material strength” in specific wartime situations, challenging traditional perspectives that rely solely on comparing military and economic potentials.

Synthesis and Analysis Method: To construct a robust theoretical foundation and a multi-dimensional perspective, the research team employed the methods of synthesis and analysis. Specifically, this method was applied to collect, filter, synthesize, and conduct an in-depth analysis of existing research works, including historical documents, monographs, scientific articles, and interdisciplinary studies, to explain the reasons for Vietnam's victory in the Anti-American Resistance War. This process aided in identifying areas of consensus and divergence in previous approaches, thereby better positioning the novel contribution of this study regarding the role of culture.

Comparison and Induction Methods: The methods of comparison and induction were also purposefully applied. The comparative method allowed for contrasting cultural manifestations across different phases of the war, or comparing the influence of Vietnamese cultural factors with those of the adversary. Meanwhile, the inductive method was utilized to synthesize and draw general, theoretically valuable conclusions from the analysis of specific phenomena, events, and cases throughout the war. This enhances the generality and applicability of the research findings.

Regarding Research Sources:

Concerning the sources utilized in this article, the authors meticulously accessed and exploited three main categories, ensuring the utmost diversity, objectivity, and reliability for the research process:

Firstly, primary sources: The research team directly explored national archives and specialized research institutions. Specifically, documents from the National Archives Center II, the Documentation Room of the B2 War Summary Committee (a crucial unit for summarizing war experiences in Southern Vietnam), and the Vietnam Military Science Institute provided original information, official documents, internal reports, correspondence, and declassified secret materials. These are invaluable, highly authentic sources, helping to reconstruct the wartime context and developments from the perspective of the directly involved parties.

Secondly, domestic secondary sources: This category encompasses reputable domestically published books, particularly works by historians, historical research institutes, and major political bodies. These documents offer an overview, analysis, and synthesis of the war from an official Vietnamese perspective. They include collections of resistance history, memoirs of high-ranking generals and leaders, and in-depth studies on the Communist Party of Vietnam and revolutionary movements.

Thirdly, foreign published sources: This is a category of sources that the authors particularly prioritized for exploitation and reference. This group includes research works, memoirs, and reports by scholars, journalists, politicians, and former military personnel from other countries, notably the United States and its allies. The use of international sources offers several significant benefits:

Ensuring Objectivity: Accessing perspectives and data from multiple viewpoints helps minimize potential subjectivity or bias from a single side.

Diversifying Ideas and Perspectives: Foreign studies often present different approaches, interpretations, and evaluations, enriching the discussion and offering fresh insights into events.

Verification and Cross-referencing: Data, information, and arguments from foreign sources are carefully compared and cross-referenced with domestic sources. This cross-verification process is extremely important for determining the reliability of information, identifying overlaps or contradictions, and thereby constructing more robust and well-founded conclusions.

The combination of rigorous research methods and the diverse exploitation of sources has established a firm foundation for this study, helping to elucidate the complex and profound role of culture in the Revolutionary War in Southern Vietnam.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Historical Context and Precursory Cultural Factors

3.1.1. Historical

Context from 1954, under the leadership of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States promulgated a “belt strategy” and “alliance strengthening policy”, establishing the “Southeast Asia Treaty Organization”, placing South Vietnam under SEATO's military protection, and dispatching American advisors, funds, weaponry, and instruments of war to Southern Vietnam. By 1960, the U.S. had provided South Vietnam with 1,028.9 million USD in aid and 650 advisors (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000, pp. 491, 500), aiding South Vietnam in consolidating its governmental apparatus, particularly its military, security, and police forces, eliminating pro-French elements, and purging dissenting factions; concurrently, launching “denounce communism, exterminate communism” campaigns, massacring communists, former Viet Minh adherents, and those who had participated in the Anti-French Resistance.

Throughout its administration, the Republic of Vietnam government implemented a stringent system of social control, coordinating military, police, public security, secret service, intelligence, administrative, economic, information, and psychological forces. One notable measure within this policy was the categorization of the populace through programs such as “Ngũ liên gia bảo” (Five-family Mutual Protection), the establishment of “Hamlet Self-Defense” organizations, land reform, and the abrogation of land policies implemented by the Viet Minh during the Anti-French Resistance. Concurrently, the government also conducted “denounce communism, exterminate communism” campaigns, contributing to increased tension and suffocation in Southern Vietnamese social life.

According to statistics from the report commemorating the “Fourth Anniversary of President Ngo Dinh Diem's Administration”, by October 26, 1958, the Republic of Vietnam government had arrested, killed, or confined a total of 13,382,484 people (Ministry of Information of the Republic of Vietnam Government, 1958). Author Avro Manhattan, in his work *Vietnam: Why Did We Go?* noted that during the period from 1955 to 1960, amidst the terror campaigns, “at least 24,000 were wounded, 80,000 executed or murdered, 275,000 imprisoned and interrogated (with or without physical torture), and about 500,000 sent to concentration or detention camps” (Avro Manhattan, 1984, p. 89).

