

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

The Other Veterans: Socialist Humanitarians Return to Vietnam

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97t8d149>

Journal

History and Memory, 27(2)

ISSN

0935-560X

Author

Schwenkel

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.2979/histmemo.27.2.20

Peer reviewed

The Other Veterans

Socialist Humanitarians Return to Vietnam

CHRISTINA SCHWENKEL

This essay examines alternative circuits of memory of the “American War” and the return of other “veterans” to postwar Vietnam; namely, socialist experts from East Germany who contributed to war efforts and urban reconstruction in the 1970s. It follows a delegation of experts who returned in 2007 to the devastated city of Vinh, which they had helped to rebuild. The motivations and itineraries of these returnees diverged from the typical agendas of “war tourists,” including the return journeys of U.S. veterans. For the socialist humanitarians, returning to Vietnam offered an opportunity for important memory work within and across former Cold War divisions.

On a windy fall afternoon in Hanoi in 1999, in the early months of field-work,¹ I came upon a crowd of people gathering at the northern end of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, where the broad, French-built avenues of the city center yield to the narrow, congested streets of the Old City. As I approached on my bike, I saw an open-air exhibition with enlarged black-and-white photographs from the war hung on a bamboo frame, encircling a fountain in the middle of a traffic roundabout. There were intimate images of children peering out from a tunnel, where they had lived during air raids; a weary female combatant smiling as she rested; a contemplative war invalid gazing across the city’s central lake; male soldiers walking hand in hand, rifles slung over their shoulders; and other provocative portraits. A palpable sense of excitement filled the air as traffic came to a halt and spectators dismounted from their motorbikes, pointing to particular images, sometimes recognizing family, friends or neighbors. Word of the exhibi-

tion quickly traveled and, within a remarkably short period of time, some of the men and women in the photographs began to arrive on the scene.

I located the photographer, Thomas Billhardt—a celebrated photojournalist from former East Germany (GDR)—who had set up the unofficial exhibit in the hope of locating his photographic subjects from thirty years prior. “This is so exciting!” Billhardt repeated breathlessly as he ran around greeting new arrivals, including the father of a lifeless child represented tenderly in one of his photographs. His joyful reunion with a woman he had photographed as a young militia member, as she took an American soldier prisoner, subsequently became the focus of the documentary *Eislimonade für Hong Li*.² The film documented Billhardt’s return to Vietnam and his search for the people in his images, with whom he had shared both intimate and violent moments during the war.

My serendipitous meeting with Billhardt offered the first of many unexpected acquaintances I would make with other wartime “veterans.” Their civil (and, for some, military) service in northern Vietnam during and after the war with the United States forged a lesser-known transnational history—and a collective socialist memory of the “other side” of war. In this essay, I address this alternative memoryscape, constituted by the diverse experiences of socialist-allied people who traveled, at times clandestinely, across borders within the former communist bloc. Xiaobing Li’s notable work on the covert support operations of Russian and Chinese forces—including logistics officers, training instructors, anti-aircraft battalions and military engineers—offers key insights into the machinations behind communist Vietnam’s hard-fought victory.³ Here, I apply a broader usage of the term *veteran* to include noncombat participants in the war, who were considered other, international “soldiers” of the revolution, including cultural producers and technical advisors from supporting socialist countries who engaged in nonmilitary labor.⁴ Today, these veterans have no official status and enjoy no special state-conferred rights or privileges (indeed, many veterans of the armed conflict are not recognized).⁵ Rather, I apply the term *veteran* to this group to denote an embodied subjectivity and affective positioning in relation to the wartime past.

As Meredith Lair has argued in her research on U.S. logistics personnel during the Vietnam War, the words “veteran” and “soldier” typically conjure images of harrowing and relentless frontline battles with the enemy Other. Yet more than 75 percent of American troops in Vietnam served in

noncombat positions, and still more never witnessed battle.⁶ Likewise, on the side of the revolution, war stories and war memory most often center on combat, thus overlooking the myriad supporting roles, both military and civilian, that thousands of international experts and workers played to sustain the war effort and then rebuild Vietnam.⁷ Their endeavors were part of wider military and humanitarian policies of socialist internationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, which provided mutual aid and “solidarity assistance” to fraternal countries. “We are the other veterans,” a chief urban planner and architect from the GDR who worked in Vietnam from 1973 to 1975 proudly declared to me. He pointed to those who, like himself, were politically motivated by moral and humanistic concerns about an unjust war to rebuild that which the United States had destroyed.

This essay examines the return journeys of a group of these nonmilitary veterans to Vietnam, namely, East German experts who helped redesign and rebuild a bombed and devastated city as part of a seven-year project undertaken after the cessation of air raids in 1973. For these “socialist humanitarians”—a term that acknowledges their humanist ethics and their role as socialist specialists, who promoted both disaster relief and social reform—the war was a profoundly formative period of their lives. Their experiences continue to shape their sense of personhood today, in a post-Cold War world where their achievements have been grossly devalued. The deep affective attachments they formed during and after the war, as East German and Vietnamese citizens worked collectively toward national recovery, motivated their return visits and enduring sense of camaraderie. As such, their travel itineraries differed significantly from the typical war tourist agenda, in which destruction and ruination are transformed into multisensory spectacles that beckon the visitor to imagine, if not experience, the apocalyptic trauma of war.⁸

Because other kinds of war memory—beyond Hollywood films and imaginaries of VC insurgency—informed their desire to return to Vietnam, the East German returnees displayed a marked absence of what Svetlana Boym has termed “ruinophilia,” or ruin-gazing.⁹ Their memory trips were consequently less about temporally and spatially preserved historical memory than about generative and forward-looking acts of remembrance.¹⁰ By rekindling former relations and identities, these visits gave new vitality and affect to still vivid pasts. Moreover, their travels differed from those of returning U.S. veterans, which are bound up with

desires for healing and reconciliation—journeys that are more backward looking than future oriented.¹¹ For the socialist humanitarians, returning to Vietnam not only evoked shared memories and sentiments of solidarity—such as the collective celebration of victory on April 30, 1975—but reinscribed status and significance to their technical work. Though it has been forgotten in reunified Germany, this work is still fondly remembered in Vietnam today. Vietnamese hosts likewise invoked past discourses of humanitarian and political solidarity, though to a different—albeit still future-focused—end: to elicit new forms of capitalist aid and investment from their old socialist friends.

