

## The Little Girl of Hanoi (Em Bé Hà Nội)

By HAI NINH

1974, 72 MINUTES, COLOR

AVAILABLE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES AT  
<https://youtu.be/vFuEYCGV5ZY>

Reviewed by Margaret B. Bodemer



Screenshot 1, 1:00:58, the kind soldier who helps Ngọc Hà and listens to her story.



Screenshot 2, 16:51, gazing at her ruined home and neighborhood.



Screenshot 3, 27:40, looking resolutely at the captured American pilots.



Screenshot 4, 27:50, the captured American pilots looking back at Ngọc Hà.

When American students learn about the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (SRV), it is typically in the context of what Americans call the Việt Nam War but that is known in the SRV as the American War. Courses that address this conflict tend to emphasize American over Vietnamese experiences.<sup>1</sup> This review forwards *The Little Girl of Hanoi (Em Bé Hà Nội)* as an engaging course viewing that offers an important and alternative window into Vietnamese war experiences. Director Hải Ninh recalls that after he survived the December 1972 bombing campaign, he vowed to make a film to remember those who had been killed, saying, “I consider the film to be a memorial, a wreath to pay tribute to the souls of the dead.”<sup>2</sup> Released in 1974, the film is considered a classic, and English-subtitled versions are widely available on YouTube.

The specific historical context of the film is the December 1972 aerial bombing raids on Hanoi and Haiphong that consisted of eleven straight days of bombing and was the largest saturation bombing campaign of the war. Known to Americans as Operation Linebacker II, the campaign was designed to demoralize the Vietnamese and force them into submission. In Việt Nam, the campaign is referred to as the B-52 Air War or Điện Biên Phủ in the Air, the latter alluding to the eponymous 1954 victory against the French. The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam’s government (North Việt Nam) leveraged substantial damage, civilian, and military deaths to boost morale and steel the citizens to continue fighting and defending their homeland. At the same time, the campaign was a key factor in the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973 that effectively ended American involvement, and paved the way for the end of the war on April 30, 1975 and the collapse of the Republic of Việt Nam (South Việt Nam).<sup>3</sup>

*The Little Girl of Hanoi* unfolds during this intense bombing campaign and follows the film’s protagonist, Ngọc Hà, a young girl in search of her father who is serving in a rocket unit in the People’s Army of Việt Nam (PAVN).<sup>4</sup> The film relies on scenes in iconic locations in the capital city of Hanoi, with rubble and debris from the bombings as a steady backdrop. Coupled with actual footage of the bombings, the film conveys the intensity and hardship of the campaign and its aftermath for those who endured it. As well as being an homage to the survivors and victims of the bombings, the film also feels like a love letter to the beautiful and historic city of Hanoi.

The film opens on Hanoi in winter as a bus full of children and the elderly rolls into town, presumably a group of evacuees returning during what they think will be a safe time. A children’s chorus sings the song “Em

Bé Hà Nội”<sup>5</sup> as the following dedication scrolls across the screen: “Honoring the heroes of Hanoi, who defeated the American imperialist B-52 bombing raid on the capital during twelve historical days and nights, from December 18–25, 1972.” As the bus flows with other traffic of French autos, rickshaws, bicycles, Soviet buses, and horse carts underneath the iconic Long Biên Bridge,<sup>6</sup> a banner comes into view bearing Hồ Chí Minh’s famous quote: “there is nothing more important than independence and freedom” (*Không có gì quý hơn độc lập tự do*), a familiar refrain then and now.

After descending from the bus, Ngọc Hà chases after a military convoy and manages to flag down a large truck—one of the “rocket units”—loaded with antiaircraft missiles and calls out, “Uncle, please stop!”<sup>7</sup> Climbing aboard, she shares her story with the kind soldier (played by Thế Anh) and her quest to find her father. The kind soldier becomes a stand-in for the audience listening to her story (Screenshot 1). The film follows Ngọc Hà’s narrative in flashback, interspersed with scenes from the bombing campaign and the rocket units’ sometimes-successful efforts to shoot down B-52 bombers. We see the fates of Ngọc Hà’s mother who was at work in a sewing factory, and her younger sister, Thuỳ Dương, who was in preschool at the time of the bombing.

