From 1964 to 1973, Soviet, American, and Vietcong propagandists generated incredible numbers of pamphlets, television shows, films, and radio programs that focused on the image of the child. How these depictions of children were created and what functions they performed as symbols of national strength and mobilization are the subjects of this article. Images of youth provide a category of analysis for understanding how these propaganda programs succeeded and sometimes failed in their attempts to win the allegiances of the Vietnamese people. Based on previously unexplored transnational sources, this article examines the contested meanings of the child’s image as a way to understand the conceptual boundaries that were established and transgressed by the Soviet, American, and Vietcong propaganda programs. By comparing and contrasting these programs with each other, this article shows how images of youth served as cultural currency in each side’s efforts to determine what was at stake in the war and what needed to be done to win it. Youth, which played such a central role in articulating and humanizing Soviet, American, and Vietcong policies, took on different meanings when contextualized by the moral and political ambiguities of the Vietnam War.

Over the last decade, historians of the Vietnam War have unearthed a complex, often opaque story of conflicting expectations, great hopes, and tragic mistakes. They have shown how the war was experienced and understood in differing ways by soldiers on both sides of the conflict, by civilians, international aid workers, and those who watched the war unfold in news reports around the world. They have started to place the conflict in its larger cold war context, and they have looked at how images and rhetoric played an important role in manufacturing public consent and dissent towards the war on a global scale.1 This article contributes to this new scholarship by exploring how Soviet, American, and NLF propagandists used images of children to articulate the terms of the Vietnam conflict to a diverse audience.

In their efforts to win the hearts and minds of their listeners and viewers, propagandists during the war took markedly different approaches in their
public depictions of children. Beginning in 1964, workers at the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) presented American youth as examples of the wealth, education, and racial equality that were ostensibly made available to U.S. citizens and their allies. As the war progressed, JUSPAO portrayed South Vietnamese children as victims of NLF atrocities and as beneficiaries of American modernization. In contrast, Soviet propagandists conjured images of Russian children supporting their North Vietnamese allies. They depicted the United States as a land wracked by racism, and, like their NLF counterparts, they constructed an image of the Vietnamese child as a trained revolutionary, driven to take up arms against the American invader. These differing images not only helped to legitimate each side’s participation in the war, but reflected and shaped each side’s construction of warfare itself. Underlying cultural beliefs about what defined childhood, what spaces children were expected to occupy, and what obligations adults carried towards the young were intrinsically tied to differing perceptions of how and why the war should be fought.

Yet while these images were meant to convey promises of Soviet solidarity, American protection, and NLF indomitability, they also displayed a variety of conflicting messages about each side’s commitment to the war. Visions of mobilized Russian children supporting the North Vietnamese could not conceal the Soviet Union’s unwillingness to intervene on their behalf. Similarly, American portrayals of Vietnamese children as passive victims of the NLF and as recipients of Western care presented a picture of a desperate South Vietnamese society at a time when the U.S. leadership was trying to convince the South that it was capable of leading its own war effort. The American message of humanitarian concern and defense for Vietnam was further complicated by depictions in the worldwide press of lynched teens in Mississippi, slaughtered infants in My Lai, and naked children covered in napalm. Not surprisingly, the NLF made it a practice to highlight all of these contradictions in their own propaganda and to present their children as a force that would continue to fight despite American aggression and Soviet reticence. Youth, which played such a central role in articulating and humanizing Soviet, American, and NLF policies, took on different meanings when contextualized by the moral and political ambiguities of the Vietnam War.

Significant scholarship has been devoted to chronicling the successes and errors of the American propaganda effort in Vietnam. Yet no analysis has been done on the other propaganda programs that were so prevalent during the war. No attempts have been made to compare the strategies and effectiveness of these programs with each other. No research has been published on the prevalent image of the child in the Vietnam War. Based on previously unexplored
American, Soviet, and NLF sources, this article uses the image of the child as a category of analysis for understanding how each side struggled to create cultural currency and establish its own conceptual boundaries for what was at stake in the war and what needed to be done to win it.

**THE AMERICAN MESSAGE**

In 1964, JUSPAO launched a campaign to sell the American message to its Vietnamese audience. Twenty new officers joined the Vietnam office while funding for propaganda to the region increased dramatically. The American program in Vietnam quickly became the largest propaganda effort in its history, requiring vast expenditure, the attention of thousands of workers, and the use of all possible psychological tactics in the pursuit of Vietnam’s “hearts and minds.” By 1967, Voice of Freedom and Voice of America broadcasts were transmitting seventy hours a day on multiple channels to audiences in Vietnam and Cambodia and were heard by sixty-two percent of the population.4

In the press, radio, television, and film, workers at JUSPAO delivered a simple set of messages to their Vietnamese audiences. They argued that humanist ideals drove the United States to stop the NLF and their communist beliefs from spreading into the South. They presented the United States as a wealthy country, willing and able to provide a path towards modernization to its allies. As a first step towards freedom, they argued that the Vietnamese people should rally behind the United States and the South Vietnamese government. These messages persisted throughout the tenure of the American propaganda effort and worked to establish the United States as a benevolent provider and protector of the South Vietnamese people.

JUSPAO delivered these messages in part by presenting the American child as a symbol of wealth and future prosperity. JUSPAO envisioned America’s children as economically comfortable while also being committed to racial equality and progressive capitalism. Such images were intended to provide a “real” glimpse into the benefits of American-sponsored modernization. They were meant to counter falling approval ratings of the American broadcasting effort among Vietnamese listeners and to fulfill the mandates of the VOA’s new director, John Chancellor, who in 1965 argued that the organization needed to “swing a little” by producing livelier and more creative programs.5

A typical radio broadcast on American children was produced in 1965 under the title “A Visit to an American School,” which took its Vietnamese listeners on a tour through the classrooms of a middle school in Maryland.6 In the broadcast, the narrator attributed the traits of intelligence, economic fairness, and a belief in racial equality to the American child. After listening in on Spanish, German,
and French language courses, the show visited a class on “American private enterprise” and took a trip to the school’s cafeteria, where the food was “plentiful and cheap.” The broadcast then turned its attention to the issue of civil rights, arguing that “how well integration is proceeding can best be told by the assistant principal,” who was himself African American.

