

Wars in Review:

Subaltern Methodologies in Conflict Studies

Abstract

This essay reviews four disparate studies on war narratives: 'Right to Mourn' by Suhi Choi (2019), 'Fly Until You Die' by Chia Youyee Vang (2019), 'Soldiers in Revolt' by Maggie Dwyer (2018), 'Breaking the Binaries in Security Studies' by Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah (2019). The studies take a 'view-from-below' approach and build new theoretical frameworks that not only expose 'the price of war', but also investigate how 'bottom-up' subjects view their place and participation in the conflict and resist over-arching homogenous interpretations. The studies respectively focus on post-war remembrance in South Korea, oral histories of Hmong pilots, mutinying in West African states, and the experiences of female combatants in the Israeli Defence Forces. Although dissimilar in terms of geographic spaces, actors and even methodology, the authors all commonly challenge established binaries within conflict studies that assume a separation of the 'military' and the 'civilian', the prevalence of power-hierarchies within armed forces, and the supposed passiveness of powerless actors in conflict. This essay reviews these books as not individual publications that contribute to the literature of their own disciplines, but as interactive theoretical frameworks that not only dispute prevailing theories of war but also present new understandings on how these narratives interrelate.

Keywords: Conflict Studies; Military Histories; Modern Warfare

Studies Reviewed

Choi, S. (2019). *Right to Mourn: Trauma, Empathy, and Korean War Memorials*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dwyer, M. (2018). *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harel-Shalev, A., & Daphna-Tekoah, S. (2019). *Breaking the Binaries in Security Studies: A Gendered Analysis of Women in Combat*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vang, C. Y. (2019). *Fly Until You Die: An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Introduction

War is chaotic, to say the least. Incalculable loss of life and property, large-scale displacements, and the irrevocable reverberations of trauma have characterised warfare of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This ‘total’ scale of destruction has, unsurprisingly, been the focus of many academic studies within the social and medical sciences. Social sciences have by and large produced works on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of warfare, expanding the scope of military histories and birthing the field of Conflict and Security Studies. Within prevailing frameworks, top-down approaches are employed that build narratives of war from the vantage point of individual actors (leaders, diplomats, generals), state actors (militaries, governments, judiciaries), and international actors (peacekeepers, third-party negotiators, humanitarians). In recent years the field has expanded to include studies of non-state or anti-state organisations such as terrorist groups and criminal syndicates. However, such top-down frameworks categorise participants in neat spheres of actors and non-actors (subservient and/or impuissant) – i.e. those who actively participate in the war, and those to whom the war betides. Much of the twentieth-century literature in military histories and, subsequently, conflict studies relies on these frameworks which have, in turn, been conceived from primary sources produced and/or enabled by those in positions of authority – such as official archives (war plans, diplomatic files, intelligence reports etc), interviews/biographies of ‘key’ actors, photographic/video evidence etc. – military historians dub these as ‘official sources’. These narrations carry the burden of intentionality – who produced them, why, for whom? And for the authors reviewed in this essay, they provoke the following questions - is the view-from-above an authentic reflection of a war? Is the rank-and-file truly without agency? Is ‘masculinity’ a pre-requisite of military service? Can peace be declared/imposed – is ‘peace’ simply the absence of active conflict?

Using decentred approaches, the authors successfully produce ‘alternate’ accounts within their fields, challenging the prevailing literature that effectively damns the subaltern to obscurity.¹ In *Fly Until You Die* Chia Youyee Vang reconstructs the histories of Hmong pilots who participated in the Vietnam War and the Secret War in Laos on the US side. The Hmong pilots challenge the scholarly and popular amnesia over the participation of ethnic minorities in Cold War conflicts. Maggie Dwyer challenges the epistemology on mutinies in *Soldiers in Revolt*, analysing protests among the rank-and-file in West African militaries. Dwyer redefines the role of these mutineers and argues that they actively participate in the sustenance and disruption of security and insecurity within the State. Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah examine female Israeli combatants and successfully dismantle the perceived victimhood of women in war. In *Right to Mourn*, Suhi Choi looks beyond the immediate trauma of war and analyses its reverberations in the decades to come with her study on Korean war memorials and ‘suppressed mourners’.

But then, what is the purpose of this re-centring? As Dwyer posits, ‘...[this] knowledge exposes, through the narratives of soldiers, the price of war, occupation, and armed conflict—

¹ Coined by Antonio Gramsci, ‘subaltern’ refers to any class of people who are subjected to the hegemony of another powerful class.

they [soldiers] can effectively challenge the narratives of the state and of its political actors'.² Such examinations then bring in reconsiderations of the rigidity of established binary notions of war and peace, of 'agency' and perceived 'powerlessness', of separation of the 'civilian' and 'military' and, of the anonymous actors and their supposed compliance, resignation, and passivity.

