



## *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War*

by Amanda Boczar.

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*An American Brothel* is an indispensable study of transactional, consensual, and violent sexual relationships between South Vietnamese women and American men during the US War in Vietnam. Though such relations played a consequential role in the war, a strong taboo has kept them from being fully researched (16–17). Historian Amanda Boczar contends that both South Vietnamese and American policies were influenced by such relationships, which imperiled “war efforts by impacting soldier readiness and pitting allies against each other on topics like eradicating prostitution” (1). Boczar outlines South Vietnamese efforts to mitigate the vice subsequent to American escalation in 1965 and highlights the willful American blindness to this threat, particularly in the war’s “escalation” years (1965–68). She cites the My Lai massacre as motivating greater concern for the threat—especially rape—during the Nixon administration. But that concern was limited to less common rapes committed on the front lines and not the more common variety perpetrated in the rear echelons. “Sexual relationships,” Boczar perceptively concludes, “between American service members and Vietnamese civilians were not simply a colorful background detail but rather contributed to the shaping of decisions, mindsets, and legacies of the Vietnam War” (192).

The book comprises an Introduction, six chapters, and a Conclusion. The Introduction, entitled “The Political Legacies of Personal Encounters,” posits that interpersonal relationships are as important to understanding war’s outcomes as are combat victories and failures. “The history of sexual encounters contributes to Vietnam War studies by adding to the discourse on American decision making, daily life, and war culture for the US military and the RVN, as well as to theoretical understandings of the relationship between war, culture, trauma, and memory” (12).

Chapter 1, “Vietnam in the American Mind from the Colonial Era through the 1950s,” registers the biases Americans held regarding South Vietnamese men and women well before the arrival of American military advisors in 1955. Under the influence of French colonial attitudes, Americans viewed South Vietnam’s alleged feminine political weakness as warranting armed intervention and casting the country as an erotic playground.

Chapter 2, “Morale, Morality, and the ‘American Brothel’” delineates the conflict between South Vietnamese and American authorities over the burgeoning prostitution industry. The South Vietnamese saw it as a violation of fundamental Vietnamese values, whereas the Americans saw it as harmless and essential to American troop morale. Women, Boczar points out, were merely objects at the center of the conflict.

Chapter 3, “Vietnamese Eradication Efforts and the Americanization of Sexual Policy,” describes American resistance to South Vietnamese efforts to control vice, including prostitution; it resulted in anti-Americanism and corruption, thereby hindering US war aims. That said, it was in fact high rates of venereal disease among US service members that drove the American military to

act, less to curb troops' use of prostitutes, than to ensure the health and cleanliness of the women and (Boczar hints) sometimes men.

Chapter 4, "Love and Companionship," points out that many interpersonal relationships in Vietnam were less transactional than consensual. Furthermore, they were not always sexual. Though, Boczar writes, South Vietnamese authorities always mistrusted American objectives, many women ended up cohabiting and falling in love with GIs. Despite both countries' resistance to interracial marriage, the US military approved some eight thousand marriages. Nonetheless, the rite did not pave the way to emigration for these women.

In chap. 5, "The Policing and Policy Problems of Sexual Violence," Boczar argues that even though anti-war advocates often highlighted sexual violence, or rape, as a common outcome of the war, the US military ignored the violence until the uncovering of the My Lai atrocity in 1969 made that impossible. Nonetheless, though personal accounts and some records reveal that rape was common both on the front lines and in the cities or rear echelons, the Department of Defense stressed those perpetrated in combat areas. This focus, Boczar asserts, allowed troops to defend their behavior as a response to the pressures of combat and the erasure of rape in the public memory of both the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the United States.

In chap. 6, "De-escalation and the Collapse of an Industry," Boczar outlines how the 1973 Paris Peace Accords and the rapid withdrawal of US troops cratered the South Vietnamese economy, including the sex industry and its affiliated businesses. American GIs left behind unpaid bills, whole families reliant on their American dollars, and an abundance of Amerasian offspring. Once North Vietnam overtook the South (Apr. 1975), many people tied to the US military, including women in the sex industry, were sent to reeducation camps; others fled by boat, leaving some fifty thousand Amerasian orphans to fend for themselves.

Finally, in a conclusion entitled "Reframing the Diplomatic History of the Vietnam War," Boczar makes her ultimate point: diplomatic history should be revised to concentrate not only on the strategic level of warfare or on exchanges between foreign service officers but on all human interactions that influence war-making.

Above all else, the human interactions at the core of this project shed light on the strained relations between the United States and South Vietnam. Negotiations between the two governments regarding sexual encounters revolved around their sometimes polarized desires for morale and morality, respectively. Practicing the policies on the ground, however, was a very different reality. As the RVN [Republic of Vietnam] worked with their advisors from Michigan State University to draft anti-prostitution laws, American Foreign Service members openly made purchases from the sex market. As it worked to shut down city bars with American assistance, MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] helped build areas outside military bases where prostitutes would live and be examined by doctors. South Vietnamese police openly accepted bribes and ran protection networks for prostitutes. Marriage laws were purposely difficult to satisfy, something both governments approved of. Some Americans committed rapes against the population they were sent to Vietnam to protect, and officers rarely prosecuted accusations of assault. Amerasian orphans remained trapped between worlds, vulnerable to the whims of government, until Congress approved more secure pathways for citizenship in the 1980s. (191-92)

Boczar's arguments are so persuasive because they are based on extensive research in national archives in England, France, Vietnam, and the United States as well as three US Presidential Libraries (Johnson, Nixon, Ford), and special collections in US university libraries (Michigan State and Texas Tech). She is also conversant with the relevant secondary literature and an impressive mix of novels, films, memoirs, and histories. Her current position as a university library Special

Collections Manager speaks to her facility in research processes and organization. Students of the Vietnam War, women's roles in war-making, foreign affairs, and diplomacy will appreciate Amanda Boczar's broadening of our understanding of the Second Indochina War.