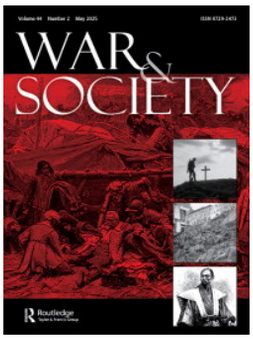

War & Society

ISSN: 0729-2473 (Print) 2042-4345 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ywar20

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To cite this article: Mai Anh Nguyen (15 May 2025): Ideology as social practice: childhood and the politics of everyday in the Vietnam war, War & Society, DOI: 10.1080/07292473.2025.2503639

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2025.2503639

Published online: 15 May 2025.

WAR & SOCIETY, Vol. 0 No. 0, Month 2025, 1–17

Ideology as social practice: childhood and the politics of everyday in the Vietnam war

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This article traces the presence of ideology in everyday lives of Vietnamese children and youth in the lead-up and during the Vietnam War, focusing on the 1955–75 period. I draw on the notion of ideology as embodied practice, present in individuals' mundane actions such as studying, washing hands, and communal eating. I emphasise that young people also engaged with and reinforced ideological practices. This article expands current understanding of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the conflict, particularly how subtle but powerful ideological practices circulated between private spaces and the international arena, ultimately motivating many Vietnamese youths to join the revolution.

KEYWORDS Ideology; everyday politics; children in conflict; Vietnam War; social military history

From Samuel Popkin to David Marr, much has been written about the history of Vietnamese communist revolutionary movement.[1] I contribute to this scholarship by exploring the presence of ideology as embodied social practice in Vietnamese peasant everyday lives. During the summer of 2019, my work in Vietnam led me to encounter Xuan,[2] a former Youth Shock Brigade member who had joined the military struggle against the US and allied South Vietnam at the age of sixteen. This brigade was created by the Vietnamese communist revolutionary movement to provide various types of support, e.g. transporting heavy equipment or tending to injured soldiers. The brigades also worked along roads in Vietnam and Laos to construct the

[1] Samuel L. Popkin, 'Corporatism and Colonialism: The Political Economy of Rural Change in Vietnam', *Comparative Politics* 8, no. 3 (1976), 431–64; David G. Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[2] All interviewees are given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

 DOI: 10.1080/07292473.2025.2503639

Ho Chi Minh Trail, allowing soldiers, guerrillas, and their supporters to move from North to South Vietnam for battlefield operations.[3]

Xuan, a cheerful and optimistic woman, remembered joining the struggle with little deliberation: 'Honestly, at the time, I didn't comprehend the notion of ideology or revolutionary consciousness. I didn't contemplate the revolution; I just wanted to go. Words cannot express how excited I was'.[4] This account could be perceived as childlike enthusiasm, conforming to the stereotype of an eager, politically uninformed youngster. Collecting stories from other young people who were associated with the revolutionary movement revealed, however, a common theme: they did not perceive ideology as their main motivator for joining the struggle. At the same time, and in contradiction with their claims of having little to no ideological consciousness or training, many of my interlocutors articulated that their motivations remained rooted in concepts such as justice, rebellion against inequality, and the presence of 'foreign invaders' – echoing closely the messaging disseminated by the communist movement. For instance, Quyen recounted not pondering about nationalism, communism, or patriotism. Nonetheless, he recalled regularly learning about protests against the US-backed regime in other parts of the country and listening to speeches delivered by the revolutionary leaders, which made his 'spirit boil'.[5] Sang, another youth volunteer, had a similar journey. He joined the Youth Shock Brigades at fifteen and also denied holding any explicitly patriotic or communist sympathies before joining the brigade. He simply wanted to help 'exploited people' and was frustrated with 'injustices'.[6] Many, then, explicitly denied having any ideological consciousness, while still conveying concern with the core ideological issues consistently disseminated by the revolutionary cadres – class inequality, nationalist struggle, among others. This raised questions of how, precisely, ideology influenced these young individuals.

I address this research question by turning attention to the nexus between ideology and the everyday. I specifically focus on how ideology manifested as social practice, embodied through actions: 'routinised, and more often than not, normalised, so actors accept their normalcy implicitly'.[7] Through focusing on the *practice* of ideology – not just ideas, discourse, and representations – it becomes possible to understand why 'actors believe social orders in the first place implicitly and tacitly do things without giving a thought to…'.[8] Through this conceptualisation, my findings illustrate that the movement's disseminated ideology became a part of children and youth's 'common sense'; a notion which young people engaged with and habitually enacted long before they actually decided to join the struggle. Core ideas of the revolutionary movement, rather than staying an abstract and distant notion,

[3] François Guillemot, 'Death and suffering at first hand: Youth shock brigades during the Vietnam war (1950–1975)', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009), 17 – 60.
[4] Interview with Xuan, 17 August 2019.
[5] Interview with Quyen, 11 August 2019.
[6] Interview with Sang, 17 August 2019.
[7] Gunhild H. Gjørv and Ali Bilgic, *Positive Security: Collective Life in an Uncertain World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 9.
[8] Ibid., 9.

were already extended to every aspect of childhood at everyday level – a part of life at home, school, and friendships.