Trauma and Remembrance

In *Right to Mourn* Suhi Choi pilgrimages three memorials of the Korean War (for the Yōsun, Jeju and No Gun Ri massacres) and examines how mourners, who for seven decades had to dismiss their loss for fear of political retribution, express their erstwhile incomplete grief – 'A regime that denies its own violence thus comes to fear mourning as a "political act", an instrument of "resistance to the regime".'³ To this group of 'suppressed mourners' Choi adds another group of, what she calls, 'empathic mourners', visitors with vivid or no association to the killings but who still attempt to participate in the grieving. She further investigates the complexity of this trauma within prevailing political regional and international circumstance. How does the state negotiate with its own legacy of violence in the face of continued confrontation with the ideologies that had originally justified this violence? How does the acknowledgement of brutality impact memory and post-memory of both, survivors and the generations that have followed? Choi believes that such an acknowledgement of violence, albeit problematic, is symptomatic of the emergence of the utopia of Korean reunification. This, she finds, is a fast-evolving theme in the public space as more creative mediums and organisations reflect on the historic cultural ties within the Korean peninsula. But, Choi continues to muse, what would a combined memorialisation of atrocities look like in a reunified Korea, where one's saviour is the other's perpetrator? How do political institutions reconcile traumatised communities with the militaries and policing forces that traumatised them?

Choi's study, for me as a historian, was the most thought-provoking among the four inventive books reviewed in this essay. This is because although Choi engages with historic events, the details of said events are unimportant to the study. She does not spend much textual space in elaborating the historical narrative or the overarching literature surrounding them. Choi is also not too concerned with the accuracy of the few oral histories that she does gather. The substance of her study is instead centred on the act of remembrance and commemoration, of both acknowledging and dismissing the past, of internalising the destruction of family and communal units. Choi's approach engages memories of the past with the present and allows one to consider how these memories influence inter-communal relationships. Choi's account reminds us that research into histories, especially war histories, is not just about understanding the past, but about recognising where this past is situated in the present.

However, Choi's work is constrained by its own methodology. Because it is focused on memorials, it ignores other non-traditional spaces of mourning and remembrance such as memoirs, private shrines, letters, photographs, mementos. It also does not engage with the

² Dwyer, M. (2019) *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press. p.30

³ Choi, S. (2019). *Right to Mourn: Trauma, Empathy, and Korean War Memorials*. New York: Oxford University Press. p.22

larger societal trauma of partition of the two Koreas and how this has impacted the communal psyche of Korean societies. This is an especially relevant avenue for enquiry as an increasing number of public media outlets in South Korea are addressing the assimilation of North Korean refugees. The growing number of popular tv shows and movies centred around historical kingdoms such as the Goryeo period further point towards the imaginings of a reunified, glorious Korea in the pre-Modern era. It then begs the question, how do mourners, especially suppressed mourners, interact with cultural movements towards peace and reintegration? How do they view their own society? Do they assume it to be symptomatic with the political and economic ideologies adopted by the State or are they engaging in myths of pre-conflict utopias?

Furthering Choi's framework will aid in understanding how populations in stable post-war societies respond to trauma and how this trauma impacts future governments in their approach to war and aggression. Choi's analysis of mourners, if built on, can allow an exploration of questions concerning restitutions, perceptions of justice, and the creation of mutable post-conflict narratives that memorialise war.

The Soldier in Combat

In *Culture and Combat in Colonies*, Tarak Barkawi analyses two conflicting approaches to understanding a soldier in combat, to explain why soldiers fight and what motivates their 'loyalty'. Barkawi identifies two broad schools of thought: the 'societal' and the 'organisational'. The 'societal' approach delves into historical and cultural trajectories which inform the making of a soldier and their conduct. The organisational approach views the structure of the military in enlisting a disparate group of men and instilling in them the values of a soldier, influencing and defining their concepts of loyalty and comradeship. As Barkawi explains, 'From the beginning of their service, soldiers are placed in common conditions and designated by a common symbol, core features of military life pregnant with the possibilities of comradeship and cohesion.'⁴ This, one can argue, is a 'European' perspective: a military structure that was imagined and birthed during the Colonial era, and adopted by post-colonial armies as they were jerked into a volatile modernity.