Marilyn B. Young, in *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*, also recorded descriptions by French journalists of events in rural Southern Vietnam during 1957-1958. These journalists reported that control measures included “denunciations, encirclement of villages, searches and raids, arrests of suspects, looting, and interrogations, sometimes with forms of torture, regardless of

the innocence of those arrested". Some accounts describe that "every arrest was accompanied by brutal forms of torture, a mandatory procedure. Whether the arrested person was willing to cooperate or not, they could not escape torture" (Marilyn B. Young. *The Vietnam wars 1945-1990*. HarperCollins publishers, the United States of America, 1991, pp. 36, 60, 61).

From 1961 to 1964, the U.S. provided 1,177.9 million USD in aid to the Saigon government. The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) increased from 200,000 troops in 1960 to 500,000 in 1964, including 250,000 regular forces and 700 various types of aircraft. U.S. military presence also intensified, from 8,000 military advisors in 1960 to 30,000 in 1964 (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000, pp. 500, 492).

Following the U.S. high-level military conference in Okinawa in April 1960, the "counter-insurgency warfare" strategy was implemented, encompassing military and administrative measures. One significant initiative was the "strategic hamlet" program, based on lessons learned from the U.S. military in the Philippines and the British military in Malaysia. Additionally, "helicopter assault" and "armored vehicle assault" tactics were adopted to enhance the military strength of the Republic of Vietnam, concurrently launching sweep operations to retake and control rural areas.

Facing unfavorable changes on the battlefield in Southern Vietnam, in 1965, the United States officially committed expeditionary forces to direct combat in Southern Vietnam, with the number of U.S. troops rapidly increasing over the years: 184,314 in 1965, 410,000 in 1966, and 485,600 in 1967. By 1968, there were 767,000 U.S. and allied troops on the battlefield in Southern Vietnam (Military Region 7 Command, 2016, p. 96). During this period, the U.S. also provided the Saigon government with 3,420 million USD (1965-1968) (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000, p. 501), contributing to the increase in the size of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces from 500,000 in 1964 to 818,000 by the end of 1968 (Military Region 7 Command, 2016, p. 97). With overwhelming forces, along with modern weaponry and war means, the U.S. continuously organized large-scale "search and destroy" and "search and destroy and pacify" operations, involving 200,000 troops in the first counter-offensive (1965-1966), 400,000 troops in the second counter-offensive (1965-1967), and 460,000 troops in the third counter-offensive (1967); concurrently dropping 7.5 million tons of bombs, 20 million gallons of chemical defoliants over 1.5 million acres of forest and 221,000 acres of crops on the Indochinese battlefield (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000, pp. 493, 514, 517) with the sole objective of defeating the resistance forces!

Furthermore, the United States conducted large-scale and prolonged bombing campaigns against North Vietnam, marking a significant escalation in the Vietnam War. The two main campaigns were known as Operation Rolling Thunder and Operation Linebacker, along with other bombing activities. The U.S. bombing campaigns against the North after 1965 represented a tremendous effort to destroy the economic and military potential and the fighting will of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. However, with a resilient air defense system, evasive capabilities, and the indomitable spirit of its people, North Vietnam stood firm, continuing to provide support to the South.

According to General William Westmoreland's statistics, about 285,000 NLF and North Vietnamese troops were involved in the fighting in the South. However, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) "estimated enemy forces at nearly double this number, "ranging from 500,000 to 600,000 troops. Meanwhile, the total forces of the "free world" nations, including the United States, South Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, the "Philippines, and Australia, amounted to about 1,300,000 troops" (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 214). Vice President Hubert Humphrey, after visiting Vietnam, confidently declared that "We are beginning to win this struggle. We are on the offensive, territory is being regained, we are making steady progress". General Bruce Palmer in Saigon also stated that "The military war in Vietnam is virtually won. The Viet Cong have been defeated from Da Nang down to the population centers. They cannot get food and cannot recruit".

Under Richard M. Nixon's presidency (1969-1974), the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces were reinforced to be capable of replacing U.S. and allied forces in ground, air, and naval combat missions. Consequently, by the end of 1972, the Republic of Vietnam had 1,086,000 regular soldiers, 7,000 militia platoons, 2,177 police officers, and 799,000 civil defense personnel, with approximately 20,000 U.S. advisors working in the "Defense Attaché Office" (DAO), formerly the "U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam" (MACV), in Southern Vietnam. The total war materiel reserves of the Saigon Armed Forces amounted to 1,930,000 tons, including 480,000 tons of ammunition, 760,000 tons of fuel, and 690,000 tons of other military equipment. When the Paris Agreement was signed, the total population of the South was 21,880,000 people, distributed across 26 provinces and cities; most of the land was controlled by the Republic of Vietnam, with 70% of the population concentrated in 11,159 Type A and B "new life hamlets" (Military Region 7 Command, 2016, pp. 248, 249, 281).