To develop this argument, I examine how the day-to-day experiences and interactions of children and youth – often overlooked or deemed insignificant – were shaped by, and in turn reproduced, the broader ideological dynamics of the conflict. Most of my interviewees were teenagers at the time of their engagement with either the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF), Youth Shock Brigades, or the Vietnamese army. All were under eighteen, i.e. under the age of majority at the time. I therefore refer to them as 'children and youth' or 'young people' to recognise both the range of their ages and the complexities they faced in navigating their 'young-ness' (e.g. going to school, listening to their parents), as conceptualised by Berents.[9] The responses analysed in this article are drawn from a larger project on children and youth during the Vietnam War, which includes interviews with thirty-two participants.[10] While I focus here on a select few responses that are particularly descriptive and detailed, this smaller sample still yields compelling insights that align with the broader historical context and corroborate findings in the secondary literature.

First, I trace the presence of ideology in studies of conflict, with particular emphasis on young people's ideological engagement. Second, I describe how communist and nationalist ideology was disseminated by the revolutionary movement and permeated many young people's spaces. I show that while my interviewees believed that their actions were not ideological, ideology was already present in their everyday lives: legitimised in educational spaces; conveyed in messaging about what young people's everyday behaviours should look like; and in how they themselves practiced ideology.

Ideology in armed conflict

A 'theoretical newcomer'

In a 2019 article, Jonathan Maynard characterised ideology as a 'theoretical newcomer' within studies of conflict, commenting on how economic, rational choice, and identity-based explanations have traditionally dominated most research agendas.[11] In many influential studies on armed conflicts, ideology has generally been understood as a rhetorical device rather than a significant factor shaping conflict and violence.[12] As such, it has been assumed that rebel and insurgent groups are

[9] Helen Berents, 'No child's play: Recognising the agency of former child soldiers in peace building processes', *Dialogue e-Journal* 6, no. 2 (2009), 1 – 35.

[10] Stories of some of my participants (Quyen and Hong in particular) also appear in Mai Anh Nguyen, *Small Revolutionaries: Participation of Children and Youth in the Vietnam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

[11] Jonathan L. Maynard, 'Ideology and Armed Conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (2019), 1.

[12] Francisco G. Sanín and Elisabeth J. Wood, 'Ideology in Civil War', *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014), 213–26.

akin to bandits or pirates engaging in economic activities rather than expressing a genuine protest.[13]

Recent literature increasingly calls for a more comprehensive analysis of the ways in which ideas matter in conflict and violence. As Francisco Sanín and Elisabeth Wood contend, actors in wars (specifically rebels) 'generally spend significant time and resources producing, transmitting, and discussing ideas. They divide and fight around ideas. And they use ideas when taking literally life and death decisions'.[14] In the context of left-leaning Colombian guerrillas, for example, despite a strong emphasis on economic motivations, researchers have shown that ideology was still a highly relevant factor shaping their activities.[15] Case studies analysing conflicts in Afghanistan, Colombia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have demonstrated that understanding ideologies of nationalism, socialism, and religious fundamentalism is essential for understanding these conflicts.[16] In addition, ideology shapes the specific tactics and relations with civilians deployed by armed groups. For example, Kai Thaler notes that the Marxist-Leninist ideology of Frelimo and the MPLA initially led to their practice of restraint in violence against civilians, but as elite ideological commitment eroded, this led to a corresponding increase in violence.[17] As Sanín and Wood conclude, 'neglecting ideology would leave major war-related phenomena unexplained'.[18]

Ideology occupies an even more ambiguous space within studies of children and youth in armed conflict. This reflects a wider pattern of young people being conceptualised as valid political actors only relatively recently.[19] Nevertheless, their spaces provide an important window into everyday ideology formation and dissemination among ordinary, non-elite individuals. More recent and critical research has uncovered the diverse ways in which these seemingly apolitical actors are embedded in political institutions.[20] Children's and youth's interaction with politics, conflict, and war occurs not only through explicit channels, such as anthems and pledges of allegiance, but also implicitly through play, storytelling, infusing mundane actions with political meaning, among many other ways of

[13] Paul Collier, *Economic causes of civil conflict and their implications for policy* (Washington, DC: World Bank., 2000); Herschel I. Grossman, 'Kleptocracy and Revolutions', *Oxford Economic Papers* 51, no. 2 (1999), 267–83.

[14] Sanín and Wood, 213.

[15] Juan E. Ugarriza and Matthew J. Craig, 'The Relevance of Ideology to Contemporary Armed Conflicts', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 3 (2012), 445–77.

[16] Juan E. Ugarriza, 'Ideologies and Conflict in the Post-Cold War', *International Journal of Conflict Management* 20, no. 1 (2009), 82–104.

[17] Kai M. Thaler, 'Ideology and Violence in Civil Wars: Theory and Evidence from Mozambique and Angola', *Civil Wars* 14, no. 4 (2012), 546–67.

[18] Sanín and Wood, 214.

[19] Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941 – 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[20] David J. Marshall, '"All the Beautiful Things": Trauma, Aesthetics and the Politics of Palestinian Childhood', *Space and Polity* 17, no. 1 (2013), 53–73; Kirsi P. Kallio, 'Becoming geopolitical in the everyday world', in *Children, Young People and Critical Geopolitics*, edited by Matthew C. Benwell, Peter Hopkins (London: Routledge, 2017), 169–86; Carolyn Kay, 'War Pedagogy in the German Primary School Classroom During the First World War', *War & Society* 33, no. 1 (2014), 3 – 11.

subtle political socialisation.[21] Treating it as seriously as politics in adults' worlds, in turn, contributes to understanding 'the mundane and idiosyncratic in the unfolding and structuring of 'the political'.[22]