The books in review, fascinatingly, challenge both approaches. In the interviews that Vang conducted, she frequently attempted to discern the 'why' of her subjects: why enlist; why volunteer to be a pilot; why risk your life; why fight for the US? The responses of the pilots were, naturally, coloured by years of reflection and their re-settlement in USA. Even so, the Hmong pilots were able to paint the chaos they experienced. No one interviewee had a story symptomatic with the others. They appeared as young disempowered men, caught in a crossfire they did not fully comprehend, choosing to fight for themselves, their family and, their community. Their motivations varied, and despite the supposed western influence, their training was as haywire as the war they were fighting. With no established training courses, poor quality of aircrafts, an accelerated pace of instruction, instructors with language barriers, facing segregation from their American and the Lao supervisors, and a leadership that viewed them as expendable – the Hmong pilots navigated an ironically disorganised institution.

⁴ Barkawi, T. (2006). Culture and Combat in the Colonies: The Indian Army in the Second World War. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41(2). p.353

Furthermore, because of the secrecy and confusion surrounding the war, Vang's research into why the Hmong participated reveals the prevalence of ethnic and social ties within the community and with General Pao, the only high-ranking General of Hmong origin and a self-appointed leader of the community during the war. The diversity of experiences of the pilots, as Vang observes, was a direct consequence of their familial and tribal affiliations (or the lack of such affiliations) with General Pao and other high-ranking officers.

Furthermore, for the Hmong pilots combat was a military *and* a civilian experience. Unlike most modern military structures that separate military communities⁵, they very much remained a part of the cultural fabric of their community, residing with them, participating in civilian rituals and festivities, engaging in economic exchanges etc. Although all interviewees identified the uniqueness of their work and the 'dignity' associated with it, they remained committed to their families and community – finding ways to balance familial and communal expectations with their service as combatants in war.

Similarly, the mutineers in Dwyer's study also represent an inter-section of the 'civilian' society (from which recruits emerge) and the organised military institutions that moulds the recruits into soldiers. Dwyer narrates in her book her adventures in locating mutineers for interviews. In Burkina Faso she was able to reach such soldiers through her network in youth groups in colleges where young men knew recruits in junior ranks. She further notes the daily interactions that she observed between soldiers participating in everyday life and the civilians who approached them for mediation and for policing. These ties were more pronounced during mutinies itself when the demands for pay and housing and, flaring sentiments against corruption and nepotism would echo with and influence the other section. This could result in, on one extreme, the civilians empathising with the soldiers and tolerating the disruption they caused, and on the other extreme, explode in mass civilian protests for their own causes (or, alternatively, civilian protests causing rank and file to mutiny).

The female combatants in the Israeli Defence Forces present a different predicament, one that reveals the cultural axioms dictating the very foundations of military structures. *Breaking the Binaries* postulates two new approaches in examining the experience of combat. Firstly, it examines the role of patriarchy in the construction of modern militaries and, by extension, their sustenance. Secondly, it investigates the significance of combat in the construction of masculine identities and in the maintenance of masculine superiority as 'protectors'. The book challenges the boxed concept of women in war as 'hysterical' women, women as victims of sexual violence, and women suffering from PTSD. Uniquely, for this, the authors employ 'The Listening Guide' methodology (primarily a feminist methodology used to analyse interview transcripts) to probe into questions of agency of these actors – that is, how did they view their participation and, in the case of officers, their leadership? Were they reactive agents responding to their circumstance or passive actors following orders? How did they look back on their experience and actions, especially vis-à-vis the 'enemy'? Their research plainly negates the

⁵ Through various means such as separating residence areas (e.g. in cantonments), providing schooling for dependents of soldiers, fostering unique social rituals that are exclusively accessible to members of military institutions and their families, providing economic benefits such as rationing and, perhaps most evidently, ensuring legal protection and a separation of jurisdiction from civilian courts.

‘passive woman’ in conflict. By challenging the gendered complexion of military institutions, the female combatants and the authors interviewing them bring to the fore new standpoints for situating the experience and self-identity of rank-and-files in a rigid institution. However, it also reveals how, unlike their male counter-parts, the female combatants constantly navigate the institution’s expectation of them to ‘be a man’ and society’s expectations of femininity. Their voluntary adoption of combatant roles does not exempt them from their role as a ‘woman’. If anything, their service as active duty combatants, although at par with their male counter-parts, appears as little more than a recess before they ‘return’ to civilian life while the service of male combatants improves their status in society as ‘men’.