The Nixon administration, and later President Gerald Ford (from 1974), committed to continuing military and economic aid to Saigon, viewing this as a prerequisite for maintaining the Thieu government in the face of crisis. Under Nixon's rule, the White House had "assured Thieu that they would be able to fulfill previous promises of full economic and military aid to help him overcome any crisis" (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 287). Thus, in August 1974, upon becoming President, Gerald R. Ford continued this policy, reiterating President Nixon's earlier promise to pressure Congress to increase aid to the Republic of Vietnam.

In summary: The period 1954-1975 was a challenging era for the Vietnamese revolution in general and the Southern Vietnamese battlefield in particular. The country was divided into two regions with two distinct political regimes. The North faced fierce destructive warfare from U.S. air and naval forces, causing severe damage to infrastructure, the economy, and human lives. Meanwhile, the South endured large-scale U.S. military intervention along with brutal urban warfare and guerrilla warfare, severely disrupting people's lives. Economically, both regions were exhausted by the war, with destroyed production, disrupted transportation, and shortages of food and supplies. Militarily, Vietnam confronted a military superpower with superior technology, weaponry, and immense financial resources. The disparity in strength was enormous. Furthermore, political, diplomatic, and social difficulties continuously challenged the nation's ability to exist and develop. Despite all these difficulties, Vietnam achieved victory. This victory did not solely stem from military might or tactics; rather, culture played a pivotal role. Ardent patriotism and the spirit of "unity between army and people", forged over thousands of years of history, created an indomitable and resilient will for the entire nation. Culture was flexibly applied as "soft power" through people's war, where every citizen was a soldier. Values such as self-reliance, adaptability in difficult conditions, and an optimistic spirit despite hardship, helped Vietnam develop unique tactics like guerrilla warfare. Moreover, the establishment of the image of "Uncle Ho's Soldier" with noble moral qualities, along with humanitarian policies towards prisoners of war, greatly influenced international public opinion, reinforcing the just cause of the resistance. Culture, as the soul of the nation, transformed spiritual potential into an inexhaustible resource, helping Vietnam overcome all difficulties and achieve final victory.

3.1.2. Precursory Cultural Factors

To profoundly comprehend the role of culture on the battlefield of Southern Vietnam during the period 1954-1975, it is imperative to revisit the historical formation and development of Vietnamese cultural values, especially those pertaining to the spirit of resistance and national self-determination.

Tradition of Resistance Against Foreign Aggression: The history of Vietnam is a chronicle of millennia of struggle to safeguard independence, from the resistance wars against Chinese domination to those against the Yuan-Mongol, Ming, and Qing armies, and most recently against French colonialism. These conflicts forged a spirit of patriotism, indomitable will, fierce resilience, and profound national pride. Heroic figures such as Hai Ba Trung, Ly Thuong Kiet, Tran Hung Dao, Le Loi, Quang Trung have become cultural symbols, endless sources of inspiration for future generations.

Village Culture and Community Spirit: The traditional village structure served as the bedrock of Vietnamese society, where the spirit of solidarity and mutual assistance was highly valued. Sayings such as "a morsel in hunger is worth a bundle in plenty", "good leaves cover torn leaves", or "when the lights are out, we have each other" clearly reflect this spirit. During wartime, the village became a steadfast fortress, a haven, a shelter, and a firm rear for the front lines. This community spirit expanded to become the spirit of national unity.

Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Vietnamese Culture: Although Confucianism was once the orthodox ideology, Buddhism and Taoism also exerted profound influence on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people. The blend and harmonization of these philosophies created a diverse and flexible culture. Values such as compassion (Buddhism), harmony with nature (Taoism), and a sense of responsibility towards family and community (Confucianism) were all transformed and adapted, contributing to the formation of the national character.

Guerrilla Warfare Culture and Flexibility: Throughout their history of resistance against foreign aggression, the Vietnamese people developed and perfected the art of guerrilla warfare, based on the principle of "using few to defeat many", and "using the weak to overcome the strong". This was not merely a military tactic but also an integral part of the cultural approach to dealing with a stronger enemy. Flexibility, creativity, and unpredictable adaptability in combat became prominent characteristics of the Vietnamese army and people.

These precursory cultural factors were not static but were continuously inherited, transformed, and promoted across different historical periods, particularly during the Anti-French and Anti-American Resistance periods. They became a solid foundation for the Vietnamese people to confront the fierce challenges of modern warfare.

3.2. Characteristics of Culture on the Battlefield of Southern Vietnam, 1954-1975

Culture in the Vietnamese Revolutionary War from 1954-1975 was inherited, developed, and perfected by Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party of Vietnam. It was not merely a military strategy but a profound application of traditional cultural values to the cause of national liberation.