When Ngọc Hà shares that her home was located on Khâm Thiên Street, the soldier’s somber expression illustrates what all Hanoians would know upon hearing this: that the street was annihilated in the bombings of December 1972. We see her return home, where she discovers the entire street in ruins and neighbors forlornly picking through the debris to bury the deceased and recover personal property. Ngọc Hà locates the spot where her house used to be, and finds nothing but building debris, along with bits and pieces of personal belongings, such as her primary school reader (Screenshot 2). Ngọc Hà also gets caught in a bombing run and is forced to seek shelter in the coffin-like individual bomb shelters on the streets, relying upon charity from ordinary Hanoians along the way. Amidst the sadness, Ngọc Hà recalls the happy times spent together as a family and evokes the sort of resiliency and courage expected of the population at the time.

In perhaps one of the most interesting scenes for American viewers, Ngọc Hà witnesses a group of wounded B-52 pilots who have been shot down and are being marched through the street en route to prison. The pilots are paraded through an area crowded with civilians who shout at them and threaten them with knives and sticks. In the midst of this, the camera settles on Ngọc Hà, clutching the damaged school reader that she salvaged

from her destroyed home, glaring resolutely and defiantly at the prisoners (Screenshots 3 and 4). The contrasts among her contained rage and determination, the citizens' screaming, and the pilots' fear is compelling.

Overall, the film provides an incredibly rich viewing experience that conveys Vietnamese civilians' experiences during the bombing campaign of December 1972 and more broadly how ordinary people endured the war. When the film was released in 1974, Vietnamese audiences were fresh from their own survival and had suffered many losses themselves, which may explain some of the film's popularity among Vietnamese viewers. The film was clearly meant to be a morale booster and an ode to what they had endured and lost. Viewed by students in an undergraduate classroom, the film can effectively provide a very different perspective on the war. Instructors looking to delve deeper into Vietnamese experiences may enjoy pairing this film with a novel, such as *The Mountains Sing* or *The Sorrow of War*. It might also poignantly be paired with another film, *Land of Sorrows*, which provides an antiwar sensibility from a southern Vietnamese perspective.<sup>8</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. After the end of the war, the country was formally reunified and renamed the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam on July 2, 1976. To refer to the war, scholars prefer the Second Indochina War or the American War in Việt Nam, although many Americans still refer to it as the Việt Nam War. In Việt Nam, the term Thirty Years' War refers to the first and second Indochina wars together, or more specifically the Resistance War against America (*Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*) or *Chiến tranh chống đế quốc Mỹ* (War against American Imperialism).
2. Note that the film's title is sometimes inaccurately translated as *Hanoi Baby*. Quote from the film director is my translation from "Đạo diễn Hải Ninh nhớ "Em bé Hà Nội" (Director Hải Ninh remembers "The Little Girl of Hanoi"), March 18, 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/ydptxwpc>.
3. Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
4. The People's Army of Việt Nam, known as *Quân đội Nhân dân Việt Nam* in Vietnamese. It is often incorrectly referred to in the US as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA.
5. The song was written for the film by musician Hoàng Văn. You can find the lyrics here: <https://tinyurl.com/7u9ejp6u>.
6. The iconic Long Biên Bridge was built between 1899 and 1902 and named for Paul Doumer, the French governor general, as a railway and passenger crossing linking Hanoi to Gia Lam and destinations north. In 1954, at the conclusion of the First Indochina War, the victorious Viet Minh renamed it the Long Biên Bridge before declaring the capital liberated from France. The bridge thus has become a symbol of Vietnamese independence and defiance against foreign aggression. A key target for American bombers, the bridge's central span was destroyed in 1967, and more spans were destroyed in 1972, forcing flotilla operations to transport supplies and manpower across the Red River. Using steel supplied by the USSR, the bridge was repaired by March 1973. See railroad historian Tim Doling's blog and search for Long Biên Bridge for more: <http://www.historicvietnam.com/>.
7. In Vietnamese, speakers use kinship terms based on age, sex, and status relative to the speaker. Here she uses the respectful yet familiar "chú," meaning an uncle younger than one's father.
8. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, *The Mountains Sing: A Novel* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2021); Bảo Ninh, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*, trans. Phan Thanh Hao (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993). For a review of *Land of Sorrows*, see <https://tinyurl.com/wyamet4f>.

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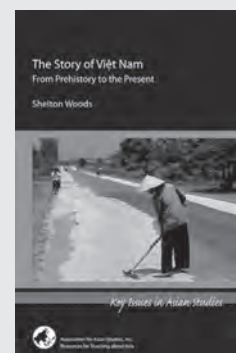
## Democratic Governments, Media, and War

**Editor's Note:** At least since the 1960 John F. Kennedy and Nixon debate, in democratic societies, media's influence on politics has been apparent. The 1968 Tết Offensive and media portrayal of the event is a case study for students trying to understand how in democratic societies media can have a powerful impact on politics and policies in times of war. EAA readers can ponder these questions through carefully considering the following excerpts on the Tết Offensive.