The above interpretations challenge the binary and stringent divisions between the military and the civilian. They problematise viewing the institution of armed forces as a unified collective that identifies with a State or an ideology. Instead, the diversity of methodologies unveils the myriad of complex associations in a seemingly independent institution. Within the three works on combatants, one cannot deny a level of militarisation of recruits, turning young enlistees into uniformed soldiers with unity, identity and a sense of pride in service. However, in all three cases, this militarisation did not result in a clean break from the ‘civilian’ life that the soldiers emerged from. Ethnic, communal and familial relations impacted service of soldiers, but of course – this was not at the cost their identities as soldiers. Thus, organisational separation did not amount to societal isolation. Militaries should be examined as part of the socio-political structures in which they exist and co-exist. The view from below allows a unique analysis on not just how militaries function, but also how they mutate and sustain, responding to its most fundamental actor – the soldier.

Relocating War Narratives

The Second World War was indisputably the gravest conflict of the twentieth-century. In the immediate after-math of the war, the question that dominated research was why, despite the many measures put in place after the Great War, was there another world war within two decades? As early as 1944, the United States government published the ‘*Chronological History of certain major International events leading up to and during World War II with the ostensible reasons advanced for the occurrence, 1931-44*’. The work represents the general standpoint adopted by conflict studies post-war – that of diplomacy and foreign policy. The emphasis within this school of thought was on analysing power centres within society and their role in the emergence, sustenance and cessation of conflict. Military histories, simultaneously, focused on the mechanics of the warfare – regimental histories, campaign biographies, and the economics of it all. Within these narratives, soldiers and civilians alike were all but pawns mobilised to feed the war machinery. This extended to post-conflict studies that reconstructed ‘bottom-up’ narratives of defenceless victims of war and displaced populations as stateless, dependent refugees.

However, with the turn of the century, newer social science studies on combat and trauma (including the books in this essay) are re-examining these notions of powerlessness and instituting a paradigm shift within military studies and histories that seek to re-centre war around its anonymous actors. But, aside from the novelty in methodology, what does this paradigm shift achieve?

Vang's pilots, despite being commissioned officers who engaged in the most treacherous arenas, were an ethnic and segregated minority caught in the 'fog of war' with no public acknowledgement of their service. Thus, while they had achieved perhaps the most prestigious position in any military, they had little control over their fate. Military protocols for them were lax as their roles and lives were dictated by General Vang Pao and the American commands. Many of the surviving pilots, although believed in the value of their service, saw themselves as 'dogs of war' – loyal, daring and obedient. In contrast, most of Dwyer's mutineers were from economically vulnerable sections of West African societies. Existing studies and policies, mostly commissioned by 'official' institutions, viewed their insubordination through a binary lens of compensations and material goods. However, as Dwyer elaborates, these were complex actors that constantly challenged existing political and military power clusters, interacting with and impacting civilian populations, and negotiating with their superiors. The Israeli female combatants were also negotiators, creating space for themselves in a 'masculine' sphere while probing their own experience in the battlefields, with their male counter-parts, and with the State. All the above actors vocalised their participation, challenging the 'official' accounts. They were not just subjects but also narrators in their respective studies. In Choi's book however, these 'narrators' were few, a lack she discusses in the context of 'suppressed mourners'. Instead it was the act of grieving, of visiting memorials, of participating in the TRCK (Truth and Reconciliation Commission South Korea), as well as the act of staying silent that voices the trauma of survivors.

Besides challenging prevailing frameworks within their own fields, these works also add unique contributions to conflict studies and social histories. Armed with the mutineer's voice, Dwyer re-establishes mutinies not as disruptive insubordination but as a form of communication and an extension of civil society. This allows her to present a balanced policy resolution to prevent similar acts of defiance within weak democratic systems. Both Vang and Choi's studies shed light on previously neglected portraits of long-standing impacts of war on communities, beyond the battlefields. As Choi remarks, 'A war, a seemingly unstoppable institution, changed both the course and fabric of life.'⁶ Displacement, economic destabilisation, repatriation, victimisation, ostracization are some of the fates that communities caught in conflict face in the aftermath – thus establishing new relations and interactions with States. By examining the impact of war, evolving studies on identities can be constructed that dissect how the community views itself, how the community views the State, and how the State views the community. This is especially helpful for research on reintegration and reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

Conclusion

Narratives of combatants and non-combatants investigate how the 'subaltern' subjects view their place and participation in conflict and resist over-arching homogenous interpretations imposed by institutional frameworks. It also allows for a democratisation of conflict studies as while researchers can be obstructed from viewing official records, scouting histories from below can rarely be perfectly controlled. Furthermore, it expands the limits of knowledge

⁶ Choi, p.15

production by reducing reliance on institutional records and archives. However, to construct a cohesive study in this bottom-up genre, researchers must go beyond their own disciplines, learn and unlearn methodologies and create made-to-measure frameworks for their subjects.

