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Review of "Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines" by Gregory A. Daddis

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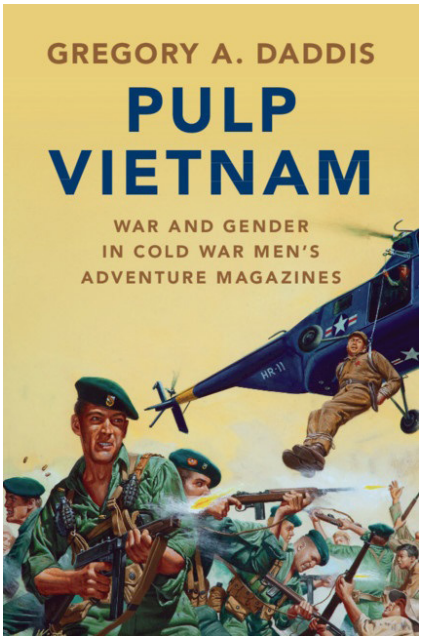
Gregory A. Daddis. *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 347.

"The Amazing GI Who Took Three Head-Hunting Brides." "I Was The One Man in A Women's Army." "The Nympho Spy Who Helped To Lose The War." "The Nordic Nymphs Who Almost Killed Hitler." These are just a few examples of the weird and wacky stories readers could peruse in the rough wood-pulp pages of the extremely popular men's adventure genre of the 1950s and 60s. With such blunt and boastful titles as *Battle Cry*, *Man's Conquest*, *Stag, American Manhood*, *Real Men* or simply *Male*, the magazines that printed such stories constructed a masculine fantasy world of heroic warfare and sexual conquest very much a product of the Cold War era. In *Pulp Vietnam*, Gregory A. Daddis, retired United States Army colonel and professor of history at San Diego State University, examines the fascinating and unexpected cultural meaning of the magazines, which he refers to as the "macho pulps" (p. 2). Through an incredible study of this outlandish male adventure genre, he vividly demonstrates that rather than low-brow, escapist literature easily dismissed and discarded, the magazines—the fictionalised "true war" stories, the exotic adventure tales, the editorials, the news items, the reader letters, the advertisements, the artwork—created a gendered narrative framework which explicitly merged manhood, war and sex. Through the late 1960s, as Daddis argues in the second half of the book, this macho fiction would take on a far darker and more somber meaning when contrasted with the unheroic reality of the War in Vietnam.

With solid grounding in the academic literature on working-class popular culture, gender and martial masculinity, Daddis explains that the jingoistic and chauvinistic façade that the magazines projected belied deeper anxieties about the resilience of American society in general and the manliness of the American man in particular to confront external and internal threats like Communism, feminism or homosexuality. Exaggerated war stories may have been the primary appeal of the pulps, but Daddis also explores the magazines themselves as compelling cultural artifacts. In between feature stories and eye-catching artwork, readers would have been exposed to reactionary political commentary, editorials about international affairs such as nuclear threats and the conflict in Southeast Asia and pseudoscientific opinions about sociological issues such marital domesticity and the



latest sex research. Tabloid-like news items further relished in salacious scandal. Magazine pages were also filled with suggestive pin-ups as well as ads and articles designed either to stir sexual fantasies or to provoke insecurities about one's manliness. The magazines, which reached potentially millions of readers during their peak in popularity, fostered worries about the emasculation of the American male through the alleged feminisation of society only to construct an alternative narrative of masculine exceptionalism drawn from the recent wartime past.

Tales of intrigue, violence and adventure reimagined Second World War and Korean War combat in purely heroic terms, setting an impossible example for male readers to emulate and somehow reclaim their postwar masculine virility. The protagonists who infiltrated enemy lines, escaped prison camps, captured secret plans, killed Jerrys, Japs or Commies and saved entire battalions, were square-jawed, sometimes cigar-chomping, muscular heroic warriors. Similar depictions of battle could be found in many comic books and movies of the era, yet, as Daddis makes clear, the pulps went further with the stereotypical male heroes also portrayed as unabashed sexual conquerors. The women in these stories were almost invariably cast as sexual objects, either as rewards for the protagonist to rescue and possess or seductive threats to be overcome and dominated. Linked to the unapologetic misogyny ubiquitous to the pulps was the equally overt racial stereotyping, the virtual erasure of non-white heroes and the objectification and sexualisation of "Oriental" women (p. 108).