President Ho Chi Minh deeply recognized the role of culture in the national liberation revolution. He believed that culture must "illuminate the path for the nation to follow", serving as a driving force to foster patriotism, the will to struggle, and the construction of a new society. In his directives and writings, Ho Chi Minh consistently emphasized educating and nurturing patriotism, hatred for the enemy, and the will for independence and freedom among the people. Ho Chi Minh skillfully integrated Marxism-Leninism with traditional Vietnamese cultural values, forging a revolutionary theory deeply imbued with national identity. He highly promoted the spirit of "great national unity", considering it a "great strength" to defeat the enemy.

The principle of “relying on the people” was not just a political slogan but a profound cultural value, manifested through absolute trust in the strength of the masses. In wartime, this principle was concretized by building mass organizations (the Women's Union, the Youth Union, the National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam), mobilizing the people to participate in all aspects of the resistance, from production labor and serving the front lines to directly taking up arms to fight.

The people were the source of human resources, material resources, and intelligence. They were those who directly faced the enemy, but also those who sheltered and protected revolutionary cadres. The “reliance on the people” was further evident in the close, blood-and-flesh relationship between the army and the people. The army was educated about revolutionary ethics, about “leaving memories with the people, earning their affection”, and not bothering the populace. This created a beautiful image of “Uncle Ho's soldiers” in the hearts of the people, completely different from the image of the invading army.

Under conditions of prolonged warfare, logistical difficulties were always a significant challenge. The culture of “self-reliance”, “simplification”, and “adaptability” helped Vietnam build an effective localized logistical system. The people not only provided food and supplies but also participated in producing rudimentary weapons, digging tunnels, and transporting wounded soldiers. The adoption of the motto “empty-handed to seize the enemy”, “self-sufficient”, demonstrated the flexible application of traditional cultural values of an agricultural society to the circumstances of modern warfare. This helped minimize reliance on external aid and enhanced the self-sufficiency of the resistance.

Another important cultural factor was the establishment and maintenance of the just cause of the resistance. The Communist Party of Vietnam and President Ho Chi Minh incessantly propagated and educated the people about the goals of independence, freedom, and national reunification, which were burning and profound aspirations in Vietnamese culture. Emphasizing the justness of the struggle against American imperialist aggression created immense spiritual strength, motivating the people not only in Vietnam but also garnering sympathy and support from peace and democratic movements worldwide.

Within the context of the Revolutionary War in Southern Vietnam, culture was not only a source of spiritual strength but also an effective tool for organizing, rallying, and mobilizing the masses to participate in the resistance. The skillful application of cultural forms helped the revolutionary government build a united front, transforming the will for independence into concrete actions by millions of people.

Oral cultural forms such as folk songs (hò, vè, ca dao) were widely used to convey information, call for resistance, denounce the enemy's crimes, and encourage the fighting spirit. Memorable, easy-to-learn, and richly imagery-laden verses quickly spread throughout the community, especially in rural areas where mass media was limited. For example: “Unity, unity, great unity / Success, success, great success” or revolutionary songs like “Marching to Saigon”, “Liberate the South” were not only works of art but also rallying cries, awakening patriotism and the will to fight.

Cultural troupes and artists overcame all difficulties and hardships to perform for soldiers and the people right on the battlefield, in liberated zones. Plays, classical opera (tuồng chèo), and modern folk opera (cải lương) imbued with revolutionary character, reflecting wartime life, praising heroes, and criticizing the enemy, contributed to boosting morale and encouraging soldiers and people to overcome hardships. These performances also served as occasions to disseminate the Party's and the revolutionary government's lines and policies.

Graphic art, with its symbolic propaganda paintings, posters, and banners, became a powerful propaganda tool, conveying messages of independence, freedom, unification, and the just cause of the resistance to all strata of the population, from urban to rural areas, from mountainous regions to the plains. Simple but powerful images like Uncle Ho's soldier, the female guerrilla, or the image of Uncle Ho became familiar symbols deeply etched in the public consciousness.

Despite the difficulties in printing and distribution during wartime, revolutionary newspapers played a crucial role in conveying information, analyzing the situation, and shaping public opinion. Newspapers such as “the People” (Nhan dan) and “People's army” (Quan doi Nhan dan) were not only means of information but also forums for disseminating the Party's lines and policies, sharing combat experiences, and building a new life. The Liberation Radio Station was also an important information channel, especially for enemy-controlled areas where official information was difficult to access. The news bulletins and appeals from the radio contributed to maintaining the people's faith and will to struggle.

Besides cultural and artistic forms, political and ideological education was particularly emphasized by the Party and the revolutionary State. Political classes, branch and mass organization meetings, where cadres, party members, and the people studied and discussed revolutionary lines, Marxism-Leninism, and Ho Chi Minh Thought. This education aimed not only to raise awareness but also to strengthen faith in the revolutionary future and the Party's leadership, thereby transforming awareness into concrete actions in combat and production.