Remarkably absent in broadcasts like these was the war itself. Unlike the Soviet Union, which portrayed its children as actively united with the North Vietnamese in their crusade for national liberation, programs like “A Visit to an American School” failed to show any direct connection between America’s seemingly well-educated, wealthy, nonracist youth and the struggling children of South Vietnam. Instead, American youth in JUSPAO broadcasts consistently appeared insulated, wealthy, and contained at home, while remaining a safe distance both physically and psychologically from the fighting abroad. Despite the fact that American soldiers in Vietnam were frequently referred to in American domestic rhetoric as “boys” who were sacrificing their lives either for the cause of freedom or for a meaningless war, JUSPAO avoided such allusions and opted instead for a vision of the soldier as an adult who was capable of providing protection to the Vietnamese populace.

Circumscribed images of American children were joined by a much larger effort to portray Vietnamese youth as victims of communist aggression and as beneficiaries of American aid. In July 1965, JUSPAO’s planning staff put together a set of recommendations for how the U.S. propaganda effort should exploit NLF atrocities among its listeners and readers. After discussing the effects that various kinds of atrocities could have upon audiences, the authors came to two conclusions. First, listeners and viewers had to be made to understand that NLF brutality was “inseparably linked to the communist system.” Second, the most “effective” atrocities were the ones where the “number of ‘innocents’ slaughtered is significant or if the slaughter is by its very nature particularly abhorrent.” As one JUSPAO writer put it, “The demolition by a NLF mine of a bus carrying children is exploitable.” Such actions would, in his words, “instill fear for the purpose of controlling people’s behavior” and would “generate hostility” towards the agents of such “indiscriminate targeting.” Children were also useful as tools for evoking homesickness among NLF and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops. As a part of what Barry Zorthian, the head of JUSPAO, called the “Born in the North, die in the South campaign,” American propagandists endeavored to convince their NLF and NVA readers that their children were suffering without them, that they were certain to die far from the homes of their ancestors, and that the only way to survive was to rally to the South.
One of the most prominent ways that these images of atrocity and defection manifested to Vietnamese audiences was through the Chieu Hoi program, a campaign meant to encourage the NLF and NVA to defect. Propaganda for Chieu Hoi was conveyed primarily through the dropping of leaflets over areas of South Vietnam loyal to the NLF. Between 1964 and 1968, images of children appeared in an average twenty-seven percent of Chieu Hoi leaflets dropped by JUSPAO. Considering that over five thousand different types of leaflets adding up to fifty billion total were dropped by the Americans through the course of the war, this represents a significant visual occurrence for audiences in Vietnam. Two kinds of leaflets consistently featured images of children: those based on what JUSPAO called the “fear appeal” and those founded on the “family appeal.” The “fear appeal” involved showing the bodies of dead women and children in order to convince soldiers who sided with the NLF that they were inviting the deaths of their families. As a second and subsequent tactic, leaflets promised that if a soldier reported voluntarily to the ARVN, he would receive medical care, rehabilitation, and would be able to reunite with his family, thereby constituting the “family appeal.” Hundreds of pictures and illustrations depicted families pleading to their fathers to come home, where their own survival was made tenuous by the absence of their main wage-earner. The United States regularly offered families as much as three hundred piastras to make such appeals. Other images depicted the bucolic happiness of rural life, with children rejoicing at their father’s return. Others offered visions of American soldiers providing medical care to families and their young, kept safe within the confines of the strategic hamlet.

Unfortunately, both the “fear appeal” and the “family appeal” had their flaws. Atrocities often created more fear than hostility among their readers. Instead of driving the population to rebel against the NLF in moral indignation, these images encouraged them to side with the enemy in order to improve their odds of survival. In addition, the promise of family reunion was often an empty one. As many JUSPAO workers would admit privately, the United States and the GVN were largely incapable of reuniting soldiers to their families located in NLF-controlled areas. Even worse, a soldier’s defection might put his family in danger of NLF retribution. Also troubling was the possibility that these leaflets might encourage South Vietnamese ARVN soldiers, as well as NLF soldiers, to desert their posts for the comforts of home. While it was easy enough to produce these images, it was almost impossible to control the meanings that they carried once they reached their audiences.

By 1967, as the war became more desperate for both the Viet Minh and the GVN, images of the child-soldier, depicted as brainwashed or kidnapped into
forced conscription, also emerged in American propaganda. JUSPAO reported
that parents in villages were cutting off their children’s trigger fingers in order
to avoid their being drafted by the NLF.\textsuperscript{15} North Vietnamese children were fea-
tured heavily in reports on young Hoi Chanh soldiers, boys and girls who had
been conscripted into the NLF army at a very young age and had subsequently
defected to the South through the Chieu Hoi program. As one issue of \textit{Vietnam
Magazine} declared in 1969, “We have welcomed little boys and girls of 12, 13,
and 14 who have returned fully armed . . . [They had been] abducted, rounded-
up, and forced into armed conflict.”\textsuperscript{16}

As David Hunt has pointed out in his study of village life during the war,
these child-soldiers often were not abductees, but turned voluntarily to the NLF
as a way to escape impoverished and abusive homes.\textsuperscript{17} JUSPAO assumed that
Vietnamese adults carried the same beliefs about the innocence and necessary
insulation of children in society. These assumptions translated into the formulat-
ion of a propaganda tactic. Unfortunately, this tactic did not necessarily reso-
nate with an audience that, whether because of belief or necessity was far more
ambiguous about the range of appropriate roles for children in war. Differing
cultural perceptions towards children not only informed how JUSPAO shaped
its message to its listeners and viewers; they also impacted how those messages
were received on the ground. This is evidenced most clearly in memoirs of the
war written by Vietnamese civilians. Authors like Le Ly Hayslip and Bao Ninh
have presented visions of a populace that was frequently forced to disregard the
needs of the young for the sake of familial and national survival.\textsuperscript{18}