In the context of studies of war and armed conflict, ideology has been approached as one of the many social factors which shapes and is shaped by children and youth. Two insights from the current literature are helpful in outlining how this might happen. The first is the extent to which ideological socialisation can contribute to non-violent methods of recruitment. ISIS, for example, 'notably recruits children using non-coercive means by gradually exposing them to the group's ideology, worldview and apocalyptic vision'.[23] The group is known to spend many resources, efforts, and complicated tactics to indoctrinate child soldiers, playing the 'long game' in cultivating the recruits' loyalty and commitment to the group.[24] Further examples are demonstrated in Murphy's study, where rebel groups disseminate the ideology of patrimonialism, in turn cultivating close ties between children and military patrons.[25]

Second, ideology has also been shown to shape young people's sense of identity which, in turn, divides their worldview into 'in-group' and 'out-group', and subsequently can enable their participation in violence. Michael Wessells, for example, recounts the case of child soldiers in LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelan) who underwent an identity transformation through their training.[26] Subsequently, they saw taking up arms as a valid way to reclaim their homeland. Such articulations of identity have also been shown to provide children with meaning within highly violent and disturbing circumstances, protecting them from distress.[27] Nevertheless, an observation by Özerdem, Podder, and Quitoriano identifies that there is still much space to investigate how ideology, the everyday, and childhood interact: the literature, they point out, is yet to engage with instances 'where [children] joining

[21] As demonstrated in earlier works by Felicity A. O'Dell, *Socialisation through Children's Literature: The Soviet Example* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Sabine Frühstück, *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

[22] Amanda Beattie and Gemma Bird, 'Recognizing Everyday Youth Agency: Advocating for a Reflexive Practice in Everyday International Relations', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2022), 2.

[23] Mia Bloom, 'Child Soldiers in Armed Conflict', *Armed Conflict Survey* 4, no. 1 (2018), 39.

[24] Asaad Almohammad, 'ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment', The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 8, no. 14 (2018), 2.

[25] William P. Murphy, 'Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientalism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars', *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2003), 61 – 87.

[26] Michael G. Wessells, 'Reintegration of child soldiers: The role of social identity in the recruitment and reintegration of child soldiers', in *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary Global Perspectives*, edited by Shelly McKeown, Reeshma Haji and Neil Ferguson (New York: Springer, 2016), 105–20.

[27] Pushpa Kanagaratnam, Magne Raundalen and Arve E. Asbjørnsen, 'Ideological Commitment and Posttraumatic Stress in Former Tamil Child Soldiers', *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 46, no. 6 (2005), 511–20; Guido Veronese and Federica Cavazzoni, '"I Hope I Will Be Able to Go Back to My Home City": Narratives of Suffering and Survival of Children in Palestine', *Psychological Studies* 65 (2020), 51 – 63.

an armed group is a natural progression in social existence, is community mediated and ideologically sanctioned'.[28] My study investigates this instance.

Ideology as social practice

To examine how ideology became a part of children and youth's everyday life, to be engaged without conscious deliberation, I approach ideology as practice, i.e. 'patterns of action which […] simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world'.[29] Althusser's contention that ideology has a material existence is particularly helpful for this conceptualisation. While he defines ideology as an *imaginary* representation of individuals' relations, it is manifested through actions, practical rituals as mundane as shaking hands and calling names.[30] He goes as far as to say that ideas 'have disappeared', in a sense that their essence is now rooted in practices and everyday rituals, which are ultimately defined by ideological apparatuses, be it 'a small church, a funeral, a minor match at sports, a school day … '.[31] The intersection of ideology and practice is perhaps best encapsulated in his evoking of Pascal's quote: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'.[32] Althusser writes further that what seemingly is outside of ideology, i.e. taking place in mundane spaces such as the street, in reality is deeply ideological; and what *is* ideological is seemingly outside of it.

For a more specific conceptualisation, I turn to the articulation of ideology as practice by Franco and Chand.[33] Contrasting their work with prevailing definitions of ideology, which emphasise significance of ideas and representations[34], Franco and Chand examined more deeply an additional dimension of human activity in ideology. Like Althusser, they also note that ideology is realised through social actors and institutions (apparatuses, in Althusser's terms). Therefore, a social practice (in this case, ideology), cannot be 'confined to a purely epistemological or theoretical level'; rather, it is realised through circuits of human actions – patterns of behaviour, everyday activity, gestures.[35] In this article, I follow Franco and Chand's definition of ideology as 'dialectical unity' of circulated ideas and practice, one

[28] Alpaslan Özerdem, Sukanya Podder, and Eddie L. Quitoriano, 'Identity, Ideology and Child Soldiering: Community and Youth Participation in Civil Conflict – a Study on the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, Philippines', *Civil Wars* 12, no. 3 (2010), 305.

[29] Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International Practices', *International Theory* 3, no. 1 (2011), 4.

[30] Louis Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014).

[31] Althusser, 186.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Francisco C. Franco and Sarvar V. Sherry Chand, 'Ideology as Social Practice-The Functioning of Varna', *Economic and Political Weekly* 24, no. 47 (1989), 2601 – 12.

[34] Adorno et al. define it as 'An organization of opinions, attitudes, and values – a way of thinking about man and society'; Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), 2. Campbell et al. similarly define it as 'a particularly elaborate, close-woven, and far-ranging structure of attitudes', primarily political in connotation: Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter: An Abridgement* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964). Franco and Chand themselves refer to definitions by Raymond Aron and Adam Schaff, both of which similarly draw on the notion of ideology as a system of values, opinions, or representations (as cited in Franco & Chand, 1989, 2611).

