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Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Nobel-nominated scholar and photojournalist, has followed the plight of the Hmong and the war in Indochina since the 1960s. The staunchest of allies, the Hmong sided with the Americans against the North Vietnamese and were foot soldiers in the brutal secret war for Laos. Since the war, abandoned by their American allies, the Hmong have been subjected to a campaign of genocide by the North Vietnamese, including the use of chemical weapons. Tragic Mountains moves from the big picture of international diplomacy and power politics to the small villages and heroic engagements in the Lao jungle. It is a story of courage, brutality, heroism, betrayal, resilience, and hope.

Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992 Details

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From Reader Review *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* for online ebook

Jan-Maat says

This is your basic everyday story of mountain folk roped in to a CIA covert war and left to fend for themselves afterwards, with added opium.

The author was a journalist, maybe still is - and much of the book is constructed from interviews she had with various people - she is plainly interested in this story, her account closes with writing to U.S congresspersons and Senators trying to prevent forced 'voluntary' repatriations from refugee camps in Thailand to Laos.

As you might expect from a journalist's book it is chatty and a mass of anecdotes, arranged to form a continuous narrative. Until the end of the book she is entirely self-effacing, although she was active as a journalist in the region during the Vietnam war it is unclear how much time she spent then in Laos, in the introduction she mentions that U.S personnel were not helpful or forthcoming, unlike in Vietnam, so it may be that most of her contacts and personal involvement began only after 1975 when formally the informal war ended. None of this matters much aside from that readers may want to salt some of what she recounts particularly reported dialogue or precise seeming details about weapons and the like.

She opens with a depiction of the Hmong as American types, or at least as sharing homely American values, apart from their habit of cultivating opium, in which they paid taxes to the French and used as a cure-all for the stresses, strains and injuries arising from this earthly life, and I suppose also their tradition of embroidery, the young men allegedly having a keen appreciation of needlework skills and would marry the most able seamstresses, also polygamy which was to become a sticking point later. It comes across as an appeal to the audience and no doubt this is no simple story but a campaigning book.

Anyhow the Hmong, she says were a simple minority group in Laos, upland farmers, who had drifted into the country from China in the not very distant past. They were divided into a handful of clans, were animists in contrast to the Buddhist majority in Laos, they spoke their own language, they made their own flintlock muskets, the women folk wore necklaces made from silver French colonial coins, the Hmong were mostly excluded from education and generally looked down upon as the Indochinese equivalents of Hill-billies. Towards the end of WWII a handful of French soldiers engaged some Hmong in insurgent warfare against the Japanese with considerable success, although the Hmong generally only bothered to turn up and fight if they thought they'd win, not realising at this stage that in modern organised total warfare it is the taking part, not the winning, that counts.

All these stories go back to the Japanese invasion / personally extended invitation to join the Asian co-prosperity sphere, and the breakdown of colonial authority.

As the USA gets involved in fighting in Vietnam they notice that supplies are being moved into South Vietnam through Laos along what is called the Ho Che Min trail and in a move to disrupt this a CIA operative turns up among the Hmong calls himself Colonel Billy and asks if they want to fight communists if he provides the guns. His offer apparently is enthusiastically welcomed. Presumably there was a little more to it than that (view spoiler), but that is more or less how it comes across here. 'Colonel Billy's' conception is that this should be an entirely covert operation and essentially guerilla warfare, he is later accused of running the whole affair out of his trouser pocket to which he can only assent as that is where he kept his note book

with all the details he needed to recall. A key part of his conception is to minimise official US involvement since, similarly to as is argued in *Understanding Vietnam* he felt the US presence was self-destructive as it ended with large numbers of monolingual people in air-conditioned facilities with a huge logistical tail writing reports on the welfare of Americans in South-East Asia rather than actually engaging with the people whose hearts and minds they needed to win. Eventually this 'Colonel Billy' was pushed out, partly it seems because he wasn't spending enough money and didn't have a big enough office, at least that is how it comes across.

After his departure the conception changes to using the Hmong as a substitute for regular infantry forces. By this time twenty thousand or more Hmong are under arms led by General Vang Pao - formally an officer in the Lao army. He was something of a big chief, his eventual five marriages linked him to several clans and his charisma (getting back to Max Weber here) won him a substantial following, helpfully the author tells us he was opposed to the opium trade. The US were providing 'covert' air support from bases in Thailand and units of the Thai army were also occasionally involved. Vang Pao pushed for air power under his own control to which end a handful of Hmong were trained as pilots, unfortunately as they all tended to be short the control panels had to be altered and the trainees were given thick cushions so that they could see out of the windows.

Air power was a critical element in supplying and fighting in this tropical mountainous region, all the more so as Vang Pao withdrew into the mountains to fight from more defensible/ inaccessible areas, this led to the construction of various bizarre dirt and log runways, sometimes with dog legs, occasionally cantilevered over mountainsides and so on. The fighting led to considerable social change, since the Hmong had moved from the Highlands to the mountains they were dependant on food supplies. Due to casualties they recruited boys to fight - the basic rule was, similar to fairgrounds, that you had to be at least as tall as the weapon you were intending to use, some girls were trained as nurses, there was an effort to provide elementary schooling, and soldiers were paid cash money.