The cumulative effect of JUSPAO’s work was to construct an image of
America protecting and aiding a largely passive Vietnamese populace from the
brutal actions taken by the NLF. They established a causal relationship in their
broadcasts and publications between the acts of the NLF upon the young of
Vietnam and the paternalistic responses of American troops, who provided aid
through the pacification program and the corralling of villagers into strategic
hamlets. As one leaflet from 1965 argued to its Vietnamese readers, in contrast
to the NLF, who “will bring you to their secret zones and kill you brutally,” the
U.S. army would instead “take care of your health, cure your sickness, and give
you remedy.”\textsuperscript{19}

Perhaps the most memorable articulation of these themes came early in the
war, in 1964, when the United States Information Agency (USIA) teamed up
with director/producer Richard Heffron in conjunction with JUSPAO to make
the film \textit{Night of the Dragon} for global distribution. The piece was often played
before the feature showing of George Cukor’s film \textit{My Fair Lady} and received
wide distribution not only in Southeast Asia, but also in Europe, America,
Africa, and Latin America. It told the story of the South Vietnamese struggle to wrest freedom from the NLF. By combining the resonant narration of Charlton Heston with graphic montages of the dead and protracted shots of the brave South Vietnamese, some of which were staged, Heffron was able to portray the United States as resolutely bound to the cause of South Vietnamese freedom, while communism was rendered as an anathema. In the words of Carl Rowan, this film sought “to evoke sympathy and support among world-wide audiences for the Vietnamese cause.”

In Heffron’s hands, the Vietnamese child became an icon of suffering and hope. In a striking montage at the film’s beginning, Heston intones, “Many of the victims did not die from the accidents of war, they were selectively murdered for political example.” A collection of photographs follows: a young man on the ground, his throat slit, his elbows bound behind him; a child atop a pile of rubble next to a burned-out bus; a woman’s face framed in bangs of blood; a girl’s head only tenuously connected to what might be a body, twisted to the verge of decapitation; a mother and child lying dead together. Pausing, the camera finally settles on the dead bodies of two children clumped together in the dirt—their elbows bound as in the first photo. Taken from a distance far beneath the boys, the shot replicates visually the explanation that Heston gives for these deaths: “because they were in the way.”

Heffron’s film produced for its unsuspecting viewers seeming verification that American policy in Southeast Asia was, at its most basic level, about resisting blind violence and inhuman barbarity. It argued that without American involvement, chaos would reign, and the innocent would become fodder for communist warmongering. It also endeavored to justify the American policies of pacification and modernization by portraying well-protected children living in a strategic hamlet. During the day, children can be seen receiving schooling and medical care. At night, Heffron captures the happiness of a festival inside the hamlet with youngsters laughing and dancing. The festival and the manifest joy of the children are unfortunately cut short by an NLF attack, which forces the children to take cover and the soldiers to man the ramparts. Just as American youth appeared defended and insulated from the world outside their borders in programs like “A Visit to an American School,” Vietnamese children emerged as innocent figures bound by the safe confines of the strategic hamlet.

Night of the Dragon reveals the extent to which JUSPAO broadcasters envisioned the United States as the parent of a juvenile Southeast Asian populace. For instance, during a staged shot of South Vietnamese soldiers crossing an open field, Charlton Heston informs his viewers that the American captain supervising them came to Vietnam because he “can’t see a decent future for his
children if aggression is allowed to succeed.” As the American captain gazes out over his advancing South Vietnamese troops, the viewer is left to wonder which children the captain is referring to: his own young ones back in America or the “children” who he is supervising on this open field. Arguably, he is referring to both groups. To the extent that he is concerned for his own children, the global spread of communism presents the most serious risk to the promise of a “decent future.” More immediately, however, it is the men walking before him, the “children” of American generosity, whose future is most vulnerable. These sentiments were presented even more clearly by Stanley F. Reed, President of the Reed Research Foundation, who commented to the House of Representatives in 1963 concerning the work of American broadcasting that “these nations remind me of children with their alternating friendships, jealousy of possessions, continual truculence, and petty quarrels. I would like the rest of the world to think we could help each other in the ages to come to give our ‘children’ a feeling of security and belonging.”

These expressions of American paternalism participated in a larger, much older colonial discourse on the relationship between the Western and Southeast Asian worlds. They also helped to infantilize and feminize the Vietnamese population in what Lyndon Johnson called “that bitch of a war.” On the one hand, they supported the argument that American leadership was needed in guiding newly decolonized countries like Vietnam towards democracy and growth. At the same time, they reinforced colonial stereotypes about the static, passive, and child-like nature of Southeast Asian populations. As such, they attempted to provide a dominant language for understanding why Vietnam needed what America had to offer.

Despite its colonial undertones and its visual omissions, it would be a mistake to ignore the success of at least some of JUSPAO’s tactics on both NLF soldiers and the Vietnamese rank and file. Captured NLF documents attest to the demoralizing effects of the Chieu Hoi program as well as the power of high-budget films like Night of the Dragon. As one NLF report declared in October 1966, “Enemy activities . . . demoralize the village and hamlet cadre.” Perhaps not surprisingly, in numerous captured documents dating from 1965 to 1968, NLF propagandists and officials argued that JUSPAO’s most effective appeals were those which encouraged soldiers through fear and homesickness to surrender and rejoin their families. As one NLF official put it, “The most common weakness is the ideology of the family and of pacifism.” They pointed out that this was a particular problem during holidays, especially Tet, when JUSPAO would increase its leaflet and broadcasting programs in order to exploit feelings of homesickness among the NLF and the NVA. The potency of these programs is also evidenced by NLF efforts to halt defections, by their admission in 1966
that they had not adequately addressed the Chieu Hoi campaign in the early years, and by the strict rules that the NLF and NVA imposed on their soldiers in regards to accessing outside information and entertainment. Cadres were forbidden to listen not only to spoken enemy broadcasts, but to music and theatrical programs as well.27 For those who showed “defectionist” tendencies, reindoctrination or execution was the only remedy.28

Yet while these images supported JUSPAO’s campaigns to encourage enemy defection, to justify the policy of pacification, and to bolster the idea that America was needed in South Vietnam to protect the innocent, they also compromised the important American message that the Vietnamese should take up arms on their own behalf for the sake of their own national liberation. The Soviets and the NLF would repeatedly argue to their Vietnamese audience that the American presence in Vietnam was one of “reactionary aggression”—that America was exploiting its self-designated role as defender of the innocent in order to justify an aggressive foreign policy.29 The dependency of the South Vietnamese was arguably useful to JUSPAO and U.S. policy makers in the short term; it justified American military and psychological operations in the region. It nonetheless did little to establish this war as a crusade for national liberation in the South. “The enemy . . . makes [individuals] dependent upon his handouts and money,” one security directive from the NLF Propaganda Office (COSVN) argued in January 1967.30 While JUSPAO embraced this approach in order to justify America’s presence in the war, it also undermined the war effort at the grassroots level by encouraging passivity and failing to establish personal connections with the populace.