“SOLIDARITÄTSAKTIONEN”: SOCIALIST HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE
TO VIETNAM

Over the last decade, there has been an explosion of academic interest in humanitarianism and its attendant forms of governmentality. The emergence of a “humanitarian sensibility,” which aspires to end human suffering and recognize the equality of all human beings, is often traced back to the abolition movement and the growth of industrial capitalism.¹² Much scholarship on the topic has subsequently privileged the role of Western actors undertaking humanitarian projects, usually in the Global South. More recently, Didier Fassin has made the important observation that humanitarian action, once considered “an exclusive prerogative of Western institutions and nations,” is now increasingly claimed by non-Western (for example, Islamic) organizations and states.¹³

However, these formulations overlook another critical lineage of humanitarianism: that of socialist states before the Soviet Union’s collapse. Though their techniques and ideologies of humanitarian assistance differed considerably from those of the West (indeed, they rejected the term “aid” because of its association with capitalist programs),¹⁴ the humanist goal was similar: to alleviate suffering and provide relief from natural disaster, poverty, and war. The socialist states, however, understood the causes of and solutions to human suffering very differently, shifting the focus away from the liberal, rights-bearing individual to broader social and economic reforms to emancipate humanity. As Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein remind us, humanitarianism can manifest itself as “several

things at once: a structure of feeling, a cluster of moral principles, a basis for ethical claims and political strategies, and a call for action.”¹⁵ Thinking about humanitarianisms in the plural, rather than as a universal regime, allows a deeper understanding of the motivations of East German experts to provide assistance to Vietnam, which were also driven by the desire to improve conditions for those who had been unjustly targeted by U.S. military aggression.

During the Cold War, all sides (including the nonaligned) used “development” as an ideological tool to maintain strategic political alliances and wield international influence; U.S. postwar recovery programs, such as the Marshall Plan, are well-known historical examples of such work. Lesser known are the development projects that socialist states engaged in with “kindred” nations. The frequent deployment of kinship metaphors forged empathetic bonds between socialist allies, which ostensibly transcended racial and national difference (social ills identified with the capitalist West), and lent a moral urgency to the collective struggle against violence and imperialist exploitation. The emphasis on non-hierarchical communities of common interest was key to the principle of solidarity that underpinned socialist humanitarianism,¹⁶ as was its rejection of charity as a bourgeois and paternalistic institution that sustained (rather than dismantled) inequality. The East German slogan, *Sozialismus ist Menschlichkeit* (Socialism is Humanity), embodied this ideological spirit. While not everyone embraced it, the slogan aimed to remind citizens of their responsibility to act globally in the name of humanity, and in fraternal solidarity with colonized peoples in the Third World.

Both state and non-state actors took up the notion of solidarity with liberation movements and postcolonial governments. Following the defeat of the French in 1954, for example, the GDR provided the newly independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam) with military aid: weapons, training and equipment; this support continued during the war with the United States. Under the banner of *Solidarität hilft siegen* (Solidarity brings victory), East Germans vehemently opposed the war. Citizens of all ages were encouraged to express their support for the “heroic Vietnamese” in their “struggle against American imperialism.” Citizen-initiated and government-supported *Solidaritätsaktionen* (solidarity actions) included children’s protest letters addressed to Washington, DC; anti-war demonstrations; food banks; blood drives; information sessions;

bazaars; and events to raise donations for the “solidarity fund.”¹⁷ The press covered such activities extensively. And while some citizens felt such actions to be socially compulsory (such as contributing to fund drives at state enterprises or schools), others felt passionate about creating a *sozialistisches Bruderland*—a socialist brotherland in Vietnam.

In January 1973, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the GDR shifted its focus to national reconstruction at the request of Hanoi. It was not the only country to do so. Much of the communist world pledged recovery assistance to the Vietnamese government, whose infrastructure was in ruins after a decade of fierce bombing. This new stage widened cooperation between socialist countries and across a range of infrastructure sectors. In the GDR, postwar aid led to a number of bilateral agreements between Berlin and Hanoi that outlined plans for mutual assistance (such as medical equipment in exchange for agricultural exports); “solidarity donations” to humanitarian projects; and—most ambitiously—the design and reconstruction of the city of Vinh, capital of Nghệ An province.

A strategic port and industrial center in north-central Vietnam, Vinh had been the target of recurrent aerial attacks by the United States, which dropped more than two hundred fifty thousand tons of ordnance on the city between August 1964 and January 1973.¹⁸ Residents, and especially children, were ordered to evacuate to the surrounding mountainous regions. By the end of the air war, the city lay in ruins; according to official statistics, an estimated 8,851 structures had been demolished.¹⁹ Upon arriving in the leveled city, one GDR expert recalled thinking that “Vinh was fully destroyed, but not yet dead.” Consequently, from 1974 to 1980, a massive reconstruction project—financed and executed by the GDR in cooperation with Vietnam—brought the city “back to life.” Reconstruction transformed the devastated landscape into a modern industrial center with an advanced material and technological infrastructure, including new and rebuilt factories, electric lines, sewer systems, schools, parks, a stadium and central market. Construction of the *Wohnkomplex*, or micro-district of Quang Trung, was the largest and most challenging undertaking; the complex went on to house approximately eight thousand residents in 22 five-story apartment blocks—close to 15 percent of the city’s population, who had been left homeless by the air war.²⁰

By the close of the project, more than two hundred GDR specialists had worked in some capacity on Vinh’s reconstruction. They were mostly

men, although a handful of their wives served in nontechnical, clerical roles like kitchen managers and receptionists. Though chief architects and planners were recruited, lower-level experts applied for positions advertised at their state enterprises in the GDR. The selected specialists represented a broad range of expertise, from city planning to carpentry to mechanics. They traveled to Vietnam on two-year, renewable contracts, in cohorts of up to forty. Some stayed for more than one term, attracted by the task at hand and the money they earned (a *Zuschlag* in addition to their standard salary). Although they lived and ate separately (dining on imported German food), GDR experts worked closely with Vietnamese specialists and brigades of skilled workers. Their goal was not only to rebuild Vinh's urban infrastructure but to engineer a new and prosperous socialist society.