Furthermore, Vietnamese military art, especially guerrilla warfare, was not just a collection of tactics but a clear manifestation of the culture of dealing with war and the enemy. Flexibility, creativity, and high adaptability were prominent cultural characteristics clearly demonstrated in Vietnam's conduct of warfare. The traditional Vietnamese cultural principle of “using the unchangeable to respond to the myriad of changes” was clearly expressed in military art. Facing an opponent with overwhelming superiority in firepower and technology, the Vietnamese army and people continuously innovated unique tactics, suitable for practical conditions and terrain. Tactics such as “clinging to the enemy's belt to strike”, “besieging points

to destroy reinforcements”, “ambush”, “close-range fighting”, and “night fighting” are typical examples of combat creativity. Instead of directly confronting the enemy's might, our army and people sought to neutralize that advantage through cleverness, resourcefulness, and a courageous spirit. The construction of complex tunnel systems like the Cu Chi Tunnels was not just a military feat but also a symbol of indomitable will and extraordinary creativity under resource-scarce conditions.

In Vietnamese culture, the human being has always been placed at the center. This was clearly manifested in military art, where the spiritual element, will, and courage of the soldier were emphasized far more than weaponry. “The person decides” rather than “the weapon decides”. Large campaigns like Tet Offensive 1968, although militarily controversial, demonstrated the ability to mobilize and the spirit of sacrifice of a large segment of the masses, creating a “psychological shock” for the adversary.

The culture of interacting with nature, with Vietnam's characteristic geography and climate, was also thoroughly applied in warfare. Forests, mountains, rivers, fields, and even urban areas all became battlefields where our army and people utilized their strengths. For example, the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through rugged mountainous terrain to transport weapons, food, and medicine to the South demonstrated adaptability and maximum exploitation of terrain advantages.

In addition to military tactics, Vietnam also paid great attention to psychological warfare, not only against the enemy but also within its own ranks. Examples of heroes, stories of noble sacrifice were widely propagated, creating a spirit of “glorious sacrifice”, “death for the Fatherland is immortal”. The culture of revering heroes and martyrs contributed to strengthening faith and motivating the younger generation to readily go to battle, despite all dangers. This created a significant difference in fighting spirit between the two warring sides. The combination of traditional cultural values and unique military art created an effective “version” of the Vietnamese revolutionary war, helping a small nation resist a superpower many times stronger militarily and economically.

3.3. Culture in the Great Victory of the Southern Vietnam Battlefield, 1954-1975

Following the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, the division of the country presented the greatest challenge, creating two military regrouping zones and two opposing governments in the North and South. This not only caused geographical division but also led to deep ideological and political polarization. The North, having just endured nine years of resistance against the French, suffered heavily damaged infrastructure, a depleted economy, and had to undertake land reform, economic recovery, and socialist construction amidst lingering feudal remnants and old ideologies, while also preparing to counter enemy sabotage and attacks. Meanwhile, in the South, subjected to repression and terror, the Ngo Dinh Diem government implemented an extremely brutal “denounce communism, exterminate communism” policy, suppressing former resistance fighters and patriots, imprisoning tens of thousands, and inciting deep resentment among the people. The promulgation and enforcement of Law 10/59 legalized the trial and execution of those deemed “communists”, leading to wrongful deaths and a severe social crisis. The revolutionary forces in the South faced a life-and-death challenge, suffering heavy losses, shifting from an offensive posture to one of preserving forces, and at times even falling into a serious passive state. In response, in January 1959, the 15th Central Conference issued a Resolution on the revolutionary path in the South, affirming the inevitability of armed struggle, shifting the Southern revolution from a position of preserving forces to an offensive position. This Resolution was like a breath of fresh air, responding to the people's aspirations, creating a premise and strong motivation for the Dong Khoi movement to explode, marking the beginning of a new phase of the Southern revolution.

The Dong Khoi movement symbolizes national culture, reflecting a deep awareness of the unity of the entire nation. The land of Vietnam, from Nam Quan Pass to Ca Mau Cape, is not only a geographical entity but also a sacred, inviolable value. This awareness has become a sense of community, responsibility, identity and enduring strength in the cultural behavior of the Vietnamese people. This is a solid foundation that creates a spirit of solidarity and resilience in the struggle for independence and national unification, a decisive factor in the Vietnam War that cannot be explained simply by military or tactical factors. Therefore, the Dong Khoi movement not only reflects the determination to fight of the people of the South but also symbolizes the strength of culture, national consciousness and undying belief in the integrity of the country, becoming a great driving force in the resistance war against invasion and division.