THE SOVIET MESSAGE

In contrast to JUSPAO’s constructed images of youth, the Soviet State Television and Radio Service (Gosteleradio) projected a series of counter-images of Russian, American, and Vietnamese children that embodied the Soviet promise for progress, the horror of the American presence in Vietnam, and the professed belief in the ability of the Vietnamese people to gain freedom on their own. Gosteleradio positioned its own wealthy, educated, activist youth as brothers and sisters of the North Vietnamese. In later years, when it became clear that the Soviet Union would not be sending troops to aid its communist ally, Gosteleradio increasingly portrayed the children of Vietnam as active revolutionaries who did not need Russian help to win the war. This was joined by an all-out condemnation of America and its treatment of African American and Vietnamese youth. As the war dragged on, Soviet expressions of undying unity between the two countries became subject to increasing criticism by the North Vietnamese and the NLF as
they realized the limitations of Russian support. As was the case with JUSPAO, Gosteleradio found itself creating images of children that both supported and at times contradicted their policies in the region.

The Soviet propaganda effort in Vietnam began as a part of a larger program in the late 1950s to reach audiences in Southeast Asia. Throughout 1956, the Soviet ministers of culture and the radio-technical industry sent regular letters to Khrushchev informing him that current levels of broadcasting were “insufficient.” They argued for “smarter” propaganda geared at reaching the cynical ears of populations significantly different from those who inhabited Europe and the West. These warnings did not fall on deaf ears. By 1960, broadcasters were transmitting in the native languages of their listeners while new programs like “Peace and Progress,” which were targeted at Southeast Asia, grew by more than two hundred fifty percent to a total of 2032 hours per week. In “simple and easy to understand” terms, the internal politics, economics, and culture of the Soviet Union were to be taught to listeners through “radiouniversities” and cultural education programs. Gosteleradio officials were directed to convey information about Soviet national politics, American colonial interference, the success of the Cultural Revolution, and the “steady help of the Soviet Union to the ‘young’ nations of the world.” They were to deliver the message that the Soviet Union was wealthy, willing to defend the non-European world from colonialism, and deeply opposed to American racism and class difference.

Broadcasts on the prosperity of Soviet children and their families were a steady fixture in Soviet propaganda throughout the 1960s. Proof of wealth, intended to counter stereotypes of Russian “backwardness,” often came in the form of domestic showcases highlighting the advantages of socialist industry. As one radio broadcast in 1966 declared, modern, “well-lit” apartments were being built at a breakneck pace, “planned with an eye for spaciousness; with a bed set up in the living room for little Katia.” In interviews, mothers and children spoke glowingly of the toys and the new washer and dryer now housed in their individual flats—all provided at the behest of the state. Steadily, as each broadcast attested, standards of living were improving. Not only were material goods available, Gosteleradio argued, produce, bread, meat, and butter were provided at heavily subsidized prices.

Fundamental to these broadcasts was the message that Soviet affluence was different than American abundance—not a form of economic imperialism but a means to gain independence and resist American hegemony. Widely disseminated broadcasts repeatedly argued that the underlying belief structures in the Soviet system enabled youth living under communism to acquire material wealth while avoiding the selfish, apathetic, apolitical consumerism that plagued the
Western world. As one 1964 radio broadcast argued, “The capitalists have only one dream—the dream to gain more profit. Children suffer when countries function in this manner.” In contrast stood the Soviet Union, whose aims were “to build new factories and new mills, to invent new machines, and to settle new lands so that children can live even better . . . even happier . . . Not only in our country, but in all the world.” Gosteleradio portrayed Soviet affluence as a product of distributed wealth. Even more important was the message that this kind of economic egalitarianism could be exported to the postcolonial world.

Russian children also played a central role in Gosteleradio’s efforts to establish Soviet solidarity with the Vietnamese people. As early as 1959, Vietnamese citizens could hear Soviet children expressing their friendship and support for independent nationalist movements. “Dear children of Vietnam—our distant friends,” one broadcast began. “I am happy that I can send to you my warmest greetings over the radio. Many of my friends and I have over the past year been exchanging letters with Vietnamese Pioneers. We have learned from them how you live, study, and how you help your elders with their work.” As American involvement in Vietnam increased, so too did the volume of such broadcasts. These programs worked to create the impression that Soviet citizens were not far away and not different from their Vietnamese listeners. While Gosteleradio certainly spent time proving Soviet wealth and progress, it also endeavored daily to cut the political, economic, and social distance between the two countries. As one Soviet boy in 1961 proclaimed over the radio, “We are happy that the youth of Vietnam are moving as one unified rank with the freedom-loving youth of the socialist countries who are all striving to create peace on earth.”

Five years later, in a radio show entitled “Always Together,” Gosteleradio travelled to five schools collecting audio recordings of Pioneer organizations as they expressed their solidarity with the “heroic children of Vietnam.” In contrast to the approach taken by JUSPAO, Soviet youth, in the words of one report, “assumed as its international duty the obligation to provide concrete help to the youths of nations engaged in nationalist struggles.” At the hands of Gosteleradio’s spin doctors, aid was rendered as more than a geostrategic action and instead was portrayed as an emotional event, born from an ingrained concern for the plight of the common Vietnamese citizen.