RETURN TO VIETNAM

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States in 1995, postwar return journeys to Vietnam have become increasingly common for those Americans whose histories are intricately woven with the war. Memoirs by overseas Vietnamese, former war correspondents and Vietnam veterans explore the complex emotional experiences of returning to a place of tremendous loss—of homeland, life, youth, property, family, innocence and identity.²¹ Frequently, these memory trips are restorative healing journeys, motivated by the desire for renewal and reconciliation, atonement and understanding.²² Underlying the narrative voice in these memoirs is often a passionate longing to witness peacetime, settle past injustices, and resolve the trauma and grief that persist across time and space.

On the other hand, for GDR experts on the “winning side,” the war was as conceivably productive as it was forcefully destructive. Vietnam provided a canvas for urban experimentation, and for building a socialist utopian future upon the ruins of an apocalyptic past. Although their lives were also marked by grueling hardships (traveling from Hanoi to Vinh across rivers without bridges), dangers (unexploded ordnance), shortages (especially of certain foods) and loss (including one colleague who died by electrocution), the GDR experts were motivated by the gratification of working *against*, rather than *within*, the machinations of U.S. imperialism.

Remorse and animosity were thus absent, contrary to the sentiments of many American returnees. There is, however, one important intersection: returning GDR experts were similarly clouded by apprehension and driven by analogous questions of what had become of war-torn Vietnam—in particular, of the city of Vinh.

I first met with a group of GDR experts in the summer of 2006, in a café along the Spree River in Berlin. During this meeting, I learned of a planned return trip—a *Vietnam-Reise*. At this initial meeting, my research intrigued the aging men, though they were somewhat wary of my intentions: Why would an American ethnographer (from a capitalist country, one pointed out) be interested in their disregarded (socialist) story? Their reaction was prompted by the tense politics of memory in unified Germany, which tended to treat their work dismissively (for example, by representing the housing estate as a “failed experiment”). However, my long-term fieldwork in Vietnam and familiarity with Nghệ An eventually won me acceptance among these new research respondents, who came to see that I was genuinely interested in their lives and work experiences abroad. Even more importantly, they learned that we shared common interests and acquaintances in Vinh.²³

As planned, one year later, in November 2007, a delegation of former GDR experts returned to Vietnam, to the decimated city they had helped to rebuild. This official visit happened at the invitation of the provincial People’s Committee of Nghệ An, in cooperation with the German-Vietnamese Association in Berlin. Ten experts born between 1929 and 1943 made the two-week journey. While returnees covered their own airfare, the province paid for accommodation, local travel, and meals. “We were guests of the provincial government,” one participant explained. Although the official reason for the visit, as outlined in the letter sent to the ten invitees from Vinh, was to thank the experts for their years of support (“ein Dank für die Unterstützung”), the government officials, as I demonstrate below, had more complex intentions.

Also complex were the tensions that developed between those who were selected to make the trip and those who were not.²⁴ The chairman of the German-Vietnamese Association in Berlin carried out the selection process, with the goal of choosing a diverse group of specialists. The experts included architects and urban planners, construction engineers, a port and shipping expert, a carpenter, a teacher and school curriculum

planner, a machinery technician, quarry and cement factory supervisors, and a cook (wife of one of the engineers). Experts represented various cohorts spanning the seven-year reconstruction project—including from the earliest and last groups sent to Vinh. The length of their assignments had varied between one and five years, with a two-year average. One returnee explained how the hierarchy of experts reflected the choice of invitees: the master planners had held high positions in the government (i.e., in ministries), while the lower-level experts who had stayed on in Vinh for much longer had not. It was the latter group who had forged close relationships with the residents of Vinh, and thus they were invited back.²⁵ A few had already traveled to Vietnam as tourists in the early 2000s;²⁶ others had never returned.

In what follows, I analyze the embodied meanings and sentiments attached to this post–Cold War visit for both Germans and Vietnamese, the first official reunion after the dissolution of the GDR and implementation of Vietnamese economic reforms. I argue that the emotional intensities returnees expressed cannot be disconnected from their affective experience of place and their sense of reemplacement during visits to former work sites. Grappling with a bygone era of “belonging” and their own post-unification dislocation, these humanitarians became “place-makers,” in Keith Basso’s sense of the term:²⁷ remembering and reinvesting emotional energy into historical landscapes associated with a particular temporality of objects, ideals, attachments, socialities and identities from the past. While I was not able to join the delegation on their journey, I did conduct interviews with them in Germany afterwards. An architect also presented me with his detailed daily travelogue (see below). Additionally, during my fieldwork in Vinh in 2010–11, I interviewed officials and residents connected to the delegation’s visit. As I demonstrate below, the postsocialist setting for the reunion prompted the GDR experts to reevaluate the past and its attendant urban forms. It moreover repositioned their subjectivity, which was shaped by former socialist and emerging capitalist relationships (often in tension) with both Vietnam and Germany.