In 1961, although the revolutionary armed forces in Southern Vietnam were still nascent, primarily engaged in defense and protection, by December 1960, the National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam (NLFV) was established and rapidly became the center of revolutionary leadership. In February 1961, the Liberation Army of Southern Vietnam was also formed, marking the development of revolutionary armed forces with over 16,000 guerrillas and a local force numbering up to 200,000. Of these, the number of Southerners regrouped in the North “approximately 4,500 people had come to the South from 1959 to 1960; by 1961, this number had increased to over 6,200”. “At a planning meeting held a week after taking office in January 1961, Kennedy posed a logical question: why such a large force was needed to confront a small threat” (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, pp. 81, 71, 75) from the resistance forces, despite their lack of weaponry and means of war. However, the resistance forces had formed an armed force comprising three types of troops: main forces, local forces, and self-defense guerrillas, forming the backbone for an all-people, comprehensive people's war. Perhaps President Kennedy did not understand that the rapidly developing resistance forces, especially the armed forces, by 1965, the Southern main forces were

at division level; military regions at regimental level; provinces at battalion or company level; districts at battalion or company level; communes had militia guerrillas at platoon or squad level; and political-social organizations had self-defense forces. Although the revolutionary armed forces were still small in number and poorly equipped compared to the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, they had truly become a three-tiered armed force (main forces, local forces, self-defense guerrillas), serving as the core for the all-people resistance. More importantly, by this time, the majority of the Vietnamese people had understood the schemes and tactics of the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam government, and fully understood the value of freedom, independence, and unification. The Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, read by President Ho Chi Minh before the compatriots, quotes from the U.S. Declaration of Independence of 1776: “all men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights: that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 11). Therefore, after the Dong Khoi movement in 1960, the revolution in Southern Vietnam transitioned from partial uprisings to the conduct of revolutionary warfare, deploying an all-people, comprehensive, and prolonged people's war posture.

The resistance of the Southern Vietnamese army and people was a just war, responding to the burning aspiration for a unified Vietnam, which was clearly demonstrated: “75% of the Southern Vietnamese people supported the Front, 20% tried to maintain neutrality, and 5% resolutely supported the government” (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 73). Among the 5% of the population who resolutely supported the Republic of Vietnam government, they went against the nation's tradition, performing acts of dividing the country for “fame” and for “generous salaries” paid by the U.S. At a high-level U.S. military conference held in Okinawa in early 1961, U.S. military experts “recommended that Diem's army increase from 150,000 to 170,000, and the Civil Guard from 32,000 to 68,000”; concurrently calculating “the cost to be borne by the United States would be \$42 million compared to the \$225 million annually budgeted for Vietnam”. This was “money poured in to keep the army in good shape, a resource that Diem could distribute to loyal commanders”. Therefore, while the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces “wore American uniforms, steel helmets, carried backpacks, and carried the latest American weapons” (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, pp. 73, 75), in their baggage when the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces entered the war of “dividing the country”, there was no longer the 4,000-year Vietnamese civilization, the tradition of fighting invaders to defend the nation by their ancestors, and the burning aspiration for freedom, independence, and unification!

This explains why, despite the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam government mobilizing significant resources to pacify Southern Vietnam within 18 months (July 1960 to December 1961), managing over 10 million people by establishing 17,000 Strategic Hamlets, hoping to separate the resistance forces from the populace, and simultaneously employing the “net-casting, spear-throwing” tactic, launching sweep operations to annihilate the resistance forces; the struggle movement of the Southern army and people erupted fiercely from urban to rural areas with three prongs of attack: political, military, and proselytizing, defeating the U.S. war strategy. Specifically, in June 1961, the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam government piloted the establishment of Strategic Hamlets; in March 1962, the Strategic Hamlet plan was elevated to a national policy; in August 1962, Strategic Hamlets were deployed throughout the South; in October 1962, it was declared that “the current era is the era of Strategic Hamlets”! However, due to fierce resistance from the Southern army and people, by December 1962, only about 4,000 Strategic Hamlets were established with about 3 million people, and by July 1963, only about 7,200 Strategic Hamlets were built with about 7,000,000 people (B2 War Summary Committee, File No. 7650). By the end of 1963, the Southern army and people had destroyed over half (3,800) of the Strategic Hamlets built by the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam government (B2 War Summary Committee, File No. 7805), contributing to pushing the Republic of Vietnam government into a period of serious crisis. Subsequently, in the years 1963, 1964, and 1965, the Southern army and people achieved victories at Ap Bac (January 2, 1963), Binh Gia (December 2, 1964 - March 7, 1965), Dong Xoai (May 10 - July 22, 1965), Ba Gia (May 28 - July 20, 1965), etc., gradually defeating the U.S. tactics of “helicopter assault” and “armored vehicle assault”.

From these victories, the important contribution of cultural factors to the resistance is clearly evident. Patriotism, faith in independence and freedom, along with the astute leadership of the National Liberation Front, helped the Southern army and people maintain a long and resilient resistance, despite the disparity in material forces compared to the enemy. The war was not only a confrontation between armed forces but also a struggle to protect the culture, traditions, and aspirations for independence of the Vietnamese nation.

When the United States officially committed expeditionary forces to direct combat in Southern Vietnam in 1965, the entire Southern army and people simultaneously rose up to conduct an all-out resistance. According to an estimate by Nguyen Cao Ky, then Prime Minister of the Saigon government, this government “controlled no more than 25% of the population of the South” (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 166). If this figure is accurate, it means that 75% of the Southern population, from urban to rural areas, participated in the anti-American struggle in all forms they could. On the battlefield, the resistance forces waged a people's war, applying a two-legged strategy (political and military forces) and three prongs (political, military, and proselytizing struggle) across three strategic zones: mountains, plains, and urban areas.