In a stimulating piece published in 2018, Alison Howell proposed the concept of ‘martial politics’ that challenged notions of ‘militarisation’ of States and institution. Such a transmutation, Howell demonstrates, assumes a ‘before’ and ‘after’ – i.e. a non-militarised state of being breached by ‘militarisation’, and the assumption that there was a peaceful civilian past.⁷ This review essay is situated in a symptomatic theoretical space as Howell’s piece: Vang’s, Dwyer’s, and Harel-Shalev’s & Daphna-Tekoah’s works challenge the notion of isolation of modern militaries as they explore the ‘civilian’ gendered, ethnic, and communal ties that permeate a seemingly exclusive institution. This further raises questions on what it means to be ‘military’ and ‘civilian’. Are they in fact mutually exclusive concepts? What makes one institution more ‘military’ than ‘civilian’, and vice-versa? Can this be determined by an institution’s, a community’s, an individual’s engagement with and adoption of, as Howell posits, ‘war-like’ identities? The bottom-up narratives discussed here challenge notions of power hierarchies, communal exclusivity, homogeneity of history and memory, and instead examine the civilian and the military as not rigid organisations, but as permeable collectives.

Furthermore, by applying bottom-up frameworks, the assumption that States and militaries are autonomous actors with rigid power-hierarchies that only negotiate with other institutional actors is contested. The ‘power-centres’ within militaries are in fact in a constant, complex negotiation with faceless communal actors – they are mutating institutions responding to communal tensions. In the case of the West African mutineers, the concession of material goods went only so far to placate them. It is the demand for accountability, Dwyer argues, that is at the core of the threat of mutiny, creating an internal check in an otherwise authoritarian institution. Similarly, IDF’s female combatants are in a constant, if slow, negotiation with a predominantly male institution to effect formal change that is inclusive of their service – e.g. an updated body armour to suit the female physique.

And finally, Vang’s and Choi’s work introduces examinations of communal self-perceptions of histories and legacies of conflict. The Hmong pilots, unlike the mutineers and the female IDF soldiers, are unable to assert a communal challenge within the American military ecosystem. Not only are they unsuccessful in creating better working conditions and equitable opportunities for themselves, the subsequent secrecy surrounding the war in Laos deprives them of public acknowledgement of their service and they are unable to transpose their substantial social and economic gains to their post-conflict lives in the US. Despite their active, aggressive service, they have much in common with Choi’s suppressed mourners – dispossessed and unable to claim their own histories and legacies. And yet, it is this experience of institutional amnesia that binds both, the Hmong ex-soldiers and ex-pilots, and also the victims of the massacres in the Korean war, in post-war communal identities. Choi further challenges the binary of ‘war’ and ‘peace’ – what is ‘peace’ and when is it achieved? Is it simply the cessation of active hostilities? Or does it include post-conflict administrations of

⁷ Howell, A (2018) Forget “militarization”: race, disability and the “martial politics” of the police and of the university. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 117-136

justice in the form of prosecution of war crimes, restitution and compensations, and commemorations? The 'passivity' of mute victims is then challenged as they expose the 'price of war' and negotiate for justice with post-conflict governments and institutions. Much like Howell's proposition of modern-democracies 'living with war', Choi's study of mute, suppressed mourners punctures assumptions of 'peace' in stable, even prosperous, post-conflict societies.

As Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah summarise, 'The literature concurs that war is the friend of binarisms, leaving little place for complex identities.'⁸ This article reviews four neoteric books that view war and combat through a myriad of repressed voices of communities and groups and focus on re-constructing bottom-up narratives; they illustrate the implications of medializing human experiences within war studies. They argue that the anonymous, invisible participant in war is all but a passive pawn who interacts with chaotic geopolitical events in complex and consequential ways. Collectively, the works in this exercise challenge prevailing binary institutional frameworks of military versus civilian, war versus peace, and power hierarchies, and reveal the volition and agency of 'non-key' participants. Finally, this essay has endeavoured to contribute a perceptive review for the expanding literature on the experience of war in military histories and conflict studies

⁸ The authors list the following binaries that concern their study, '...combat soldiers versus veterans, non-combat soldiers versus combat soldiers, trauma of men combatants versus trauma of women victims, care versus protection, femininity versus masculinity, voice versus silence, and militarist versus pacifist.' Harel-Shalev, A., & Daphna-Tekoah, S. (2019). *Breaking the binaries in security studies: a gendered analysis of women in combat*. New York: Oxford University Press. p.6