Such stereotypical depictions of male and female bodies appeared most prominently in the dramatic artwork iconic to men's adventure magazines. *Pulp Vietnam* is very well illustrated in this regard with numerous magazine covers and pictures reproduced in black and white or as full-page colour plates. Many talented artists used a highly realistic and detailed drawing style to produce utterly unrealistic, caricatured scenes, which even the most lurid text would struggle

to live up to. Veterans of the Second World War might have been surprised to see how often amorous women frolicked amid a fierce firefight, or how many scantily clad female resistance fighters fought the Nazis or how Allied prisoners-of-war confronted so many equally alluring female SS guards. Yet the pulps not only counted American veterans among their readers; many veterans served as the editors, writers and artists who created this sensationalised version of the war. Daddis is undoubtedly correct that these exaggerated tales and pictures allowed some veterans to relive their war years in the most fantastical ways, very much at odds with the truth that they had experienced and witnessed. For other younger male readers, however, the wild stories and exciting imagery produced a very distorted portrait of warfare in which the thrill of combat appeared to be the best way to achieve true manliness with the promise of tantalising sexual rewards.

The male fantasy that the pulps endorsed and promoted for over a decade eventually confronted the grim reality of the Vietnam War, marking a decline in popular resonance of the men's adventure genre. Adapting the same type of muscular patriotism and sexually-charged narratives to an ongoing and increasingly controversial conflict exposed the creative limits of the genre. Fictionalised stories of aggressive male violence against dehumanised enemies and sexual dominance over submissive native women created uncomfortable parallels to real instances in Southeast Asia where some American soldiers indiscriminately killed Vietnamese civilians and sexually assaulted or exploited Vietnamese women and girls. Throughout the book Daddis is careful to emphasise that his analysis implies no direct causal relationship between the content in the pulps and the actual behaviour of some American troops. Instead, he very effectively argues that the macho narrative framework that the magazines helped to create contributed to a martial cultural context which normalised such violent aggression as natural and even acceptable.

Using letters to the editor, veteran recollections and a range of other sources, Daddis thoroughly details the popular consumption of the magazines by young working-class readers and serving personnel. He acknowledges that most readers of men's adventure likely enjoyed the stories as entertaining fantasies with little deeper thought to the toxic messaging, but it is also fair as he does to consider to what extent the pulps set unrealistic expectations for many soldiers and draftees prior to going to Southeast Asia. It is not simply that the martial and sexual fantasies proved illusionary in a real conflict; the Vietnam War

also revealed that such fantasies when played out in real life scenarios could devolve into vicious crimes of murder and rape.

Daddis makes a convincing case that the magazines formed an essential part of a martial masculine ideal bound up in Cold War era politics. Yet even if many readers were drawn in by the fictional promise of sex and adventure only to be disillusioned when real war did not match expectations, it is less clear that all would have interpreted the material literally. Daddis, for instance, notes that actor George Takei recalled reading Second World War-era pulps as a boy in an internment camp, attracted by pictures of muscular men rather than the cheesecake pin-ups (p. 62). The potential for this kind of unintended homoerotic reading might have been investigated in the book further to consider the ways that contemporary readers' interpretations could in fact subvert the endorsement of a purely heterosexual warrior model of American manhood. Daddis offers glimpses behind the scenes of the magazine-making process with the words of editors, contributors and artists but knowing more about the perspectives of these creators would have provided insight into their intentions and motivations. Some of the pictures, stories and titles seemed so over the top as to raise the question whether there was sometimes an ironic element of self-parody of the genre going on. At the same time, given the pulps' characteristic excess and luridness it would be almost impossible to detect a difference between a parody and the target of satire.

Pulp Vietnam makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of how Cold War era popular culture, even in its cheap pulp form, both reflected and shaped societal attitudes toward gender and distorted ideas about the martial qualities that constituted real, natural and normal masculinity. It is a valuable and worthy book that also carries particular significance for our ideas about gender and masculinity today. Past and present social commentators, politicians and military leaders have perennially engaged in moral panic over the alleged emasculation of the next generation of men. In such a systematic and absorbing analysis of men's adventure literature, Daddis reveals how such anxieties conceive manhood in such a narrow and constraining way as to deny alternative narratives not rooted in martial aggression and sexual conquest (p. 230). *Pulp Vietnam* pulls back the macho façade to expose the magazines' silly extravagance as well as their potential to normalise sexual violence in both fiction and reality.

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