*The Story of Việt Nam: From Prehistory to the Present* (Key Issues in Asian Studies) by Shelton Woods. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asia Studies, 2013. 118 pages. ISBN: 978-0924304712. Paperback.

From p.55 of *The Story of Việt Nam*, on the Tết Offensive:

Many experts on the Việt Nam War believe that the NLF's 1968 Tết Offensive was the war's turning point. Tet, the lunar New Year and Việt Nam's most celebrated holiday, ushered in 1968 with much more than firecrackers. Directed by North Vietnamese military officials and carried out mainly by the Việt Cộng, the communists simultaneously attacked South Việt Nam's urban centers on January 30. Việt Cộng soldiers infiltrated the US embassy, and the Imperial City of Hue was held by the communists for several days. However, the grassroots uprising the NLF hoped would support its attacks did not materialize. In short, the Tết Offensive was a military disaster for the Việt Cộng, but politically it worked to perfection. Western media captured American officials ducking for cover in their pajamas outside the US embassy; cameras also captured the horrific scene of a South Vietnamese military official publicly executing a suspected communist sympathizer. These scenes caused many Americans to reassess US involvement in an increasingly unpopular war. Walter Cronkite, the highly respected CBS anchorman, broadcast and editorial predicting that the final outcome of the war would be more like a stalemate than the promised US military victory. Subsequently, President Lyndon Johnson did not run for reelection in 1968 and the Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, became the next US president. He promised an American victory in Việt Nam.



Mass graveyard for Communists who died trying to capture Hue during the 1968 Tết Offensive. Source: Wikipedia at <https://tinyurl.com/wbwr3pkn>.

### Democratic Governments, Media, and War (continued)

#### The Vietnam War

A ten-part documentary series produced and directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.

Public Broadcasting System (PBS), 2017



Boston Globe newspaper reporting on the aftermath of the Tét Offensive.  
Source: *The Vietnam War* episode 6, "Things Fall Apart."

Episode 6, "Things Fall Apart" (January 1968–July 1968), features a segment on the Tét Offensive. This segment along with additional materials for a lesson plan appropriate for high school students are available on the PBS website at <https://tinyurl.com/h69zfcv>.

The Tét Offensive:

President Johnson insisted the Tét Offensive had been a "devastating defeat for the communists." Militarily, he was right. Of the 84,000 enemy troops estimated to have taken part, more than half—as many as 58,000 men and women—are thought to have been killed, wounded, or captured. But it also showed that even after so many years of war, North Việt Nam still had the will and resources to fight. Walter Cronkite came home from covering the Tét Offensive convinced that victory was no longer possible. He told his viewers, "it is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out...will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could." ■



John Laurence reporting for CBS News from Saigon, Việt Nam following the Tét Offensive.  
Source: *The Vietnam War* episode 6, "Things Fall Apart."

### Day of the Western Sunrise

By KEITH REIMINK

DALIBORKA FILMS, 2018

76 MINUTES, DVD, COLOR

JAPANESE LANGUAGE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

By Angie Stokes, with Keith Reimink



*The Lucky Dragon*, dwarfed by the Castle Bravo nuclear blast eighty-five miles away.  
Source: Screen capture from the documentary.

#### The Survivors



Susumu Misaki: Wheelman.



Matashichi Oishi: Refrigeration/catch room.



Masaho Ikeda: Engineer/engine room.

*Day of the Western Sunrise* is a Japanese-language, English-subtitled, animated documentary film that follows three surviving crew members of the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* (*Lucky Dragon* No. 5). On March 1, 1954, this small wooden Japanese tuna fishing vessel was exposed to the United States' Castle Bravo thermonuclear test near the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific, where it stood eighty-five miles away from the epicenter of the blast. Because pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had circulated widely in newspapers and movie theaters, the fishermen knew they were witnessing the detonation of a nuclear weapon when a brilliant orange and red sky gave way to a gigantic mushroom cloud. After that instant, the lives of these twenty-three Japanese fishermen would never be the same.

The filmmaking process for *Day of the Western Sunrise* took place over a four-year period and included interviews of three surviving crew members in Japan, footage translation, and the reworking of rough pencil drawings that would eventually become the final animations. The film uses a *kamishibai*-inspired paper and digital animation process to retell the stories