[35] Franco and Chand, 2603.

which pervades all levels of social life, shapes the extent of what is thinkable, valuable, and possible for all members of society while in turn being reproduced, embodied, and legitimised by them.[36]

This is not to deny that ideas matter; however, also identifying practice as an important part of ideology allows for rigorous examination of war and conflict in a variety of ways. First, it addresses instances of individuals who are impacted by (and reproduce) ideological messaging even when they do not appear to be committed ideologues, or do not articulate their commitment in explicitly memorised tenets. It is therefore particularly relevant for studying how actors such as children interact with ideology, given that political messaging frequently conveyed to them is obscured in informal, simplified, and indirect forms.[37] Although beyond the scope of this article, such a conceptualisation also treats ideology as *one* of the many social practices actors engage in, such as cultural traditions, rituals, economic transformations. As Maynard earlier commented, these theoretical factors – be it ideology, culture, or ethnicity – need not stand in explanatory competition with each other.[38]

It also has particularly important implications for debates about young people's agency. Often, as a way to challenge prevalent stereotypes about children's passiveness and victimisation, the notion of agency is mobilised as a catch-all term, becoming an end-argument and ignoring the many structural and environmental constraints children face.[39] Often, too, agency is conflated with resistance; doing so obscures other ways in which children and youth participate in politics.[40] Conceptualising children and youth as *practicing* ideology, then, on the one hand presupposes careful attention to their environment while acknowledging that they are also valid social and political actors. On the other hand, it opens avenues for exploring different ways in which children and youth can participate in armed conflicts (and politics more widely) beyond resisting – for example, reproducing existing social order, striving to deeply understand the meaning of one's roles and obligations and shape the relationships to the best of their ability. With this conceptualisation, I now turn to the case of the ideology dissemination by the communist revolutionary movement in the Vietnam War.

Ideological messaging of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement

The discussion surrounding the importance of ideology for the Vietnamese revolutionary movement mirrors the wider pattern of debates about ideology. Many well-known works invoke the notion of ideology of the Vietnam War in the context of international and great power struggles – e.g. Slater's critique of the domino

[36] Ibid., 2602.
[37] Raewyn C. Connell, *The Child's Construction of Politics* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1971).
[38] Maynard, 637.
[39] Kay E.M. Tisdall and Samantha Punch, 'Not so "new"? Looking critically at Childhood Studies', *Children's Geographies* 10, no. 3 (2012), 249 – 64.
[40] Mona Gleason, 'Avoiding the agency trap: caveats for historians of children, youth, and education', *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (2016), 446 – 59.

theory,[41] or Herring's analysis of how the Vietnam War fitted in the wider Cold War struggle between the 'two hostile power blocs'.[42] With regards to the NLF's own interpretation of ideology, economic explanations are once again frequently mobilised. As Ithiel de Sola Pool highlighted: '[Our view] that ideology is important to NLF cadres, is not a popular one. In one form or another there is a widespread notion that Asian communism is solely a matter of the belly' (i.e. economic).[43] A comprehensive report by the RAND Corporation suggests that NLF propaganda was highly ineffective, and there were few sincere ideologues, with only specific circumstances leading people to join.[44] Likewise, Tal Tovy concludes that enlistment motivation was not ideological, but instead driven by promises of improved economic prospects, general excitement, or familial loyalties.[45]

Economic considerations were certainly a significant part of the NLF's (and the wider Vietnamese revolutionary movement's) appeal and campaign. They identified as a class-based peasant movement. Similarly, it is undeniable that the war was deeply entangled with wider international dynamics. With most of my interviewees stating that they had no economic interests in mind, as well as having no idea about the power struggle between the US and the USSR at the time, my attention shifted to the broader impact of ideology on children and youth's social environment. This environment encompassed economic grievances and also shaped their private lives. I therefore found that analysing the transformation of everyday social structures, influenced by ideology, provided a more useful framework to understand motivations of children and youth who ended up passionately working and fighting on the side of the communist movement, thus contributing in no small part to its eventual victory.

Many works on the Vietnam war have similarly indicated an interest in ideological and social aspects of the conflict. At the height of the war, Bernard Weiner pointed out: 'Logic dictates that if we are fighting only a military enemy, the war would have been over long ago. But something, some tenacious force – namely, Vietnamese communism allied with not a little Vietnamese nationalism – is tying down an estimated 400,000 American troops…'.[46] More recently, Miller and Vu argued that many Vietnamese communist leaders had a deep-rooted commitment to ideology and were sincerely enthusiastic about promoting communist revolution on a global scale.[47] Turning attention to the non-elite actors, David Elliott explicitly challenged the notion of the rational choice model in evaluating why Vietnamese peasants joined the revolution, asking 'what rational person would continue to risk

[41] Jérome Slater, 'The Domino Theory and International Politics: The Case of Vietnam', *Security Studies* 3, no. 2 (1993), 186–224.
[42] George C. Herring, 'The Cold War and Vietnam', *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004), 18.
[43] Ithiel de Sola Pool, 'Political Alternatives to the Viet Cong', *Asian Survey* 7, no. 8 (1967), 561.
[44] John C. Donnell, *Viet Cong Recruitment: Why and How Men Join* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1967).
[45] Tal Tovy, 'Peasants and Revolutionary Movements: The Viet Cong as a Case Study', *War in History* 17, no. 2 (2010), 217–30.
[46] Bernard Weiner, 'Review of Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, by D. Pike', *The Western Political Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1967), 505.
[47] Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, 'The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009), 1–16.

hardship and probable death on the mere expectation of some distant payoff?'.[48] Instead, he examines social engineering carried out by the NLF throughout 30 years (inducing changes in practices such as marriage, alongside disseminating principles of patriotism and class struggle), which provided a more satisfactory explanation. In the Vietnam war, then, the importance of ideology has been demonstrated to go beyond mere 'window wash' (to borrow the wording of Sanín and Wood).[49]