Gosteleradio aired broadcasts almost daily on a wide array of children’s activities engineered to show Vietnam that the Soviet Union was raising youngsters devoted to peace and the eradication of colonialism and racism. Pioneer groups and classrooms constructed “Vietnam Corners” like the one built by School Number Nine in Odessa in October 1966. Just as students had created “Red Corners” and “Pioneer Corners” in past years, they set aside a semi-permanent
space in their classrooms for materials and documents about the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with photographs of Haiphong, Odessa’s sister city, and the children who lived there. As one reporter marveled, “Here they exhibit letters and gifts. On the table lie books by Vietnamese writers and poets as well as works by Soviet authors about Vietnam.” Similar reports highlighted Vietnamese language programs, the publication of a Vietnamese-Russian dictionary, and campaigns like “Young Pioneers of the USSR aid Vietnam,” which was run by the International Friendship Clubs of Kiev, Ivanovo, Sverdlovsk, Moscow, and Artek, a summer camp on the Black Sea. Pioneers in these locations collected pens, pencils, textbooks, picture books, drawing paper, and paints and sent them as gifts, with no distinction ever made between North and South Vietnam. Pioneers also initiated a program called “Medicinal Herbs for the Hanoi Children’s Hospital” as well as a “Solidarity” movement where schoolchildren delivered thousands of pounds of collected herbs and three million rubles to Vietnam to build a Young Pioneer palace in Hanoi. In stark contrast to the constructed image of the American child in JUSPAO broadcasting, Soviet youth appeared not only to be the recipients of the gifts provided by a highly developed and prosperous society, but also socially conscious citizens willing to work on Saturdays doing dirty jobs not for themselves or for anyone within their national borders, but for the sake of their less-fortunate brothers and sisters abroad.

The Soviet child also provided a model for how the Vietnamese could frame their own resistance. From its inception, the Soviet Union had embraced an idealized vision of the child as a revolutionary. While this image had receded somewhat in the early Stalinist period, by the 1960s, the image of the Soviet child as warrior, both during the Second World War and the Cold War, reemerged. In their broadcasts to Vietnam, Gosteleradio argued that Russia’s children were living examples of how the youngest in society could contribute to the war effort.

Soviet youth experienced the burdens and difficulties of the struggle against foreign imperialists, during the Revolution, the Civil War, and the Second World War, when they heroically fought against the foreign aggressors and gave all their strength in the name of the motherland. This is why the Soviet youth, and all the Soviet people, decidedly and uncompromisingly come forward in support of the young of Vietnam, who are needed to stop the American aggressors and expel the American forces from their home.

Gosteleradio promised that the Soviet Union not only stood behind the South Vietnamese struggle to wrest freedom from America, but that it would provide a model for the children in Vietnam in their struggle against foreign aggression.
Positive representations of Soviet children supporting the Vietnamese cause were part of a much larger propaganda campaign aimed at contrasting communist success and moral constancy with American exploitation and apathy. Soviet broadcasts specifically targeted images of African American children, where the upheaval of the civil rights movement commanded international attention. In a 1964 broadcast, one Soviet announcer reminded his Vietnamese listeners that “the Governor of Alabama (Wallace) and his lackeys, from the height of their official posts, are openly instigating pogroms against innocent children in the American South.”49 In contrast to the assurances made by JUSPAO that racism was a dilemma specific to dwindling populations in the South, Gosteleradio provided an image of an entire nation wracked by hatred and controlled by a violently enforced caste system. “Who are these child-killers?” one broadcaster asked his listeners in 1965. “The semi-official American press asserts that they could be simply renegades of society, moral freaks, but doesn’t it seem as though there are a lot of these renegades being allowed in ‘civilized’ American society?” Broadcasts like these were quick to list the “renegade” actions of America’s racist population: George Wallace’s election, the survival of Jim Crow, the murder of Medgar Evars, and finally the “six negro children who wanted only to pray.”50 What emerged in these broadcasts was a picture of a sick, amoral American society, littered with the bodies of dead black children.

From the beginning, Soviet accusations of American racism were used to substantiate allegations of U.S. colonialism in Southeast Asia. Images of black children suffering at the hands of American racists were joined by a vast visual and audio record of the United States’ abuse of children abroad. As one Soviet broadcaster commented in 1965, “Racist Americans are produced at a young age . . . When [they] are ten-years-old they are intentionally taught not to see Negroes as human . . . [Now] they kill thousands of South Vietnamese . . . It is a terrible, inhumane [человеконенавистнический] logic. But isn’t it such a ‘logic’ . . . which inside America defends racism and outside of it imperialism?”51 According to Soviet broadcasts, racism was a prerequisite to America’s capitalist agenda in the postcolonial world; it was the vehicle by which countries like the United States could pursue their neocolonial programs without facing the moral ramifications of their actions. This meant real danger for nations like Vietnam, Gosteleradio contended. If children in America were being raised to hate a significant portion of their own citizenry, what hope was there for foreign youth?52

In response to what it considered to be a fairly clear American imperialist agenda, Gosteleradio used images of dead Vietnamese children in order to incite revulsion among its listeners, to demonize America’s role in the Cold War,
to legitimize its own actions in Europe against American aggression, and to provide a common enemy against whom Soviet broadcasters and their listeners could unite. Common exposés focused on the bombing of Vietnamese schools and children’s hospitals by reckless American bombardiers. One report in 1966 declared, “There are no words that can explain in full measure the sadistic actions of the American imperialists, who have lost all notions of human honor, morality, and conscience, who have lost their humanity.”

By all accounts, the Soviet propaganda attack overwhelmed JUSPAO. As one American official would admit as early as 1964, the United States had “come out second best in the ideological struggle with Moscow.” The aggressive Soviet propaganda program in Vietnam did more than put a dent in JUSPAO’s armor, however. It also played an integral role in the pursuit of Soviet foreign policy vis-à-vis the North Vietnamese Government and the NLF. These images attempted to conceal the Soviet Union’s unwillingness to fight the United States directly while retaining a degree of influence over the communist leadership in North Vietnam. Gosteleradio believed that this program provided a carefully crafted portrayal of the Soviet Union that would condemn the enemy and provide personal legitimacy without demanding real military intervention in the process.

