

The Vietnam War revisited

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An art exhibition, a film, a key figure and a recent panel discussion have breathed new life into the debate on the Vietnam War and anti-war opposition.

German artist Nghia Nuyen and his family fled South Vietnam on the Cap Anamur in 1980, shortly after the Vietnam War had come to an end. Much of Nuyen's work takes the form of portraits in a style that is informed by van Gogh and Bacon. His installation of large scale oil-painted dollar bills can be seen at his current exhibition in Berlin. On closer inspection of the works it becomes apparent that the central portrait of George Washington has been replaced on each bill with a depiction of a mutilated face of one of the victims of the US airstrikes that sprayed Agent Orange across Vietnam. The war formally ended in 1975 but its fatal consequences are still felt today, particularly by the victims of chemical warfare who, despite numerous setbacks, continue to organize and seek reparations.

The other side of the war – the deep rift it caused in US society – is explored by New York director Johanna Hamilton in her film *1971*, screened recently as part of the One World Berlin festival. She documents the actions of a group of anti-war activists as they break into an FBI office in Philadelphia. The group found reams of evidence of the widespread surveillance of the anti-war and student movements and organized women's and black groups. It was an act of resistance that formed part of a wider movement; during the 1970s activists broke into over 350 US army conscription offices, burning files and records in an effort to stop the war. Despite the organization of one of the biggest ever FBI manhunts under the direction of infamous FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, the identities of the members of the Philadelphia group were never discovered until they appeared in the film and in the recently published Betty Medsger book "The Burglary". How? I suspect it was because they were part of a large movement that was able to offer them protection; there were just too many people on the FBI's lists.

The movement was a global one that included the West German student movement, which was denounced in the strongest terms by the political parties currently in power for its resistance to the illegal war being waged by the US.

Daniel Ellsberg, now 83, was a member of the anti-war movement. In the late 1960s he photocopied and distributed 7,000 pages of strictly confidential files known as the Pentagon Papers. These documents showed that the war policies of a series of US presidents were based on lies and the deception of the American people. His remarks on the recent awarding of the Right Livelihood Award to Edward Snowden had a bitter edge. Ellsberg's 1971 revelations did not prevent the re-election of Richard Nixon, nor did it stop the most egregious bombing campaigns since World War II in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

These blanket bombings, which killed tens of thousands of civilians, went unpunished, just like the widespread torture and massacre carried out at My Lai. In his comprehensive study of

the war, *Krieg ohne Fronten* (War without Fronts), and at a recent event at ECCHR, America expert Bernd Greiner described how Lieutenant William Calley was initially sentenced but later pardoned for his role in the massacre. One of the harshest critics of the methods of warfare in Vietnam was current US Secretary of State John Kerry who, as spokesman for the Vietnam Veterans against the War, pointed out: “if you are going to try Lieutenant Calley then you must at the same time [...] try all those other people who have responsibility.”

The situation is no different today. Those who uncover breaches of human rights and constitutional violations are brought before courts while the perpetrators go free. The Edward Snowden of 1971, as Ellsberg ironically refers to himself, was lucky. He managed to avoid the 115 year jail sentence that he could have received under the Espionage Act because President Nixon panicked at the prospect of the revelations, resorting to illegal methods that included FBI agents breaking into the office of Ellsberg’s former psychoanalyst seeking information on Ellsberg’s mental state, ultimately resulting in the dismissal of charges.