To contextualise my findings further, I sketch out the main ideological foundations of the movement, focusing particularly on the NLF. In the first instance, the NLF's primary commitment was 'liberation from American domination as a national movement'.[50] As a result, many of their campaigns that sought to engage support from peasants drew on the language of patriotism and unity of the people, sometimes shifting rhetoric from class struggle to patriotic struggle.[51] The theme of nationalism was not abstract: it was cleverly connected by communists to more local struggles, fostering loyalties to the commune first, and then to the national 'skeleton'. It therefore created a 'sympathetic environment for a revolutionary movement'.[52]

The second goal of the NLF was to achieve socialism; as such, they drew on Marxist principles to shape their ideological foundation.[53] Their messaging would strongly emphasise the oppression of the poor and 'direct denunciation of a few selected 'cruel and wicked' landlords'.[54] Joining the movement was seen as necessary for 'freedom and prosperity for the country'.[55] The language of labour equality, joining together against exploitation, and building a socialist future was a consistent feature in the messaging of the NLF.[56] It is important to highlight that the NLF were inspired by Maoism – itself a branch of communism. In particular, they acknowledged the importance of winning popular support and implemented the strategy of 'people's war', also borrowed from Mao.[57] As a result, they were known for their deep understanding of peasant life and ability to relate and connect to villagers due to the friendly relations between the front and civilians.[58] In accordance with the NLF's understanding that people were critical to mobilisation, a systematic and prolonged effort was made to incorporate revolutionary efforts into

[48] David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930 – 1975* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 368.
[49] Sanín and Wood, 213.
[50] Mark Selden, 'The National Liberation Front and the transformation of Vietnamese society', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 2, no. 1 (1969), 36.
[51] Elliott, 240.
[52] Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 207.
[53] Philip M. Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
[54] Elliott, 773.
[55] Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War In Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 18.
[56] John C. Donnell, Guy J. Pauker, and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964: Preliminary Report* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1965).
[57] Marc Opper, *People's Wars in China, Malaya, and Vietnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).
[58] Ronald B. St John, 'Marxist-Leninist Theory and Organization in South Vietnam', *Asian Survey* 20, no. 8 (1980), 812–28.

civilians' (particularly peasants') everyday lives. As one of my interviewees observed: civilians are the heart of the revolution, and wherever there were villagers, there were soldiers.[59] Through various methods recounted below, the movement blurred the line between the political and the personal, infusing social structures in everyday life with nationalist and communist ideologies.

Institutionalisation

As Althusser and Franco and Chand point out the importance of institutions in ideology normalisation, I focus here on the ideology dissemination within schools and mass associations established by the Vietnamese revolutionary actors. They attempted to legitimise ideology through connection between ideas and manifesting them 'in human activity and embodied in human institutions'.[60] As part of the 'all-people' mobilisation, the presence of ideological teachings was transmitted at schools and other educational spaces. One report issued by the Committee of Unification encouraged schools to include communist cadres in teaching positions and increase the overall children's awareness of the political events within the country.[61] Explicit directives for educational curricula stated:

> … To rely on the people … to destroy the policies of ignorance and forms of reactionary and corrupt education of the US and Vietnamese puppet governments; to actively build a national, democratic and scientific education system according to Marxism-Leninism … and train the next generation to deeply hate the enemy, to be passionately patriotic, have knowledge, morals and health to continue the cause of fighting against America to save the country and build society in the future.[62]

Importantly, children were not asked to directly take up arms. Even considering the 'all-people' mobilisation, young people were not seen as desirable or viable candidates to fight on behalf of the movement (formally, the age of recruitment to the military struggle was 18 years old). They engaged with the movement's ideological messaging in a variety of subtle ways, reflected in a story Quyen told me. He recalled listening to stories of Vietnamese history, where the teachers retold touching tales about heroes who expelled foreign invaders from Vietnam. He denied being brainwashed, explicitly saying that no one would direct a group of primary schoolchildren to participate in the struggle; the teachers simply, as he recalled, encouraged pupils to mirror the bravery of past heroes.[63]

In addition to these campaigns through schools, the communist government established mass associations such as Women's, Farmer's, and Buddhist Associations, as

[59] Interview with Hung, 25 August 2019.
[60] Franco and Chand, 2601.
[61] Committee of Unification, Báo cáo của Ủy ban Thống nhất về một số nét của học sinh miền Nam nội trú năm 1971 [*Committee of Unification Report about some features of boarding students from the South in 1971*] (1971). File number 2140; Archival Centre 3: Hanoi.
[62] Mai Pham, 'Kháng chiến chống Mỹ và "mặt trận" đặc biệt của ngành giáo dục' [*Resistance against the US and special educational 'battlefields'*] <https://thanhtra.com.vn/xa-hoi/giao-duc/khang-chien-chong-my-va-mat-tran-dac-biet-cua-nganh-giao-duc-170569.html> [Accessed 24 December 2023].
[63] Interview with Quyen, 11 August 2019.

well as a Youth Association and a branch of the Youth Pioneer Organisation. These associations aimed to involve every member of society in supporting the front and to 'promote revolution, inculcate national pride, combat the natural passivity of the peasantry, and overcome the dread of fighting a technologically superior enemy'.[64] For example, the Youth Pioneer Organisation aimed to involve children and youth in campaigns against the French (and later, the US) by distributing anti-war leaflets, delivering letters, and performing other war-related tasks to aid political cadres.

