

# Ordinary Evil: Vietnam's History Reveals the Banality of Systemic Violence

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by **Jerry Elmer**

MY LAI, Vietnam — My Lai is known to Americans as the site of a massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American troops. On the morning of March 16, 1968, American forces entered the village and gathered up all living things: elderly men and women, infants in mothers' arms, pigs, chickens, and water buffalo. Then, the Americans proceeded to kill them all, slowly, carefully, methodically. It took four hours (this was no sudden outburst of passion), until all 504 people and all the animals were massacred. Fifty-six of the people killed were under seven years old; some of the infants were bayoneted to death. Women were raped before being shot.

After the killing orgy, two of the American soldiers (one a religious Mormon) sat down to lunch nearby. Unfortunately, their meal was interrupted by the moans of a few villagers shot and left for dead, but not yet fully dead. The two soldiers, disturbed by the interruption, finished off the few villagers still alive, and then went placidly back to their meal.



Today, there is a memorial here at the site of the massacre. Part of the memorial is an indoor museum. The highlight of the museum is a somber plaque containing the names and ages of each one of the 504 people killed. There is a large outdoor monument and several smaller sculptures on the grounds. There is also a large outdoor mosaic in a pattern that reminds one of Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" (which was commissioned as a memorial to the victims of an earlier massacre). Here at My Lai, one can walk around the remains of the village and see the Thun Yen ditch in which 170 of the victims died. And one can see the remaining brick foundations of the few burned village houses that had brick foundations. It was raining today in My Lai. Neither the village nor the museum is very large, and it does not take long to see it all.

My friend, Lady Borton, who lives in Vietnam, tried to discourage me from visiting My Lai. Back in 1968, Lady had been living in Quang Ngai Province, where My Lai is located, working for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the co-recipient of the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize. AFSC had a center in Quang Ngai, providing medical aid for civilian war victims. Lady had taken some of the first American journalists to My Lai after the massacre was first revealed in the West by Seymour Hersh. Lady said to me, "The point I made then, which was ignored then, is that this behavior by American GIs happened all the time. I had friends who survived and were killed in subsequent massacres in the same area. There were many massacres.... I hold a contrarian view about [these] tourist sites because they lift up one incident (or one individual) as if this were an aberration, when, at least to my observation, the truth is quite the opposite."

Lady (that's her name, not her title) is quite correct; the My Lai massacre was not an aberration. It was an exemplar of what American troops did in Vietnam. The issue that Lady raises is an important one, and it is part of a wider debate that has been going on for decades.

In 1962, Hannah Arendt covered the trial of Adolph Eichmann for *The New Yorker* magazine, and her articles were subsequently published as a book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt's book caused a firestorm of controversy. Her argument, reflected in the subtitle of the book, was that Eichmann was not a monster, not an aberration; he was an ordinary man, a bureaucrat, who did his job efficiently and well. In the 50 years since the Eichmann trial, Arendt's central argument has become a commonplace — so much so that it is difficult for contemporary observers to appreciate how controversial Arendt's thesis was at the time. Today, Daniel Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, makes much the same point. Hitler did not kill six million Jews on his own, and atrocities were not limited to a few monsters in the Schutzstaffel (SS). The Holocaust was carried out with the cooperation and assistance of millions of ordinary people. Evil is banal, not extraordinary.

Lady argues that My Lai was just an ordinary example of a far wider phenomenon. Arendt argues that Eichmann was just an ordinary example of a far wider phenomenon. They are both correct.

This argument resonates for me because, growing up, I heard it from my own family, Viennese Jewish refugees who fled Vienna after the Anschluss, the Nazi takeover of Austria in March 1938. For example, I keenly remember the controversy that erupted in 1972 over the elevation of the Austrian Kurt Waldheim to be Secretary General of the United Nations. During World War II, Waldheim had been an intelligence officer in the Nazi Wehrmacht. His defense of his actions was that Austria had been Hitler's first victim. Don't blame Austrians

for Nazi atrocities, Waldheim said; we Austrians were *victims* of the Nazis. My grandmother was outraged. She told me how, when Hitler marched into Vienna, jubilant throngs of Austrians packed the streets to welcome him. Mothers held infants aloft to be blessed by Hitler. Austrians were not unwilling victims, my grandmother told me; the Austrians embraced Hitler eagerly and enthusiastically.

My grandmother's personal experience agreed with Goldhagen's scholarly research; the Holocaust was not caused only by Hitler and a few henchmen. Despite the controversy Arendt stirred up in 1962, she was absolutely correct: what was *really* scary about Eichmann was precisely his banality.

So, too, with My Lai. One leading scholarly account of the massacre describes Charlie Company, which carried out the atrocity, as "very average" for American forces (*Four Hours in My Lai*, by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, pp. 50-51). Of Lt. William Calley, the only American convicted of the crime, Bilton and Sim say that he was "a bland young man burdened with as much ordinariness as any single individual could bear ... conventional and commonplace" (*Id.*, p. 49). Another scholarly account of the massacre says: "There was simply nothing unusual about Charley Company" (*My Lai: A Brief History with Documents*, by James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, p. 10).

That is to say, I believe that Lady is correct. My Lai was not an aberration; it was very, very ordinary. But still I traveled many hours out of my way to visit. Why?

I believe that, while what happened on March 16, 1968 here at My Lai was in no way unusual, exemplars like this help us to remember important matters. In 1975, I visited the memorial that now stands at Dachau with my father. It was a very moving visit, not because this was the only place where the Holocaust was carried out, but because it was — in its typicality — an exemplar. Seeing the barracks, seeing the crematoria, reminded me that this was one of the very, very many places where the Holocaust was carried out.

In 1981, I was one of the first Westerners in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge were driven from power. The killing field at Rolous Village that I visited, with its acres of skeletal remains and the stench of rotting corpses, was not unique; but it was an important exemplar of a much broader phenomenon. As an exemplar it was worth visiting, because it helped me to understand and remember the wider phenomenon.

So too with My Lai. Lady is correct; My Lai was not unusual. But I am glad I came here, because it helps me understand and remember the wider phenomenon.

**Jerry Elmer** is the author of *Felon for Peace: The Memoir of a Vietnam-Era Draft Resister*. The book has been published in Vietnam as *Tôi ph?m vì hòa bình*, by Th? Gi?i Publishing House in Hanoi, which is bringing out a third edition of the book in January on the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Paris Agreement.

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