POSTSOCIALIST RECONNECTIONS: THE TOUR

The delegation's itinerary focused on reconnecting the experts with the places they had helped to rebuild during their assignment in Vietnam, as well as with the people who inhabit(ed) those spaces. As such, their agenda took them to largely non-touristic locations that were off the beaten memory path for international visitors. American veterans also commonly return to places of deeply sensorial or affective memory—including former military bases and battle sites—where sights, sounds and smells revive past sentiments.²⁸ However, many of these destinations have been incorporated into the larger repertoire of war tourist attractions, such as Khe Sanh Combat Base, one of the highlights of the “DMZ Tour” in the province of Quảng Trị.²⁹ On the other hand, the GDR delegation's visits to banal, everyday sites of work and dwelling forged distinct “place-worlds,” which revived (and “brought into being”) particular versions of the past in a post-Cold War present, through recounted and reencountered stories and memories.³⁰ As an engaged act of place making, the 2007 tour—outlined below—became a “venerable means of *doing* human history,” through the reembodyment and performance of lost or fragmented subjectivities.³¹

- November 1–2 Flight from Frankfurt to Ho Chi Minh City; transfer to flight to Hanoi
- November 3 Travel by road to Vinh, late arrival at 4 pm; welcome dinner; walking tour of Quang Trung block housing
- November 4 Morning travel to Kim Liên, birthplace of Hồ Chí Minh; afternoon visit to former stone quarry, brick and cement factories (now privatized), new bridge over Blue River, Nguyễn Du's house (the “Goethe” of Vietnam), and Quyết Mountain viewing station overlooking the city
- November 5 Morning visit to the pioneer club for children's cultural performance; afternoon trip to the Vietnam-Germany vocational school; return to Quang Trung housing with stopover at Tecco tower eighteenth floor café [site of former housing Block C1]; sumptuous dinner with officials in a new hotel

- November 6 Morning trip to cotton mill (now privatized), machine repair plant, and private visit with former chief translator; afternoon trip to Cửa Lò beach followed by dinner with Cửa Lò district authorities
- November 7 Visit to local cemetery to lay wreath at grave of former colleague (the District Director of Construction) and to participate with family members in the ritual disinterment of his remains;³² dinner with former colleagues; visit to electronics market and to former guesthouse inhabited during assignment
- November 8 Morning visit to the Urban Planning Institute followed by appointment with City Council to discuss infrastructure development; tour of new industrial area and new Western-standard resort on the coast; authentic Vietnamese dinner
- November 9 Field trip: early departure for Lao border, travel through the jungle and small ethnic minority villages to the former Hồ Chí Minh trail—now a highway; tour of National Park established with support of the European Commission; boat ride along the border
- November 10 Morning photo tour of Vinh to former and new construction sites; visit to water sanitation plant; afternoon: official meeting with provincial authorities to discuss German investment and support for developing city
- November 11 Departure from Vinh at 8am; travel by road to Hạ Long Bay, arrival 6 pm
- November 12 Hạ Long Bay
- November 13 Afternoon return to Hanoi with brief stop at martyr's temple along the way; evening stroll around Hanoi's central lake
- November 14 Morning trip to Tam Đảo National Park in the mountains (former French colonial resort); stop at local pagoda; afternoon meeting with Deputy at

- the Ministry of Construction, a former colleague from Vinh
- November 15 Visit with German credit organization; afternoon shopping and visit to Art Museum; late evening flight back to Frankfurt
- November 16 6 am arrival in Frankfurt

Though many of these veterans had maintained their engagement with Vietnamese culture over the years, by going out for the occasional bowl of *phở* noodles or attending cultural events at the “Viet Haus” in Berlin,³³ for the majority of participants, the 2007 trip offered the first opportunity to return to Vietnam. Most of the experts had known the country as desperately poor and war-ravaged, a nation whose people were high in spirit but great in need. They had been young when they had arrived in Vinh in the 1970s, mostly in their mid-thirties, and they had gone for a variety of reasons—adventure, money, or the opportunity to travel. Yet their political and humanitarian motivations had also bound them together. They had seen their work as serving a just cause in an unjust war, and had been enthusiastic about applying their skills in the service of anti-imperialism. They had returned to East Germany with deep feelings of empathy and connection with the people of Vietnam (and with one another),³⁴ having experienced extraordinary moments together during the war (for the early cohorts) and having worked collaboratively to rebuild the city.³⁵

Because experts were usually on rotating two-year contracts, many had left Vinh before the reconstruction project was completed. The official visit thus gave them their first opportunity to see their work in its finished state. Upon their return, they viewed firsthand the legacies of GDR assistance in Vinh, from German-speaking residents (former graduate students or contract workers) to the urban infrastructure they had helped to rebuild, including the housing estate where more than half the original residents still reside. However, privatization (of factories, for example), as noted in the travelogue, and a new service infrastructure catering to an emerging consumer class (thus the “opulent dinner” with officials) threatened to remove these material reminders of past “socialist friendships” from the urban landscape.³⁶

The delegates also observed how Vietnam had changed since reunification. Not unlike U.S. veterans, whose healing journeys have been closely tied to witnessing peace and landscape regeneration,³⁷ the German experts expressed astonishment and relief at the extent of the country's recovery. "It's amazing that Vietnam is now an international tourist destination!" one delegation member declared, reacting to the nonstop flight between Frankfurt and Ho Chi Minh City with Vietnam Airlines. That flight made a stark contrast to travel on Interflug in the 1970s, from Berlin to Hanoi via Moscow and Karachi: a trip that had once taken two days was now a mere ten hours. Contrasts between "then" and "now" peppered the experts' observations of post-reform Vietnam.³⁸ In the words of one man: "I first returned to Vinh in 1992, and at that time Vinh was still war-ravaged and practically unchanged.³⁹ [But now] the city is full of new buildings, and old wounds, like bomb craters, are no longer visible." Bodies appeared healthier, and people happier. Women, in particular, seemed to pay more attention to beauty and fashion trends: "Tight jeans are in, loose pantaloons out!" a returnee laughed, referring to the standard and simple Vietnamese dress of the 1970s. Others observed cultural continuities in the face of rapid urban change: "Motorbikes and cars have replaced bicycles as the primary mode of transportation, but traffic is just as disorderly as ever!" Such comments suggested that capitalism (or "market socialism," as it is referred to in Vietnam) and cosmopolitan urbanization had significantly changed the sociocultural and built landscape of the city.