Many of my interviewees recalled performing these activities at schools and associations. Interestingly, they were treated by many interviewees as a small part of the everyday, less important than actually taking up arms and joining the armed struggle – and therefore almost not worth mentioning. Although seeing these activities as less important, my interviewees were not performing them mindlessly, or without commitment. Many strove to do these tasks well, turning it into a competition. For example, Duc remembered that he and his classmates would compete over who could distribute the most leaflets, or who could run the most errands for the guerrillas. 'If we saw that our friends did a job very well, we would ask – hey, how did you do it so well? What are your tricks?', he remembered.[65]

Educational spaces also embodied the spirit of ideology through instilling concrete actions of either rewarding, punishing, or disseminating the revolutionary messaging. In schools, for example, children were classified as 'well-behaved' if they wanted to go and fight the 'foreign invaders' in the future; if their parents participated in the military struggle, they were automatically characterised as fundamentally good people.[66] Deviating from the vision of unifying the country or advancing a communist society would result in being disciplined – see, for example, Olga Dror's observation that even joking about not going to the army would not be possible in a setting where the communist movement 'enforced a unified agenda in all spheres of life'.[67] Such institutions, then, were essential for legitimising ideology in subtle but persistent ways, passing ideological messaging while at the same time providing a tangible, material space to practice it.

Embodying ideology

Within various institutions, children indeed were exposed to more traditional teachings about communism and nationalism – as Dror noted, Vietnamese children have always been expected to understand complex notions such as class inequality.[68] The question of how explicitly ideological messaging was transmitted to

[64] Sandra C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

[65] Interview with Duc, 24 August 2019.

[66] Ministry of Education, *V/v giải quyết số học sinh miền Nam bỏ học, không học được và đau yếu nằm 1966* [Regarding the problem of Southern students dropping out, not being able to study or being ill in 1966] (1966). File number 2060; Archival Centre 3: Hanoi.

[67] Olga Dror, 'Raising Vietnamese: War and youth in the South in the early 1970s', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013), 76.

[68] Olga Dror, 'Love, hatred, and heroism: socializing children in North Vietnam during wartime, 1965–75', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (2016), 424 – 49.

young people, and whether they retained much of it, remains open – seemingly (given that most of my interviewees denied possessing any revolutionary knowledge), memory of some of the content of ideological teachings was lost over time. What is notable is that children were also exposed to other influences, which focused on encouraging their 'revolutionary participation' *via* mundane everyday practices.

Perhaps the most illustrative example here are Ho Chi Minh's (Uncle Ho, as my interviewees referred to him) letters to children and youth. He wrote many of these letters both throughout the Vietnamese struggles against France and against the US.[69] They were published in multiple outlets (mostly revolutionary magazines), and often celebrated a specific occasion, such as Children's Day. In some of these letters, he advocates for the role of children in the revolution, stating that '… because of the cruel colonialists who want to rob our country, we have to fight hard to keep the Fatherland, so that our children won't have to be slaves. Adults participate in the revolution, children also participate in the revolution'.[70] Consistent with messaging at schools, there were no calls for young people to take up arms while being underage. The closest sentiment was perhaps a poem he wrote for children 'hoping that each of you will become a child hero'.[71] Instead, Ho Chi Minh asked:

'How do you [children] fight? You:

- Study hard.
- Participate in the agricultural production.
- Help families of wounded soldiers and martyrs.

That's how you fight'.[72]

The equalisation here of studying and being more explicitly involved with the war effort (helping families of those who were injured or killed in the war) was significant. Years later, in an exhibition compiling various photos of children's lives in wartime Vietnam, a photo of an all-school meeting was shown. Under the photo, the caption read: 'Good study result was considered a great contribution to the course of defeating American aggressors', confirming Ho Chi Minh's writings.[73] In other letters, Ho Chi Minh encouraged children and youth to keep hygiene, nurture

[69] In this article, I examine letters Ho Chi Minh sent during the conflict with France as well as the US, despite my interviewees' participation solely in the struggle against the US. This is crucial as the French conflict immediately preceded and set the stage for the later US engagement, deeply influencing the environment in which my interviewees grew up and formed their political perspectives.

[70] Trương Tấn Sang, Tô Huy Rứa, Phan Diễn, Lê Văn Dũng, Lê Hữ'u Nghi¬a, Đỗ Hoài Nam, Nguyễn Duy Hùng, *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn Tập. Tập 5* [*Ho Chi Minh: Complete Works. Volume 5*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2011), 251 – 2.

[71] Nguyễn Văn Toàn, *Nhữ'ng vần thơ Bác Hồ gửi thiếu nhi* [*Poems Uncle Ho sent children*] <https://thanhtravietnam.vn/van-hoa/nhung-van-tho-bac-ho-gui-thieu-nhi-204684.html> [Accessed 24 December 2023].

[72] Trương et. al, *Volume 7*, 91.

[73] Multiple authors, Trẻ em thời chiến [Children at War] (Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing House, 2017), 97.

good manners, be disciplined, and be polite, or advised them to 'gradually cultivate the habit of self-reliance in your everyday lives' (to be able to apply it later in life).[74] In living their lives accordingly, young people defended the country and contributed to building a communist society. He praised all these actions as 'very good' and described these as little things that will benefit the revolution. Only in doing so, he concludes, would one be deserving of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.[75] In other words, ideological tenets of communism and nationalism were realised and reproduced through children and youth's daily actions as basic as washing hands and doing homework.