Unfortunately for Gosteleradio, masking the Soviet Union’s unwillingness to fight with expressions of solidarity only lasted for so long. By 1967, the North Vietnamese had come to realize the limitations of Soviet as well as global communist support. As one COSVN executive remarked to his colleagues in an internal policy document, they had “fail[ed] to see all the difficulties and complexities in [their] relations with socialist countries, thinking that these countries will readily and wholeheartedly support the Front policy.” As the NLF and North Vietnamese leadership learned, what drove Soviet policy in Vietnam was only partially related to the cause of national liberation and was equally concerned with Russia’s desire to avoid direct confrontation with the United States and to mediate its contentious relationship with China and Korea, who it saw as threats in the struggle for power in the communist camp. When the NLF turned to build their own propaganda campaigns, they reflected this growing awareness as they increasingly portrayed themselves not as victims or beneficiaries of either American or Soviet meddling, but as self-sufficient warriors driven to defend their homeland.

Despite these setbacks, Soviet-constructed images of children went a long way in constructing a compelling message of Soviet patronage and solidarity. Victimized by American racism and imperialism and mobilized by Soviet
and NLF revolutionary fervor, these images navigated the path between the expression and obfuscation of public policy.

THE NORTH VIETNAMESE MESSAGE

Any examination of propaganda during the Vietnam War would be incomplete if it did not address the massive campaign undertaken by the NLF and the North Vietnamese government to solicit the loyalties of populations in the North and South. Like their American and Soviet counterparts, the image of the child was central to the NLF’s propaganda approach. While at the beginning of the war, reports of American atrocities against children were common, by the middle of 1966, the NLF propaganda office was constructing only one image of the child: that of the warrior. This child, in the words of one North Vietnamese official, represented “the spirit of the Vietnamese people to sacrifice anything for the cause of freedom.” More than this, it reflected the specific agendas of the North Vietnamese and NLF during the war: to inculcate a feeling of hatred among the populace for America and its soldiers, to show the United States the lengths to which the NLF were willing to go in order to win the war, and to establish their crusade first as an inevitable fight for nationalist freedom and only second as a communist class struggle.

From its inception the North Vietnamese leadership, and especially Ho Chi Minh, considered propaganda to be a “key factor” in their victory over French and later American “colonial” rule. The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which was formally established in 1961, initially used the airwaves and publishing houses to attack the corruption of the Diem regime. After Diem’s collapse on November 1, 1963, COSVN turned its attention to the rising American commitment in the region, claiming to be the sole representative of the South Vietnamese people and the leading force against renewed Western intervention. By the summer of 1965, COSVN was conducting daily broadcasts in Vietnamese, Khmer, Mandarin, French, and English as well as special programs for American troops in the South. They established publishing branches in every major city. They distributed bulletins and leaflets and placed correspondents in Havana, Prague, Algiers, and East Berlin. At their South Vietnam Liberation Film Studio, they produced feature films with titles like Telling Blows and the U.S. Imperialists Certainly Will Be Defeated and The Vietnamese People Will Certainly Win. All of these programs received significant funding and attention from the higher echelons of the party leadership and the Hanoi government. They were distributed widely throughout Vietnam as well as the global socialist camp. They presented well-coordinated messages to their audiences and con-
structed a markedly different set of images than either their American enemies or their Soviet allies.

Images of and ideas about children were central to NLF publishing, radio, and film. In one U.S. analysis of NLF propaganda published in October 1965, evaluators noted that three of the nine geographic areas covered in their study had employed propaganda that “appeared aimed particularly at youth” and the use of children as soldiers and “martyrs” for the NLF cause. These statistics are arguably underrepresentative of the real saturation that the child’s image maintained in NLF publishing and broadcasting. Although our records are incomplete, the samples that we have reveal that in almost every NLF propaganda document, some kind of reference is made to youth and to its role in engineering the liberation of the populace.

The image of the child in NLF propaganda underwent a transformation in 1966 when reports on suffering children were largely replaced by exposés on young revolutionary fighters who appeared well trained in the art of combat, imbued with revolutionary fervor, driven by hatred for the enemy, willing to take up arms, and ready to sacrifice themselves for the nationalist cause. Broadcasts like the one sent out in September 1965, which declared that U.S. troops had “indiscriminately bombed . . . our kindergartens, schools, and hospitals, and declared war even with the infants and the dead,” were rare by 1967. Similarly infrequent by this time were broadcasts which in earlier years had heralded the gratefulness and love felt by the Vietnamese people towards the Soviet Union. Instead, children were portrayed as “combatants” who understood, in the words of one captured NLF document from 1969, “the value of a bullet and a grain of rice.” As active participants in the war, children were presented not only as watchdogs for their villages and as support personnel, but “as liaisons and reconnaissance agents” who, as COSVN declared, were now “tak[ing] part in the revolution while still in the womb.” By creating a vision of the militarized Vietnamese child, COSVN attempted to depict its nationalist crusade, both in the North and in the South, as a moral imperative. The country’s young people had no choice but to take up arms in response to clear aggression, they argued. As one publication noted in 1969, “Youth of the South, in the face of the extremely savage crimes committed by the American aggressors and the clique of their lackeys, realized that there was no other way than taking up arms to fight and save their country, homes, and their happiness.”

COSVN strove to unite Vietnamese youth across borders for a shared battle that was not only inevitable but was seemingly unwinnable by the United States.

COSVN also harnessed visions of children to prove the ineffectiveness of American policy. Most glaring in this respect are COSVN’s portrayals of South
Vietnamese children as saboteurs of the strategic hamlet program. In southern villages like Long An and Quang Da, they claimed that “100 percent of the youth, both male and female, joined the guerillas.” These troops ostensibly contributed “tens of millions” of working days to the replacement of strategic hamlets with their own version, called the “combat village.” Needless to say, such portrayals of Vietnamese children destroying American hamlets seriously complicated Richard Heffron’s vision of the contained, passive youth that we saw in Night of the Dragon. Instead of being the recipients of Western care, Vietnamese children become active and mobilized, moving outside of the boundaries established for them by their protectors. They become the very saboteurs whom the hamlet was originally built to repel. The problems inherent in the strategic hamlet project are suddenly brought into stark relief, as they appear to be defending children . . . from themselves. Of course, many Americans were aware of these contradictions. By the end of the war, U.S. soldiers commonly argued that because children were functioning as militants, the killing of civilians was militarily, if not morally, justified.