Reflections on the bonds of friendship dominated the experts' accounts of their return journeys. They were excited to reunite with old friends, both German and Vietnamese, many of whom they had not seen in more than thirty years. "What a great joy to see them again! [*große Wiedersehensfreude!*]" the architect wrote in his travelogue, upon meeting fellow delegates on the train to Frankfurt, whom he had not seen since before the dissolution of the GDR. Several of the experts brought their wives on the trip to introduce them to the city that had profoundly shaped their personal and professional lives.⁴⁰

Also meaningful was the weeklong tour that officials organized for the experts, which conjoined visits to locally important tourist sites (such as Hồ Chí Minh's birth village of Kim Liên) with those to industrial and cultural infrastructure sites that signified the main achievements of the GDR's urban recovery work. At the stone quarry, brick factory, cement

plant, vocational school, youth house, seaport and public housing estate, the German experts were welcomed warmly and treated like celebrities, as they met with old and new colleagues, workers and residents. Upon their return to Germany, the men reflected on the unexpected *tiefe Dankbarkeit* (deep gratitude) they encountered as they toured Vinh. For the construction engineer who had been responsible for the housing blocks, this reaction was transformative. During a group interview, his voice wavered with emotion: “I never imagined our work had such an effect on the population. It was incredible; they thanked us everywhere we went.” He then turned to his former superior, who had not been invited to join the delegation. “Dr. G., you really should go back if you can afford to. It will change your life. It was so meaningful to see the city again and to hear people express their gratitude. I had no idea our work was so appreciated.”

For returnees, place-making thus involved mutually generative acts of remembrance with the residents of Vinh, of “making present the past”⁴¹ to re-confer status and meaning on the built environment, the product of their labor. Seeing the Vietnamese “extremely proud of [their] rebuilt city,” as one Vinh resident declared, drawing on her own affective memory of working with GDR experts, served to renew relationships and revive past (pre-unification) subjectivities. As the experts were pleasantly surprised to learn during their visit, GDR technical and humanitarian assistance remained valued and recognized across Vinh.

THE VERSATILITY OF MEMORY: FROM “THĂM” TO “LÀM”

On November 14, 2007, the local press in Vietnam reported on the successful closing of the “visit” (*chuyến thăm*) and “work” (*làm việc*) of the delegation of German experts in Nghệ An province.⁴² This distinction between a sentiment-laden “visit” (East German experts returning to visit old friends) and an official “work trip” involving important business (in this case, with government representatives) reveals a dynamic spectrum of meaning and intent attached to the historical memory of Vinh’s reconstruction, as shaped and interpreted by differently positioned actors. For Germans, their “Vietnam-Reise”—the term used in interviews and travel documents, with *Reise* alluding to leisure and personal travel—was foremost an affective journey. The group understood the trip as a tourist expedition

that mixed sightseeing with emotion-laden visits with old colleagues at former work sites, and at no point inferred a *Dienstreise* (business trip). That provincial coffers generously covered travel costs was understood as a delayed act of gratitude—a gift made possible by the city’s slow but steady economic growth over recent years of market reform. While the work meeting with party officials did surface in post-visit discussions—which I address below—on the whole, it was almost an afterthought in delegation members’ recollections, and second to the pleasure of reconnecting with the city and its residents.

Vietnamese residents in Vinh reacted similarly. Working together in a high-risk construction zone, scattered with unexploded ordnance, the East Germans and Vietnamese had developed a strong camaraderie. The delegation’s visit thus marked a sentimental occasion for the latter, and particularly for older generations who had suffered through years of aerial bombing and then arduous reconstruction. Female bricklayers fondly recollected the *người nước ngoài* (foreigners) bicycling around the city in shorts, a sight they found both amusing and embarrassing. Translators recalled the cigarettes that GDR experts had slipped them on the sly. Adults remembered receiving candy as children.

The local press treated the delegation like returning heroes. They greeted the group upon arrival, then followed them around with cameras, featuring their visits to urban landmarks on TV. A retired architect, who had trained in the GDR and served as a chief Vietnamese expert during reconstruction, explained why this was the case (moving effortlessly between Vietnamese and German):⁴³

Architect: Meeting the German experts again was very moving [*cảm động*] for us. It was such a joyful reunion! After thirty years a special relationship remains. The Germans saw firsthand the hardships [*Schwierigkeiten*] that residents of Vinh endured. Our friendship [*Freundschaft*] continues to this day. We will never forget [*không thể quên được*] the huge contribution they made to our city.

Author: Why was the delegation invited to return to Vinh?

Architect: Because of the memories [*kỷ niệm xưa*] we share. *Man vergisst nicht die Mühe und Arbeit der Zusammenarbeit* [One can never forget the effort and labor of our collaboration]. We also wanted the experts to see how our city has grown. So we took them to the top

of a high-rise tower.⁴⁴ They were so impressed [*sehr beeindruckt*] with the new landscape! The last time they were in Vinh there was nothing to see. It was quite stirring for them; they were just astonished at how things had changed.