Ho Chi Minh's encouragements were significant. From a very young age, children and youth were encouraged to develop a familial connection between him and themselves regardless of whether they actually met or knew him personally.[76] For instance, in an undated letter, Ho Chi Minh reinforces the affectionate (if parasocial) relationship between himself and young people: 'Beloved children and teenagers, I went to France for a few months. I always miss you [*nhớ*' - alternatively can be understood as keeping one in mind; remembering]. You probably miss me too'.[77] At schools, houses, and public spaces, young people would see his photos or his teachings for children (often taking form of quotations within the letters). Further, 'Uncle Ho's good child' was an official title recognised and legitimised by schools, which resulted in receiving certificates of merit. To receive this title, children and youth were encouraged to 'build discipline to study, maintain cleanliness of schools and villages; care for families of war invalids, martyrs, and lonely elderly people; participate in labour to help families, support production cooperatives, and protect public property … '.[78] In loving Ho Chi Minh, striving to become 'Uncle Ho's good children', children and youth also strove towards the ideological notions he represented: the goals of unifying the country (which was equated to patriotism) and building socialism.

Uncle Ho's presence (and the continuous evocation of communism and nationalist struggle) was constant. Within their everyday lives, my interviewees recounted, they aimed to live according to his teachings, dreamt of being strong like the famous revolutionaries, brave soldiers, or 'child heroes' he spoke about. One of my interviewees, Trong, started participating in organising various musical performances led by the movement. These musical performances would recount Vietnamese history and once again frequently evoke themes of nationalism and loving one's country. Later, Trong would serve in the military. Thinking back to his motivations from the very beginning, Trong evoked Uncle Ho's call.[79] Here, we see the convergence of ideological practice and institutions which, through concrete actions of affirmation and recognition, contribute to dissemination of ideology.

[74] Trương et. al, *Volume 9*, 499.
[75] Trương et al., *Volume 5*, 223 – 4.
[76] Dror, 'Love, hatred, and heroism', 429.
[77] Trương et al., *Volume 4*, 472.
[78] Bùi Sỹ Tụng, Nguyên Vân Hương, Trần Quốc Thành and Phạm Vãn Thanh, *Giáo trình công tác Đội Thiếu niên Tiền phong và nhi đồng Hồ Chí Minh* [*Curriculum for the work of the Young Pioneers and Ho Chi Minh Children's Team*] (Hanoi: National University of Education Press, 2009), 27.
[79] Interview with Trong, 13 August 2019.

Production and reproduction

Almost word-for-word, the messaging about children and youth being revolutionary actors would be repeated at schools, public radios, and performances, which they attended and sometimes helped to organise through institutions such as Youth Association. Throughout the years, messaging about the war was also disseminated in more subtle ways, including setting up public meetings, delivering speeches, and posting bulletins in public spaces. The mass mobilisation campaign contributed to overwhelming support for the front which was almost 'bordering on hysteria'.[80] Those who did not join the military participated in labour and agricultural production. Many young people were therefore inevitably exposed to, and internalised, various ideological messages – and some, like my interviewees, indeed grew up to be dedicated to the revolutionary cause.

This does not mean that they were passive recipients of propaganda. Much like adults, children engaged, re-interpreted, reproduced, and challenged the ideological messaging. Even prior to joining the military effort, my interviewees created spaces to discuss, disseminate, and interpret ideology in the everyday: gathering around the loudspeaker while sharing meals and listening to the latest news, making up skits about the NLF fighters and their enemies, mimicking and poking fun at the Western accent. In doing so, young people learned 'to love, to hate, to detest the French occupiers, the American invaders … '.[81] Perhaps the most demonstrative story is that of Quyen, which highlights the subtle presence of politics in children and youth's lives from a young age and how he gradually grew to understand it. Prior to joining the struggle, Quyen remembered having conversations with his friends while doing mundane activities, such as eating. They frequently discussed recent NLF victories, listened to the latest news, and retold stories of brave martyrs who fought foreign invaders. Looking back on his childhood as an adult, he realised that despite not being aware of formal ideologies, the language of exploitation, social justice, and patriotism, was already strongly present in his thinking.[82] Understanding of 'formal' politics only fully materialised much later, as a result of participation in the war.

What was notable is the extent to which these activities became 'common sense'; I was struck by the instances of children and youth participating in reproduction of ideology, which frequently was taken for granted by many of my interviewees. Many recalled stories of cooking, sheltering the NLF guerrillas (with one recalling an amusing story of not knowing whether she was cooking for her pets or for the guerrillas at the beginning, being a very young child and not understanding the relationship her family had with the NLF). Yet, the villagers' activities in sheltering and feeding guerrillas not only helped the Front's survival, but also contributed directly to children and youth familiarising themselves with what it was fighting for. It was through the conversations with the combatants, that young people learned about

[80] Marr, 383.
[81] Trương et al., *Volume 7*, 186.
[82] Interview with Quyen, 11 August 2019.

the war and the 'beautiful' image of communists, as put by one of my interviewees, which later convinced her to join the struggle herself.[83]

Another interviewee, Khanh, was an active participant in the local Youth Association at the age of fourteen or fifteen, regularly setting up and organising propaganda performances. While acknowledging that these activities were beneficial for the movement during its military struggle, he seemed to treat it as less important than his later activities, when he enlisted into the army.[84] Setting up these performances, however, was also an important part of the movement's strategy for disseminating its ideology. It frequently organised meetings and historical and theatrical performances which centred on themes of Vietnamese history of expelling foreign invaders and building a new, socialist government.[85] Much like with other activities, these everyday actions did not presume passivity and laziness. Although treating it as a simple task, Khanh still took pride in his work and recounted that he responsibly set up every good performance (being able to detail every part of the process decades later).[86] In turn, many young people either went or directly participated in these associations, theatrical performances, or propaganda meetings. For interviewees such as Hong, it started with thinking the performances were fun, but then genuinely deliberating about her role in the military struggle to 'liberate our country' and ultimately deciding to become a nurse for the NLF.[87] What was taken to be a mundane everyday activity by Khanh or Hong, then, was a politically significant tool for disseminating the revolutionary ideology.