All things come to an end. In this case in 1975. A small number of Hmong were flown out of the country. General Vang Pao managed, after divorcing most of his wives, to get to the USA where he got a mortgage to buy a farm in Montana though eventually he drifted to California, he died in 2011. Reasonably the Hmong feared reprisals as Vietnam friendly forces took over Laos and tens of thousands fled into Thailand. In the late 1970s various chemical weapons were used on Hmong populations while others were imprisoned, and sent to labour camps. Naturally after decades of fighting there was no particular shortage of people who had been involved in the war or in working with the US.

The refugees as one might expect were in a jolly position - it is best to avoid being on the losing side of any war, but because it was officially covert and still worse, the CIA had lost, the USA didn't want to know, perhaps in part didn't even know - which is where this book comes in as Agitprop. When the book ends the Thais are increasingly unsupportive hosts of the 25,000 odd refugees, there are some thousands of Hmong in the USA, the USA is angling towards normalisation of relations with Laos despite their human rights record and there are ongoing attempts to enforce the voluntary repatriation of refugees.

All in all it is a decent work of campaigning journalism but for the absence of apparent success or a road map to a bearable future. On the downside it has a tendency to flop into stories of who spilled whiskey over themselves one New Year's Eve, equally some may feel that CIA operatives engaging in Animist ceremonies to bind parties together for common action is a difficult basis to build lasting American policy on. For me the author was overly fussed about Vietnamese violations of the Geneva accords in regard to Laotian neutrality when according to her account the US were equally in violation, I couldn't help suspect that if challenged on this her answer would be 'Mommy, they started it!'

I wondered if one could go along with the subtext of the narrative that the Hmong were victims of the Cold war roped in as proxies in order to avoid a head to head nuclear confrontation between the Soviets and the

USA, or if the Hmong made use of US weapons and air support to continue traditional rivalries in a more modern fashion. I suppose either way it doesn't matter much to the resulting mess, people who play with sharp knives often have fewer fingers.

Nou says

How could I express my gratitude...it tells the facts of why Hmong people are here in USA, how so many of us are here, whether we wanted to or not.

Karen says

This year President Obama became the first American president in office to visit Laos and acknowledge the role the U.S. played there during the Vietnam War. The Ho Chi Minh trail ran through Laos, the Americans ran many secret bombings against the Viet Minh from there. They mostly worked with an ethnic minority called the Hmong whom they trained and encouraged in guerrilla warfare. There was no official agreement between the Hmongs and the U.S. so when the U.S. pulled out many of the Hmong were left behind and seemingly forgotten. They were killed or disappeared when the communists took over in Laos without any concern shown by u.s. policy-makers. Some of the Hmong top fighters did emigrate to the U.S. but the general public knows nothing about them and how closely they worked with and helped the u.s. If anything they were vilified in the media as public sentiment turned against the war, the u.s. military and politicians.

This is the only book I've come across that tells this story. The author does take a side, though. She is clearly advocating for the Hmong.

Makes me want to finish The Pentagon Papers.

For an unrelated take on the Hmong: The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman

Joy says

I didn't finish this book. I think it was because it's summer that I'm just not in the mood for nonfiction. Particularly on a subject which I at least know something about already, and seemed a bit not seeing the forest for the trees. Fascinating information on the role of the Hmong in Laos, though. The author of Hmong! The CIA's Secret Army seems to have used information verbatim from this book.

Amanda says

Read in college and got this much fatso. I don't know if it was in this book or somewhere else but I'm recalling something about Korean soldiers being involved or sent. I could be erred.

Mos says

This book is very personal to me since it is the story of my parents and grandparents. To some, it may seem like just a tragedy or something that happened long ago. But in my parents' house, it's a story that's still told with a lot of sorrow and heartache. The book covers a lot of information about the Vietnam War that most people aren't aware of. Some part can be brutal.

Jcken says

Highly recommend to anyone interested in the truth of the ruin of Laos and its people.

Maggie says

Important information about an aspect of the so called Vietnam War that most Americans know nothing about. The author spent time as a journalist during in the war, and witnessed many events she describes. She also played a role in getting recognition - or at least, attempting, for some of the people who were involved in the "secret war" in Laos. This explains why the tone of her narrative comes across as shrill, given that she was writing for a purpose and amidst an ongoing crisis. So this doesn't read like a typical academic treatise, it rather as a journalistic exposé.

Paul Cornelius says

A sometimes overly sympathetic look at the Hmong people of Laos and what happened to them during and immediately after the "Secret War" in Laos. (Vang Pao, for instance, while being a remarkable guerrilla leader did have his faults and did often succumb to his vanity.) The Hmong story, I hasten to add, is actually a sympathetic story overall. So it is acceptable that their side of things is given a primacy here, whereas in other histories of the conflict, the Hmong are often underappreciated, at best, or unappreciated, at worst. The fact is that they were tenacious fighters and committed to the land, Laos, when other Lao peoples did not have the will to fight the North Vietnamese. It should be mentioned, however, that not all Hmong fought against the Communists and with covert American forces. Some served on the other side and have reaped great honors in contemporary Laos for their commitment to the communist cause.

An important part of the story that also is much neglected is how the Hmong fled Laos after the end of the war in 1975. Many ended up in refugee camps in Thailand, where life was far from easy and almost all faced the threat of death while trying to cross the Mekong to get to Thailand. That the Hmong survived their ordeal is admirable. And their later success, when they came to the United States, is still a story in progress.

Jakob says

canceled