For both sides, the reunion triggered nostalgic memories of affective solidarities, even as they recalibrated the past—forgetting, for example, the intermittent tensions that had surfaced during the process of urban planning.⁴⁵

And yet many party officials, particularly those from other provinces or rural areas, did not have the same connection to the socialist internationalism that had laid the material foundation of postwar Vinh. For these contemporary state actors, the city's invitation was less a *gratitude* reunion tour (a “visit”) than a speculative business opportunity. Officials were frank that their motives were more economic than sentimental, and that their primary concern was to attract foreign investment to spur urban development—thus the visit to the high-rise café to showcase post-reform growth. The German experts, with their attachments to Vinh and historical commitment to “gifting” aid, were logical candidates for securing additional investment. In an interview, a high-ranking municipal official insisted that the decision to invite the delegation had been made on practical grounds: who else could the city call upon to help revitalize Vinh?

In his seminal work, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen calls for a comprehensive approach to the study of memory.⁴⁶ He asks that such studies move beyond conventional analyses of representations of the past, to think critically about memory's role in shaping and expressing future aspirations. In Vinh, utopian memory guided state actors in their present actions, which were likewise informed by utilitarian visions of urban futurity. That officials drew upon the province's unique global socialist history in their efforts to (re)build a modern and prosperous city attests to the versatility of memory—in this case, of Vinh's destruction and collective rebuilding.

Yet this new urban imaginary, propelled by the desire for rapid urban growth, has deviated significantly from the postwar emphasis on the egalitarian distribution of wealth, infrastructure and services. Vinh's contemporary reputation as an aesthetically unappealing and economically depressed city, compared with booming, affluent urban centers elsewhere

in Vietnam, contrasts sharply with its former position as a “model” for Vietnamese urban planning. With the steady deterioration of its material infrastructure—symbolized by rows of decaying block housing targeted for demolition and redevelopment—the central party has called for a market-oriented modernization of the cityscape. In tandem with neoliberal approaches to urban development that advocate privatization and capital accumulation, authorities revived, somewhat ironically, socialist discourses of “friendship” and “assistance” to solicit support for the 2020 master plan. As newspapers recounted, the delegation’s week of visits and sightseeing concluded with a day of formal work, and a request by provincial authorities for increased collaboration and humanitarian aid. With the help of former comrades, Vinh could now become a prosperous commercial city.⁴⁷

AMBIVALENT PARTNERSHIPS

The German experts met with ambivalence these solicitations for private investment in Vinh. Most were not in a position to provide aid or counsel, given their own professional displacements after German reunification, when layoffs or early retirements were commonplace. Officials in Vinh were largely incognizant of the impacts that postsocialist transformation had had on East Germans, including their relative lack of wealth and power in reunified Germany and the general and persistent sense of marginalization. Such experiences contrasted with the officials’ own social and political continuity under Vietnamese market socialism, making it difficult to realize that though the delegates may have desired to help, they were generally not in a financial position to do so.

Moreover, the German experts were largely indifferent about collaborating with the Vietnamese state to further market-oriented planning, when similar changes had also reconfigured the urban landscape of East Germany. One delegate in particular expressed concern over these market developments, during an interview at his office back in Germany:

I’m a socialist at heart and strongly support providing affordable housing for the poor. I agree that the buildings [the block housing] are old and need to be rebuilt, but not with expensive condominiums that will displace the elderly and poor residents from their homes.

Visits to new city landmarks, such as the café on the eighteenth floor of the tallest building in Vinh (at the time), thus provoked ambivalent feelings about progress, despite the spectacular views it afforded. While the modern high-rise and its adjacent twin signified economic growth and material well-being, such urban “development” had forced evictions and relocations three years before the Germans’ visit, with the demolition of housing Block C1. Such acts provoked critical questions among the returnees about the benefits of the urban renewal in which they had been invited to invest.

Decentralized (i.e., non-state) requests for aid, however, engendered a different response. After returning to Germany, one retiree received an email from a former colleague, with whom he had reunited during the trip, requesting support. Although living off a small pension in a three-room apartment, he was enthusiastic to offer assistance, though it remained unclear how much and what type of support (monetary or advisory) was needed at his former work site—a college struggling to achieve economic self-sufficiency with diminishing state subsidies.

“My heart still beats for Vietnam and the city of Vinh,” he pined as we pored over his photographs of the college, while his wife—who was more skeptical about the email—looked on. For this expert, the prospect of providing another cycle of aid gave new affective force to his memories, anchored to a specific time and place, thus making the work of memory a moral imperative rather than a “history without discernible applications.”⁴⁸ As such, the tour was not just a means to remembering—that is, it did not simply fulfill a nostalgic desire to see Vietnam and its people one more time. Here, memory was more generative than reflective, and marked the beginning of a postsocialist relationship between individuals (rather than with the state), whose future collaboration drew on the affective socialities and attachments of the past.

CONCLUSION: THE AFTERLIFE OF COLD WAR MEMORY

The return of socialist humanitarian allies as tourists to Vietnam raises a number of complex issues about Cold War memory and its role in a new global order. The divisions and reunifications of both Germany (East-West) and Vietnam (North-South) have left traces on the landscape of divided

memories and disparate experiences within and across these countries.⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that southern Vietnamese refugees (“boat people”) migrated to West Germany, and (mostly) northern “contract workers” went to East Germany—or that these groups remain largely alienated from one another today, each shaped by their own histories of war and postwar trauma.⁵⁰ For the East German experts, embroiled in contested memory politics at home, the journey to Vietnam generated memory work at multiple registers across former Cold War divisions: reviving shared sentiments of solidarity and reattributing status and value to their work. In many ways, returning to Vinh became as much about negotiating GDR memory in reunified Germany as it was about memories of the GDR in Vietnam.