Within this context, it was difficult to pinpoint when exactly my interviewees started to become a part of the military struggle. Ideological socialisation took months, if not years, and, as I have shown above, often manifested in specific actions, rather than ideas to be articulated. It is further not a surprise that at the time of enlistment, many of my interviewees did not see the decision to join the revolution as explicitly ideological, but entangled with what they thought were more 'personal' aspects of their life. At that point, ideology and 'revolutionary consciousness' were already practised on all levels of their social life.

Conclusion

This article responds to calls within academic literature on armed conflict to attend to the role and importance of ideology. More specifically, I demonstrate the potential usefulness of approaching ideology as not just ideas but also embodied everyday practices. Examining the case of children and youth who grew up amidst Vietnamese military conflicts and eventually became dedicated to the revolutionary struggle, I found that none of my interviewees explicitly named ideology as the

[83] Interview with Kim, 25 July 2016.
[84] Interview with Khanh, 9 August 2019.
[85] David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); also Walter P. Davidson, *Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1968).
[86] Interview with Khanh, 9 August 2019.
[87] Interview with Hong, 23 July 2016.

cause they were fighting *for*, denying having any ideological consciousness. Using an Althusser-inspired approach and previous work by Franco and Chand, I show that ideological messaging was still consistently present in the social environment of Vietnamese young people – deliberately disseminated by revolutionary cadres as part of their all-people mobilisation campaign – and enacted by them through mundane actions. The language of, and concerns for, social justice, patriotism, and anti-colonialism became integrated into children's everyday life, even if they did not always register it consciously or treat it as significant. Their experiences further demonstrate the presence of ideology beyond slogans and dogmas, illuminating how even if a child does not know ideological slogans by heart, it can become an important part of their everyday life.

Such a framework provides a way to understand why many former veterans did not believe their motivations to be ideological while still embedding their motivations in ideological concepts. In other words, as Cynthia Enloe earlier commented, 'the mundane matters'.[88] This approach could provide important insights with regard to contemporary conflicts. Already, teachers in Russian schools are justifying the invasion into Ukraine by presenting Russians and Ukrainians as 'one people',[89] while everyday spaces are transformed with memorial plaques.[90] Investigating these changes may provide important insights for the significant number of youths who support the Russian invasion in Ukraine[91] and the ideology which 'considers the Ukrainian and Russian peoples to be parts of a single social and cultural community'.[92] Similarly, valuable work is already being done investigating how Palestinians practise nationalism in everyday life,[93] which can be of particular help in understanding the manifestations of resistance and ideology in Palestine.

This article also responds to earlier observations that there is still much space for investigating the role and effect of ideology specifically within children's daily lives – spaces which are highly politicised, but still largely overlooked within studies of war. The notion of *practice*, further, has important implications on conceptualising agency – which is at the 'heart of the everyday' – as being both product and force of social life.[94] It can also manifest itself in obedience and dedication,

[88] Cynthia Enloe, 'The Mundane Matters', *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 4 (2011), 447.

[89] Mediazona, '«Наши действия—это самозащита». Как школьные учителя должны оправдывать вторжение в Украину—методичка' *["Our actions are self-defense." How school teachers have to justify the invasion of Ukraine - a manual*] <https://zona.media/article/2022/02/28/propaganda-lessons> [Accessed 24 December 2023].

[90] ER, 'В Оренбургской области активисты «Единой России» установили в школах мемориальны е доски в честь участников СВО' [*In the Orenburg region, United Russia activists installed memorial plaques in schools in honor of the SVO participants*] <https://er.ru/activity/news/v-orenburgskoj-oblasti-aktivisty-edinoj-rossii-ustanovili-v-shkolah-memorialnye-doski-v-chest-uchastnikov-svo> [Accessed 24 December 2023].

[91] Ian Garner, *Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2023).

[92] Denys Kiryukhin, 'Russia and Ukraine: the clash of conservative projects', *European Politics and Society* 17, no. 4 (2016), 438.

[93] Iris Jean-Klein, 'Nationalism and Resistance: The Two Faces of Everyday Activism in Palestine during the Intifada', *Cultural Anthropology 16*, no. 1 (2001), 83–126.

[94] Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall and Ted Svensson, 'Everyday international relations: Editors' introduction', *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019), 125.

not just resistance. In turn, such conceptualisation challenges the conventional perception that children and youth are politically passive. On the contrary, much like more 'traditionally political' spaces such as international summits and town hall meetings, children's and youth's daily lives are filled with receiving, negotiating, and *practising* ideology. Such an approach also has implications for studying how adults engage with ideology as well: it recognises that individuals, regardless of age, do not simply absorb ideological tenets but also contribute to their evolution and manifestation in their everyday activity.

Ideology plays a varied role in war and conflict – however, as Maynard points out, in the context of organised violence there is 'almost always an ideological dimension in play'.[95] It is therefore essential to understand its many manifestations. Paying attention to how ideology can be lived, experienced, and enacted in the routines and interactions of ordinary people opens a line of enquiry with much potential. It contributes to an understanding of how ideology is not just a superficial façade. Rather, in intertwining with personal, everyday, as well as cultural and economic factors, ideology can play a significant role sustaining and shaping armed conflict even within seemingly apolitical spaces.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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[95] Maynard, 646.