

Fall 1991

Maurer, Harry. *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam, 1945-1975, An Oral History*. New York: Avon Books, 1989.

Harry Maurer, the editor of this interview collection, contends that most Americans regarded their twelve month tour in Vietnam "as alien as science fiction." (p. 5) Maurer conducted a number of interviews with military personages (Army Generals John Cushman, William DePuy, William Fulton, and Harry Kinnard) as well as with less prominent men and women. He concludes that the Americans, true outsiders, had little understanding of their ally.

Maurer's book is well organized. His interviews are grouped topically, covering America's involvement from 1945 to 1975. Each topical section begins with a chronology of major historical events and each interview with a short account of that person's experience during and after the war. The range of interview subjects (combatants, advisers, ex-POWs, nurses, diplomats, civilian volunteers, intelligence officers, and AID officials) is quite remarkable, bridging nearly all aspects of America's commitment in Vietnam. The chronological span and topical variety of the collection serve as reminders of the difficulties and danger of generalizing about this controversial and complex struggle. The diversity of interviews also evokes the varied motives of those who served: patriotism, altruism, escape, adventure, career advancement. To his credit, the editor allows each person to speak in his or her voice. On the basis of their interviews, most individuals have seriously reflected on the personal meaning of their time in Vietnam and the significance of the war.

Time has brought no consensus on the meaning of Vietnam. Judging from the range of views expressed in this collection, civilians and soldiers as well as hawks and doves still strongly disagree about America's involvement, how the war should have been fought, and what lessons the US should have learned from its tragic experience in Southeast Asia. The interviews on the pacification program and those with general officers are particularly germane to the debate on Vietnam. They probe the nature of the war and question whether the US Army's strategy was appropriate in fighting a revolutionary guerrilla movement, raising the issue of how the Army ought to handle insurgency in the future.

The general introductory essay, however, detracts from the book's merits. Here, Maurer strives to divine the larger significance of the war, but produces instead an idiosyncratic interpretation that is laden with cliches and overly broad generalizations about Vietnam that reflect the author's anti-war position. Although a self-acknowledged "draft dodger," the editor keeps his personal views out of the interviews; the introduction is unfortunately another matter. His reference in the introduction to the Vietnamese as "locals" seems an ironic slip of the pen for a writer whose central thesis is criticism of American colonial intrusion. A further irony is that the interviews, in their rich diversity, tend to refute Maurer's basic thesis. By virtue of their long service, many of those interviewed became both conversant and comfortable with Vietnamese culture.

The book raises methodological issues, because the interviews are not even remotely contemporaneous with the events they describe. Maurer's subjects were interviewed 10 to 40 years after their experiences in Vietnam. This long interval makes it impossible to discern to what extent those interviewed have modified their views as a result of the war's outcome or in what ways the passage of time has altered their recollection of events. It is hard to conceive that the author's subjects were as discerning and prescient in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as they were in the 1980s when interviewed. For these reasons, the historian needs to handle these interviews cautiously. It would be imprudent to accept them unreservedly as accurate historical documents.

Yet, these interviews matter. They offer deeply felt personal insights. The perception and eloquence frequently expressed in them reveal how deeply the war still affects many of those who served. My advice is to skip Maurer's introduction and investigate the interviews.

Richard A. Hunt
U.S. Army Center of Military History

Bocharov, Gennady Nickolayevich. *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan Through Russian Eyes*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

The author of this book is a correspondent for one of the more progressive and civilized Soviet publications, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* or *Literary Gazette*. He was in and out of Afghanistan throughout the war and produced some of the better — which is to say, less mendacious and rubbishy — coverage of that miserable event. During the Brezhnev period *Literaturnaya Gazeta* was the most progressive — which is to say, least abominable — Soviet paper probably because it was the publication targeted at the intelligentsia.

The book is structured as a series of anecdotes in which the correspondent's experiences are alternated with stories from the point of view of Soviet soldiers. These anecdotes resemble short stories and each one points a moral. The morals are without exception depressing. It was a truly horrible and pointless war in which, evidently, everyone involved knew that all the officially-given reasons for it were lies. In one section Bocharov sets out to find out whether anyone knows what the war was really about. An Afghan refugee doesn't know: there is war there, that's all. A Soviet private soldier doesn't know: he was drafted, dropped down in the middle of it and was told that it was his "internationalist duty." But he doesn't know what that is either — not even his political officer could give him a satisfactory explanation. Finally Bocharov asks General Gromov, the commander: he doesn't know either; Bocharov should ask someone else. No one today will attempt to