The best example of the constructed image of the heroic Vietnamese child can be seen in the stories surrounding the young hero Nguyen Van Be, who became the focus for debates on youth, heroism, and state policy throughout the course of the war. As the COSVN-generated version of the story goes, the young Nguyen Van Be, having grown up in the midst of war, “joined the Revolution and stood with his friends and relatives to free himself and offer his enthusiastic heart to the task of liberating his country.” Although “he wished to use a rifle to shoot directly at the heads of his enemy,” he was nonetheless assigned the less heroic task of transporting weapons to troops at the front. He approached his work with enthusiasm, however, and was “always considered [by comrades and civilians] as one of their children.” Be’s heroic moment came in 1966, when a fierce battle erupted between his battalion and a platoon of American soldiers. Despite the best efforts of Be’s team, they were eventually overwhelmed by their American foes. Be was eventually captured along with his weapons cache and, as COSVN reported, was subjected to “all possible savage means to torture him.” He remained courageous, and, as one report phrased it, “all the [Americans’] efforts were just like bubbles of soap that were washed away by the flow of a great river.” Finally, Be and a fellow ploughman were brought to a central location “near My Ann, where the US invaders and flunkeys soon gathered with real proud expressions on their faces.” In a moment of seeming heroism, Be signaled to the ploughman to run just as he, “with flashing eyes” and “hateful iron arms,” lifted ten kilos of Claymore mines over his head. Shouting “Long live the NLF and down with the US imperialists!” he smashed the mine
on the hull of the armored vehicle and created an explosion that lit all the other cached bombs, “causing a burst of thunder that shook the world.” According to initial COSVN reports, sixteen Americans and ten “flunkeys” were killed in the ensuing chaos, while a number of additional Americans were also killed by friendly fire that erupted in the aftermath.

Almost from the moment that the story hit the press, COSVN began holding classes and meetings across the North to study Be’s heroism. According to the North Vietnamese, Be represented “the bright example” that could be admired “not only by our youths but by young men throughout the world.” Be’s actions quickly assumed mythical qualities. One account described him with “genius arms.” Young drama groups reenacted the story of Nguyen Van Be in their local theatres. One report released in May 1967 told its readers that while “the mine Nguyen Van Be exploded was an ordinary one,” it was, nonetheless, “empowered by magical forces.” Because of this empowerment, this mine “not only destroyed almost one hundred enemies and colossal tanks in a second and made a hero out of Nguyen Van Be, it also helped to create a chain reaction that had led to the rise of similar “copy-cat” heroes around the country.” As the years passed, Be became increasingly younger in NLF accounts of the story, with initial reports putting him at sixteen years old and later reports claiming that he was thirteen or fourteen.

Unfortunately for COSVN, there were numerous problems with the story of the young hero, not the least of which being that he did not appear to be dead and did not appear to be thirteen, or even sixteen years old. American reports told listeners a different story of the young Be. They argued that he had surrendered to South Vietnamese forces of his own free will and was now participating in the Chieu Hoi program. A damning photo of Be hit the JUSPAO presses showing Be sitting with a copy of the COSVN newspaper article that recounts his death. Here apparently sat visual proof that the entire Be mythos was a product of NLF trickery. No longer a child, JUSPAO listed Be as twenty-four years old, thereby removing from him the heroic valences of the “child-warrior” and in effect normalizing him as yet another North Vietnamese soldier who had defected to the South in order to settle down with his family away from NLF control.

Rumors quickly spread throughout the Central Nam Bo district where Be’s family lived. The South Vietnamese government prepared to distribute photographs of the living Be while the NLF mobilized their propaganda network to support their own version of the story. Counter-theatre groups, funded by the United States, toured villages, carrying with them ten thousand song sheets entitled “The Truth about Nguyen Van Be.” Leaflets were published with
photographs of Be’s mother with a caption reading “I Ought to Know my Own Son.”72 The response of the NLF and the Party Cadres to the Be controversy was to initiate “indoctrination classes” for each individual hamlet. They told their audiences that American plastic surgeons had refashioned a new Be in order to deceive the population. While Be (or the Be pretender) was carted from one press conference to another throughout 1967, ’68, and ’69, COSVN maintained that he had died on that fateful day and that he was the child-hero against whom all young people should judge themselves.

What is most striking about this story for the purposes of this article is the centrality of this child/man in the North Vietnamese and American struggles to refashion their own images for an uncertain, rumor-heavy population. For COSVN, Be represented the idyllic child-warrior who is driven to make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of national liberation. This story substantiated the NLF argument that an entire population of youths were in fact willing to sacrifice their own lives for the nationalist cause. In contrast, for JUSPAO, the image of Nguyen van Be, pictured sitting in the exact same pose and with the exact same expression as that rendered by COSVN, symbolized delegitimation, not simply of the North Vietnamese Government, the NLF, and their propaganda effort, but of the imagined child-warrior as well.

CONCLUSION

These varying constructions of the child’s image provide insight into the contradictory nature of the American, Soviet, and NLF propaganda efforts. By depicting their children as educated, wealthy, and distant from the fighting, American propagandists missed the opportunity to establish the same national solidarity with the South Vietnamese that the Russians were showing with the North. By portraying the children of South Vietnam as passive victims of brutality and as beneficiaries of American aid, JUSPAO created a vision of South Vietnam as unable or unwilling to rally its entire population for the cause of freedom. Similarly, despite their projections of solidarity between the Russian and Vietnamese people, Soviet propagandists were unable to contradict the NLF’s rising awareness that no Russian help was forthcoming. For COSVN, the campaign to create an image of the Vietnamese child as independent, militarized, and self-sacrificing came under great debate when faced with counter images that questioned the role of children in the war and the state’s claims to ideological and military legitimacy.