Therefore, the first dry-season counter-offensive (1965-1966), despite high U.S. expectations, failed to achieve its objectives. By 1966, the success rate of the U.S. military in Southern Vietnam was considered extremely low. One estimate showed: "With 200,000 to 400,000 troops, the U.S. had only a 20% chance of success, a 70% chance of stalemate, and a 10% chance of total defeat" (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 159). By the end of 1967, in the second dry-season counter-offensive (1966-1967), the objective of annihilating the resistance forces was also not achieved. To cope, the U.S. was forced to prepare forces for a third counter-offensive.

In the Spring of Mau Than 1968, the General Offensive and Uprising erupted throughout Southern Vietnam, marking a significant turning point in the Anti-American War for National Salvation. Under the leadership and rallying call of the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front of Southern Vietnam, the Southern army and people simultaneously rose up to attack U.S. forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) across the entire Southern battlefield with the slogan: "all people's armed liberation forces, all political struggle forces, all members of liberation associations shall stand shoulder to shoulder with other patriotic forces and all compatriots to rise up in unison, decisively punishing the American aggressors and the Thieu-Ky puppets who sold out the country. O all compatriots, cadres, and soldiers, bravely advance. We shall surely win total victory!" (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 1968, p. 4). In this uprising, the soldiers were mostly young, in their prime, when "blood flowed freely in their hearts". when "their souls spun in the storm", when "muscles were taut and flesh firm". This was an age when they began to dream of careers, love, and contributing to the future. However, they put everything aside, determined to participate in the resistance and dedicate themselves entirely to the revolutionary cause. They did not hesitate to say: "Living for the revolution, our comrades; Dying for the revolution, no complaints!", and thus, they "joyfully died like having finished ploughing a field" (To Huu, 1998, p. 145). This very spirit created boundless strength for the Southern army and people in the Tet Mau Than 1968 General Offensive and Uprising.

After Tet Mau Than, logistical supply lines from the North and internal bases were gradually blockaded and cut off. At the same time, the Saigon government intensified its "pacification" efforts by militarizing the entire administrative apparatus through pacification centers and councils at all levels. Concurrently, police and intelligence forces such as the "Phoenix Program Committee", "Swan Squad", "Chieu Hoi Centers", etc., increased control over rural areas through search, interrogation, and sweep operations. In 1969-1970 alone, the Republic of Vietnam government "discovered" 98,763 underground communist cadres, of whom 53,956 cases were identified in tactical zones 3 and 4 (Military Region 7 Command, 2016, p. 177).

Facing this situation, the resistance forces not only confronted a changing battlefield and the insecurity of their staging areas but also faced fierce counterattacks from the U.S. and the pacification efforts of the Republic of Vietnam government, especially regarding ensuring logistics, particularly food and medicine. By "September 1969, the food reserves of the South were only 2,000 tons, not enough for the troops to eat for one month; in many units, our cadres and soldiers had to eat cassava, sometimes rice, or wild yams and forest fruits" (B2 War Summary Committee, 1979, p. 76). The resistance forces overcame these difficulties, enduring and implementing the "three clings" motto: clinging to the battlefield, clinging to the people, clinging to the enemy with the spirit of "fighting even with just a loincloth"; finding ways to overcome enemy containment, actively procuring food and supplies, exploiting natural products, increasing production, opening transport routes, and receiving aid from the great rear in the North. In particular, the "youth volunteers" movement, the "youth on the frontline" movement, and the "enlist to kill the enemy" movement surged like underground currents in the South, and enthusiastically and vigorously in the North, all directed towards the front lines. By 1971, "although the enemy and we were still in fierce contention, the rural situation had overcome the most serious difficult period, we had blocked the enemy, repelled them in many places, and were creating very fundamental conditions that demanded urgent and firm consolidation to transition to the second phase of attacking and destroying pacification" (B2 War Summary Committee, File No. 7.758).

It is impossible to explain the tenacious and vigorous vitality of the resistance forces without examining them through cultural lenses. Under a rain of bombs and bullets, the Southern Vietnam battlefield became fierce, with life and death mere inches apart; however, young men and women in their prime successively followed each other to the front. Many cases involved "cheating", increasing their height by adding thick inserts to their shoes, or increasing their weight by putting stones in their pockets to "meet the standard" for participation. This explains why during those seemingly insurmountable difficult years, by the end of 1971, the resistance forces had recovered, and logistical routes overcame bombs and bullets to continuously expand and extend, bringing forces, resources, and materiel from the rear to the front lines.