Andreas Huyssen has observed that memory discourse in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, “seemed to be haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism.”⁵¹ As I have demonstrated, the trauma of social, economic, and political displacement after the collapse of socialism made the *Vietnam-Reise* all the more meaningful for the GDR experts. The trip allowed delegates to recuperate the affect of a bygone era—from the deep bonds of collegiality and friendship to a renewed sense of pride in their work. Yet their journey was not driven by a longing to return to the days of the GDR, nor was it a novel form of *Ostalgie*—nostalgia for the East. The experts did not fetishize the West and its material comforts, a position that scholars of *Ostalgie* take as the starting point for GDR aspirations.⁵² Rather, their social worlds and global imaginaries went beyond East/West, socialist/capitalist geographies that underlie assumptions about *Ostalgie*. Moreover, the return visit signaled something less material than scholarship on *Ostalgie* permits: the desire to return to *emotional* attachments of the past, to the human relationships, forms of validation, and dignity they once felt.⁵³ The journey to Vinh was thus a symbolic return to the status of recognized and respected technician, whose specialized skills, knowledge, and commitment to humanitarian assistance had helped heal a decimated cityscape for a displaced people that had returned from evacuation and found only ruins.

NOTES

Research for this article was supported by Fulbright-Hays, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), the UC Pacific Rim Research Program and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The author wishes to thank Geoff White, Eveline Buchheim, Jim Clifford and the reviewers at *History & Memory* for their valuable suggestions and feedback on earlier drafts.

1. Research for this article is based on several years of ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam, between 1999 and 2012, in Hanoi and Vinh City. Additional interviews and archival research were carried out in Germany in 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2012.

2. Dietmar Ratsch and Arek Gielnik, dirs., *Eislimonade für Hong Li* (Filmakademie Ludwigsburg/FilmPOOL, 2000).

3. Li Xiaobing, *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian and Russian Veterans* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010). Li argues that between 1965 and 1970 more than 320,000 Chinese forces served clandestinely in Vietnam (218). Likewise, though no official records in Russia have been released to date, Li estimates that more than 4,000 Soviet military personnel served during the war (66). On account of their undisclosed status, these men are not officially recognized as “veterans” in the Russian Federation.

4. During the war, photography and documentary film were considered important political weapons in the fight against imperialism. “Cultural soldiers” used images to convey the tremendous scope of the war’s devastation to a wider audience and to articulate their anti-imperialist sentiments of solidarity and sympathy with the Third World. Trần Kim Thành, “Hội thảo Điện ảnh Quốc tế về Chiến tranh—Hoà bình” (International Film Conference on War and Peace), *Nghệ thuật Điện ảnh* (Cinematic Arts) 1, no. 57 (1987): 34; Christina Schwenkel, “‘The Camera Was My Weapon’: News Production and Representation of War in Vietnam,” in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 93.

5. For example, women who fought on the Hồ Chí Minh trail with the youth brigade or veterans of the armed forces of the defeated Republic of Vietnam who receive no state benefits and whose families have long been subjected to discriminatory policies. See, respectively, Karen Gottschang Turner with Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: Wiley, 1999); Christina Schwenkel, “The Ambivalence of Reconciliation in Contemporary Vietnamese Memoryscapes” in Scott Laderman and Edwin Martini, eds., *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

6. Meredith Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 6.

7. The most well-known Vietnamese memoirs by authors such as Báo Ninh, Dương Thu Hương, and Đặng Thùy Trâm—all three of which have been translated into English—offer deeply intimate, anti-heroic portrayals of the extreme hardship suffered during years on the battlefield. See Báo Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, trans. Phan Thanh Hao (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993); Dương Thu Hương, *Novel without a Name*, trans. Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson (New York: Penguin, 1996); and Đặng Thùy Trâm, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*, trans. Andrew X. Pham (New York: Random House, 2007).

8. Christina Schwenkel, “Recombinant History: Transnational Practices of Memory and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Vietnam” *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (Feb. 2006): 3–30.

9. Svetlana Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern* (New York: Architectural Press, 2008).

10. Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, “Introduction: Beyond Methodological Nationalism,” in Cesari and Rigney, eds., *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 8–9.

11. Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 28–31.

12. Thomas L. Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility,” pt. 1, *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 339–61; and pt. 2, *ibid.*, 90, no. 3 (June 1985): 547–66.

13. Didier Fassin, “Inequality of Lives, Hierarchies of Humanity: Moral Commitments and Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarianism,” in Ilana Feldman and Mariam Ticktin, eds., *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 239.

14. Jude Howell, “The End of an Era: The Rise and Fall of GDR Aid,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, no. 2 (1994): 305–28.

15. Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein, “An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism,” in Bornstein and Redfield, eds., *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2010), 17.

16. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

17. Information on “solidarity actions” was gathered from File 7409, Văn Phòng Chính Phủ 1957–1995, at the Vietnam National Archives III in Hanoi; the Hoover Archives at Stanford University; and File DY24 8760 at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin.

18. Phạm Xuân Cần and Bùi Đình Sâm, *Lịch sử thành phố Vinh, 1945–1975* (History of Vinh City, 1945–1975) (Vinh: Nghệ An, 2003), 217.

19. According to the District People’s Committee, this figure included 141 enterprises, 13 schools, 4 hospitals and 8,663 houses and buildings. District People’s Committee, *Lịch sử khu Quang Trung, Thành phố Vinh* (History of Quang Trung District, Vinh City) (Vinh: Nghệ An Press, 2007), 89.

20. Christina Schwenkel, “Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam,” *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (May 2013): 252–77. The original design had called for 36 five-story buildings to house more than 15,000 preferential residents (revolutionary cadres and workers). However, due to GDR material and financial constraints, only half of the plan had been completed by the close of the project in 1980.

21. See, for example, Andrew X. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2000); David Lamb, *Vietnam, Now: Reporter Returns* (New York: Perseus, 2003); Larry Heinemann, *Black Virgin Mountain: A Return to Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

22. For more on the healing journeys of U.S. veterans who return to Vietnam, see Schwenkel, *The American War*, chap. 1.

23. These common acquaintances in Vinh were also research respondents at my field site. Several of the German experts, I should note, were excited to have someone with whom they could talk about Vietnam and share their memories (which included bringing out old photographs and souvenirs).