Examining how the image of the child was constructed and used by propagandists in the Vietnam War gives us a far more nuanced understanding of both the image and the event. It gives a clearer view of how images like that of
the child served as cultural currency for creating conceptual boundaries in the Vietnam War. It illustrates the semiotic complications that American, Soviet, and NLF propagandists faced when their messages came into conflict with each other. It reveals the contradictions that defined the war itself, from the American commitment to protect and teach leadership to civilians who were nonetheless portrayed either as passive victims or as saboteurs, to the Soviet promise to defend a population that it simultaneously argued needed no outside assistance, to the NLF who made claims of widespread sacrifice that the population could not sustain.

NOTES


2. I am using the term “modernization” as conceived by historians like Mark Latham, to encompass the popular ideology in the 1960s that colonial conflicts and cold war contests could be won through the sharing of modern American technology and democracy. See Mark Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000).


5. Memo from Donald M. Wilson to George Reedy, 22 July 1964, Folder 03, Box 01, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), TVA; “Foreign Polls, [2 of 2],” 1965, Folder: Office Files of Frederick Panzer, Box 218, 1, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Archive, Austin, Texas (hereafter referred to as LBJ).


7. JUSPAO Planning Staff, “Exploitation of Vietnamese Efforts and Successes,” 2 June 1965, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 2.

9. The Case for Psychological Warfare Against North Vietnam, no date, Folder 14, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA.
10. The Diary of a Returnee in Khien Phong Province, October 1967, Folder 08, Box 01, Gary Gillette Collection, The Vietnam Archive, 1.
11. Consolidation of JUSPAO Guidances 1 thru 22, Vol. 1, 1 June 1967, Folder 12 Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 32. The piastra was worth approximately one dollar in 1967.
12. JUSPAO Planning Staff, “Exploitation of Vietnamese Efforts and successes,” JUSPAO Guidances Issue Number 6, 2 June 1965, 14, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 2.
13. JUSPAO Field Memorandum Number 42, 13 December 1967, Folder 14, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 1.
19. Propaganda Leaflet with translation—About NLF Crimes, no date (1967?), Folder 08, Box 01, Gary Gillette Collection, TVA, 1.
22. Memorandum for the President from Carl Rowan, Director of the USIA, 1 December 1964, FG 296 U.S. Information Agency (1964–1966), Confidential File, FG266–1–1, Box # 33, 3, LBJ.
23. Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Winning the Cold War: The U.S. Ideological Offensive, First Session, 28–29 March, 2–3 April 1963. The Reed Research Foundation was founded by Stanley Reed in 1940. Reed employed American and European scientists in the years during and after World War II to develop technologies in bioengineering. Reed was also active in politics and publishing, lecturing on world affairs to universities and governmental bodies throughout the 1960s.

26. “From a top secret directive on enemy espionage and intelligence activities,” Folder 12, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 11.

27. “From a Circular issued by the Political Staff Department,” Folder 12, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 8.


29. Folder 12, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 32.

30. Security directive of the COSVN Current Affairs Committee, 11 January 1967, Folder 12, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 16.


34. Doklad: Gosudarstvennogo Komitet Soveta Ministrov SSSR po Radioveshchaniiu i Televideniu, 1962, GARF f. 6903, op. 1, d. 774, l. 20.

35. GARF f. 6903, op. 1, d. 495, d. 624, d. 472, d. 774.


40. “Odno muzhestvo ili dva?”

41. V. Karpov, “Nasha Dela,” 24 March 1959, GARF f. 6903, op. 24, d. 138, l. 58.


43. N. Osipov, “Reportazh: Vsegda Vnemest,” 5 March 1966, GARF f. 6903, op. 24, d. 2495, l. 68.

44. “Maiak,” Glavnaia redaktsiiia propagandy, 22 June 1964, GARF f. 6903, op. 23, d. 174, l. 33.


47. This, of course, is how they were portrayed. The extent to which they actually did this work on their own is open for debate.


50. Erik Alekseev, “Rasizm—Pozor Kapitalicheskoi Ameriki i Vietnam.” It is interesting that four children, not six, died in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

51. “Stenogramma zasedaniia komissii po Azii i Afriki,” GARF f. 9540, op. 1, d. 34, l. 13.


54. Ideological Operations and Foreign Policy, 27 April 1964, Folder 03, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 6.

55. The Soviet Union and the Vietnamese Conflict, 1 September 1967, Folder 03, Box 08, Glenn Helm Collection, 5; Sino-Soviet Competition in Hanoi, 9 March 1966, Folder 13, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06, TVA, 1.

56. NLF Foreign Affairs and Propaganda Activities, 14 April 1967, Folder 18, Box 01, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06, TVA, 2.


58. The Vietnamese Communist Agit-Prop, 1967, Folder 12, Box 16, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 1.

59. NLF Foreign Affairs, 14 April 1967, Folder 18, Box 01, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06, TVA, 2.

60. Diplomatic and Psychological Offensive, 2 February 1966, Folder 06, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 1.

61. Analysis of NLF Propaganda for October 1965, 11 November 1965, Folder 06, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03, TVA, 1.


63. Captured Documents, 23 September 1966, Folder 1252, Box 0029, TVA, 1.

64. Youth Urged to Emulate Revolutionary Heroes, 15 October 1969, Folder 09, Box 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 8.

65. Youth Urged to Emulate Revolutionary Heroes, 8.

66. Youth of the South Resolve to be Heroic, 6 June 1969, Folder 09, Box 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 101.

67. Youth of the South Resolve to be Heroic, 100.
38  **BROADCASTING BENEOLOENCE**

68.  Cadres, Party Members & Youths are Determined to Live and Fight Like Our (Dead) Hero Nguyen Van Be, 1967, Folder 03, Box 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 1.

69.  Study of the example set out by Nguyen Van Be, 4 February 1967, Folder 03, Box 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 1.

70.  It is Bound to Achieve the Greatest Results, 21 May 1967, Folder 05 Box 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 2–3.

71.  Radio Hanoi, 30 May 1967, Folder 04, Box 17, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05, TVA, 1.