1972 was a year of "seemingly insurmountable" difficulties. The resistance forces steadfastly held their ground, gradually overcame difficulties, consolidated their strength, organized defense, counter-attacks, and offensives, step by step blocking and repelling the U.S. strategy. This was the basis for the army and people of the South to create the "fiery summer of 1972", launching deep attacks on important defense systems of the US and the Republic of Vietnam government on many fronts: Quang Tri - Thua Thien Hue, the Mekong Delta under Military Region V, the Northern Central Highlands, the Southeast, the Mekong Delta under Military Region VIII (South Vietnam), composing heroic songs, typically the heroic song "81 days and

nights” at Quang Tri Citadel. Along with the 12 day and night victory of Dien Bien Phu in the air, forcing the US to sign the Paris Agreement.

From 1973, the revolutionary posture and strength developed powerfully. By early 1975, the main forces of the liberation army had grown to corps level. Five Truong Son trails connected the Northern rear to the South, then branched into thousands of lateral and longitudinal paths connecting to each resistance front. On each resistance front, the Southern army and people, each with a task, were all enthusiastic, with “songs drowning out bombs” and a spirit of optimism and faith in victory. How could they not believe in victory! when the U.S. and its allies had been defeated by the Southern army and people, and now only the Republic of Vietnam remained! Although the Republic of Vietnam was handed over all military bases by the U.S. and its allies; it was supplied with a huge amount of military materiel and means of war by the U.S.; “the ARVN outnumbered their opponents 2:1; they possessed fourteen hundred artillery pieces compared to four hundred on the other side and twice the number of tanks. The Air Force, over-equipped, was effectively maintained by the Americans under civilian contract with the Department of Defense” (Marilyn B. Young, 1991, p. 291). It can be said that the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces “was considered the largest army in Southeast Asia, second in Asia, and fourth in the world” (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000, p. 499). However, all comparisons of the military potential gap became meaningless for the Southern army and people.

In 1975, the strategic general offensive, culminating in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, erupted. The Southern army and people swept from Trại Thiên through the Central Highlands to the swampy plains. The Republic of Vietnam government rapidly collapsed in large chunks: Central Highlands (March 10, 1975), Hue (March 26, 1975), Da Nang (March 29, 1975), Saigon (April 30, 1975), Mekong Delta (May 1, 1975). Just like the fate of the “Special War” strategy, the “Local War” strategy, in turn, the U.S. “Vietnamization of the war” strategy failed! The Vietnam War ended, and the Southern Vietnamese army and people achieved a resounding victory as an inevitable law of history!

Some also opine that Vietnam defeated the U.S. due to the immense support from the Soviet Union and China. Indeed, the support from the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries was extremely significant and crucial for the Vietnamese people's Anti-American Resistance. However, that is not the main reason. From 1954 to 1975, total U.S. expenditure for the Vietnam War was 676 billion USD, of which direct expenditure on the battlefield was 240.8 billion USD, and aid to the Republic of Vietnam government was 17,939.1 billion USD; while the Soviet Union, China, and other socialist countries provided Vietnam with 2,362,682 tons of goods, including food, provisions, military uniforms, medicine, gasoline, construction materials, weapons, ammunition, equipment, and military supplies with a total value of about over 7 billion rubles (Steering Committee for War Summary under the Politburo, 2000, pp. 496, 501, 502, 601), corresponding to about 1.2 billion USD. These figures are persuasive enough to shift those “doubts” towards other perspectives or to delve into the cultural strength and the aspiration for independence, freedom, and unification of the Vietnamese people in the Vietnamese Revolutionary War of 1954-1975.

4. CONCLUSION

Looking back at the entire process of the Revolutionary War in Southern Vietnam (1954-1975) through a cultural lens, we can affirm that culture was not merely an accompanying factor but an endogenous force, a strategic power, decisively shaping the trajectory and ultimate outcome of the war. Vietnam's victory against a military and economic superpower like the United States was not simply a triumph of tactics or weaponry; more profoundly, it was the victory of a culture, a national will forged over thousands of years of history. Traditional cultural values such as patriotism, the spirit of solidarity, self-reliance, adaptability, and resilience created a strong foundation for the spirit and will to fight of the entire nation. They transformed hatred for the enemy into action and the aspiration for independence into the strength to overcome all hardships. It was the unwavering commitment to the goal of independence and freedom, reinforced by cultural values, that enabled Vietnam to sustain a prolonged resistance and face the most severe challenges. Culture was flexibly and creatively utilized through oral traditions, popular arts, journalism, and political education to rally, motivate, and consolidate the faith of the people in the revolutionary cause. It transformed every citizen into a soldier, every family into a fortress. The flexibility, creativity, and the ability to “use the unchangeable to respond to the myriad of changes” inherent in Vietnamese culture were concretized in guerrilla tactics and people's war, turning material disadvantages into spiritual and strategic advantages. “The person decides” rather than “the weapon decides” is a powerful testament to the superiority of culture in warfare. After the war, culture continued to play a crucial role in healing wounds, national reconciliation, and rebuilding the country. Values of sacrifice, comradeship, and gratitude towards previous generations have been maintained and promoted.

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