24. Tensions surfaced during group interviews, when information about the return trip came out.

25. Clearly there were other, more tacit political concerns guiding the selection process and the exclusion of former high-ranking GDR government employees from the trip, though interviewees were careful about how they inferred this.

26. A group of eleven Germans (former experts and their wives) traveled to Vietnam as tourists in 2005. When Vietnamese colleagues heard they were in the country, they invited the group to spend a few days in Vinh. One expert, who was invited back with the official delegation in 2007, speculated in an interview that this unofficial 2005 visit had spurred the 2007 invitation, after officials realized that the Germans had the desire—and means—to return.

27. Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 6.

28. The French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot coined the term “affective memory” in 1894 to refer to the *reviviscence*, or revivability, of past affections and emotions of pain, pleasure or ambivalence. Edward Bradford Titchener, “Affective

Memory,” *Philosophical Review* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 1895): 65–66. Here, I am interested in the temporality and spatiality of affective memory work.

29. Schwenkel, “The Ambivalence of Reconciliation.”

30. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 6.

31. *Ibid.*, 7. This itinerary is adapted from a travelogue that one of the returnees provided to me. For consistency, I have added diacritics to Vietnamese names and places.

32. This refers to a secondary burial practice, in which bones are exhumed after three or more years, washed, and carefully arranged in a smaller coffin or urn before they are reinterred in a final burial spot. For details on this ritual and its cultural significance, see Shawn Kingsley Malarney, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 142–44.

33. Several interviews took place at the Viet Haus in Berlin, at the request of experts who wanted to drink “Vietnamese-style coffee” (individually filtered coffee with condensed milk).

34. For example, one cohort continues to hold annual *Vietnamtreffen* reunions in cities across the former GDR.

35. For example, two interviewees recollected the celebrations that erupted on April 30, 1975, as news of the end of the war spread across the city. They traveled with elated crowds to the top of the city’s sacred Quỳt mountain to hoist the national flag and to watch the fireworks that took place that evening. This shared experience was important to the sense of solidarity that interviewees expressed.

36. On the demolition of Block C1 in the housing estate and its replacement with two condominium towers, see Christina Schwenkel, “Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam,” *positions: asia critique* 20, no. 2 (May 2012): 437–70.

37. Schwenkel, *American War*, 31–33.

38. Economic reforms, called *Đổi mới* in Vietnam, were introduced in 1986. In contrast to rapidly improving conditions in the more prosperous metropolises of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, in smaller and poorer cities like Vinh, living standards did not rise markedly until more than a decade later.

39. To clarify, the specialist is referring to areas of the city, such as the university and its bombed dormitory, that were beyond the reach of the reconstruction project, which focused primarily on material and industrial infrastructure, such as the construction of housing and factories.

40. For example, one participant went on to write his PhD dissertation about Vietnam, while another applied his experience and knowledge of Vinh to teaching courses on construction in tropical, developing countries.

41. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

42. Hải Ninh and Đình Lam, “Đoàn chuyên gia CHLB Đức kết thúc tốt đẹp chuyến thăm và làm việc tại Nghệ An” (German delegation of experts successful wraps up its visit and work in Nghệ An), *Lao Động Nghệ An* (The Nghệ An Worker), November 14, 2007, 2

43. Interview in Vinh City, August 20, 2009.

44. This eighteen-story high-rise, whose top-floor café commands sweeping views of the city, replaced the demolished Building C2 in the housing estate.

45. For example, Vietnamese planners and residents felt that the design of apartments in the housing blocks was at odds with architectural principles of *feng shui* (*phong thủy*), which hinged on proper spatiality for healthy living and harmonious human-environment relations.

46. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*.

47. Hải and Đình, “German delegation”; Trâm Anh, “Lãnh đạo tỉnh làm việc với Đoàn cựu chuyên gia Đức” (Provincial leaders work with the delegation of former experts), *Báo Nghệ An* (Nghệ An News), November 12, 2007, 1.

48. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 33.

49. I am grateful to Geoff White for encouraging me to develop this point.

50. Gertrud Hüwelmeier, “Spirits in the Marketplace: Transnational Networks of Vietnamese Migrants in Berlin,” in Michael Peter Smith and John Eade, eds., *Transnational Ties: Cities, Identities, and Migrations* (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 131–44.

51. Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 8.

52. See, for example, Daphne Berdahl, “‘(N)Ostalgic’ for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things,” *Ethnos* 64, no. 2 (1999): 192–211; Jonathan Bach, “‘The Taste Remains’: Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 545–56; Martin Blum, “Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 229–53; Dominic Boyer, “*Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 361–81; Milena Veenis, “Consumption in East Germany: The Seduction and Betrayal of Things,” *Journal of Material Culture* 4, no. 1 (March 1999): 79–112.

53. Likewise, Vietnamese tend to reminisce about the past as a time of deeper and more meaningful relationships. After attending an exhibit on the postwar subsidy era at the Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi with friends in 2007, one woman commented: “At that time, when the state provided us with everything, we didn’t have to lock our doors or worry about thieves. We were equal in our poverty and had nothing to steal. Now things are different. You cannot trust people like we did then.” When I asked her whether things were better or worse now, she replied, “Better of course! We now have food to eat!” On other analyses

of the exhibit, see Ken MacLean, “The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Vietnam during the Subsidy Period (1975–86),” *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (Oct. 2008): 281–303; and Margaret Barnhill Bodemer, “Museums, Ethnology and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Vietnam” (PhD diss., University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, 2010), chap. 7.

CHRISTINA SCHWENKEL is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California Riverside. She is the author of *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Indiana University Press 2009) and a co-edited special issue of *positions: asia critique* (with Ann Marie Leshkovich) on “Neoliberalism in Vietnam” (2012). Her current work examines socialist urban planning and postwar reconstruction of Vinh City with the technical and financial assistance of East Germany. (cschwenk@ucr.edu)