

## Book Review

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Gregory A Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2020; 347 pp.: ISBN 978-1108493505 (hbk), £24.00.

In this book, Daddis offers an examination of how men's adventure magazines, or 'macho pulps', helped shape the attitudes of young working-class Americans who fought and served in the war in Vietnam. Daddis brings focus to a genre that has mostly been discounted in terms of its impact on the mass culture of the Cold War, possibly given that men's adventure magazines were regarded by the era's cultural commentators as 'disposable consumer kitsch'. (2) This is somewhat surprising, since the magazines did clearly have a significant import – as Daddis writes, by the mid-1960's the magazines had a collective circulation of roughly 12 million copies a month.

Daddis thus delves and examines how '[...] men's postwar pulps offer deep insights into an overlooked source of how masculinity was broadcast during the Cold War era.' (2) Given that their primary readership was working-class young men, Daddis further argues that these magazines may also be seen as a '[...] form of entertainment and escapism from deep class anxieties and fears about not measuring up in a rapidly changing postwar society.' (4) In so doing, Daddis also compares men's adventure magazines vis-à-vis soldiers' memoirs, oral histories, and court-martial proceeding testimonies, to examine gender, sexuality, and the broader connections between war and society. There was also a clear geopolitical angle, since the pulp magazines of the 1950's and 60's, as Daddis argues, further reflected fears by US foreign policy experts of Soviet communists having turned '[...] the whole world into a massive battlefield.' (48)

What kind of man, therefore, was presented in these adventure magazines of the 1950's into the mid-1960's that American men could seek inspiration from and identity with? Already at the outset, Daddis sets a convincing scene in which macho pulps offered a way for men to fantasize and identify with masculine norms of the 'protector' and 'provider' in contrast to the alienation and emasculation engendered by a dissatisfying post-war consumer society, as well as the Cold War communist threat. Further, magazines depicted '[...] the ideal man as both heroic warrior and sexual conqueror.' (3) Women, on the other hand, were treated much less kindly, and were represented as '[...] sexual objects, either trivialized as erotic trophies or depicted as sexualized villains using their bodies to prey on unsuspecting, innocent men.' (4) The pulps were therefore replete with sexism through the explicit denigration and objectification of women, as well as at times representing distorted, hyper-masculine, and racialized versions of masculinity – for example, minority soldiers rarely featured in storylines. This is in spite of the fact that the US armed forces had become increasingly diverse in the 1950's and 60's. As

a consequence, the tailoring of the magazines to a white male audience meant by proxy a disavowal of the recognition of blacks, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans as 'real' or 'full' men (35). This disavowal further meant an exclusion of minority men from dominant narratives of masculinity implicated in a shared 'sexual camaraderie' enjoyed by fellow white soldiers (36), and additionally implied that, contrary to the ideal of the 'All American' melting pot infantry squad, minority men were not really '[...] part of the heroic warrior-sexual conqueror paradigm.' (36)

However, pulp also offered a 'safe space' that 'helped to democratize war' (70). As Daddis argues, 'Everyone had potential to tell their story, even the lowliest private. Writing could become a form of catharsis, especially for those unwilling to reveal the ugliness of war with their own families.' (70). If the pulps could claim to have one overarching redeeming feature, then this would certainly be it.

What is also interesting is the role of fantasy and projection that the magazines may have played for some of these military men. As Daddis argues, retrospectively, for some men wartime service may have been privileged as a time when they felt most 'manly' (71) and how a man should supposedly stereotypically feel. Here, then, pulp had a role in providing an outlet for fantasies that could function as idealized psychic supplements to what could be, perhaps, the at times more banal aspects of real life, and in which 'men mattered' (72).

As Daddis puts it in an evocative passage:

'After deploying overseas and fighting in a global war, how many returned to suburbia and found their civilian lives monotonous, if not somewhat inconsequential? To these men, it seems likely that the macho pulps may have resonated more deeply. There they could find electrifying stories of rugged World War II bomber pilots crash-landing behind enemy lines, and then joining the French resistance to sabotage a key bridge over which the Nazis were planning to send reinforcements to pinch off the D-Day beachheads in Normandy.' (72)

One of the most interesting discussions in the book concerns 1960's stories on female Cold War spies, working at the direction of the Kremlin. As far as a specific story in a magazine argued, the use of sex in this manner meant a commitment to warfare, whereby the Russians were performing a form of, in the words of another magazine, 'sexological warfare' (102) that was as destructive a force as a 'nuclear bomb'. (102) Here, storylines in which females used their bodies to deceive and sex as a weapon made one thing clear – women could not to be trusted. As Daddis argues, 'That communist subversives so effortlessly could use sex meant few men were safe, being instead imperiled by women who were inhabiting bodies that *were* weapons [...]' (107) (Emphasis in the original). It is certainly discomfiting to read about the manner in which women's bodies were reduced and objectified into crude weapons, albeit clearly extremely powerful ones – but neither is it, strictly-speaking, a surprise, given that honey pots and honey traps are by no means an unusual occurrence, whether in the world of real-life espionage or in fiction. And it is by no means only women that engage or have engaged in the practice – think of, for example, the British case of female environmental and other activists who were deceived into sexual relationships by undercover police officers.

Indeed, Daddis makes clear that within the context of the Vietnam War, men also used sex as a weapon, specifically rape. Daddis provides explicit and uncomfortable descriptions of occurrences like gang rape. In one case, one witness described his company mates as ‘basically nice people’ (193) that nonetheless engaged in a brutal rape of a Vietnamese woman. One man ‘punched [a] chick on the side of the head’ and then seven GI’s ‘ripped her off’, in an occurrence that the witness described as ‘everyday routine.’ (193) As Daddis argues, ‘Regardless of their individual motives that evening, the rapists had acted out a violent form of aggressive masculinity, one tied directly to power and dominance. By imposing themselves on a young woman, they had weaponized their own bodies.’ (194)

Another salient discussion involves the war crimes and atrocities committed by American GI’s in Vietnam. In January 1971, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War held a 3-day event in Detroit – the Winter Soldier Investigation. The event brought to light more than 200 allegations of criminal behaviour on the part of American GI’s, with one participant claiming that ‘the deliberate and indiscriminate killing of civilians’ (184) had become standard operating procedure. Within this context, the additional historical value of adventure magazines is that they reflected the potential of combat to corrode moral standards and to turn men into cold-blooded killing machines, as well as its potential for sexism and the interlinking of sexism with war and violence. As one 1966 pulp storyline put it, for example, there were ‘damned few complaints from GI’s about bedroom co-operation from the local belles.’ (190) However, as the same pulp argued, a problem was that ‘formerly sheltered Vietnamese gals have not much imagination. That’s why a couple of enterprising noncoms have imported a half-dozen doxies from Japan – to teach the Viets a few tricks.’ (190) The sexism, disdain and violent misogyny towards Vietnamese women in particular could be stark. Daddis provides a quote by the American journalist Michael Herr, who recalled the repetitive sexual remark every time an American GI encountered a dead woman. ‘No more boom-boom for that mama-san.’ (191) the GI would say.

To conclude, Daddis’ book provides a fascinating, albeit somewhat brief – the book runs at a mere 237 pages – account of macho pulp magazines within the context of war, and particularly during the 1950’s and 1960’s and with a specific focus on the Vietnam War. This book would be of interest to those concerned with military masculinities, gender and sexuality, representations of war in popular culture, the link between sexuality, violence and war, the Vietnam War, and war more broadly.

## ORCID iD

Linda Roland Danil  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9276-9535>

## Linda Roland Danil

*School of Medical Sciences, Department of Surgery,  
Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge, UK*

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