



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *More Than Meets the Eye: Lessons in Methodology through a Critique of Jonathan Schell's "The Village of Ben Suc"*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/224502/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Fear, S. orcid.org/0000-0003-4371-5500 (2025) More Than Meets the Eye: Lessons in Methodology through a Critique of Jonathan Schell's "The Village of Ben Suc". *American Historical Review*, 130 (1). pp. 131-135. ISSN 0002-8762

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhae656>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

More Than Meets the Eye

Lessons in Methodology through a Critique of Jonathan Schell’s “The Village of Ben Suc”

Left running head:

Short title :

 Sean Fear [AQ1](#)

University of Leeds, England

Footnotes

Jonathan Schell, *The Real War: The Classic Reporting on the Vietnam War* (DaCapo Press, 2000). In-text citations refer to this reprint edition of “The Village of Ben Suc,” unless otherwise noted.

Funding

No funding information is available

I encountered Jonathan Schell’s 1967 *New Yorker* article “The Village of Ben Suc” as an enthusiastic if somewhat naïve undergraduate conducting research on American counterinsurgency in Vietnam. It was absorbing, dramatic, and poignant, and I remember devouring it late one night in a single sitting, then reading it again the following day. At 130 pages, “The Village of Ben Suc” is considerably longer than most of the research articles and book chapters I’m able to assign in my Global Vietnam War course at the University of Leeds. But with

reading expectations everywhere wavering due to eroding attention spans if not work ethic, the piece has always been popular with my students, due in large part, I suspect, to Schell's adept storytelling. Classroom discussions of the text are lively and engaged, and it is routinely listed in my end-of-year course evaluations as one of the readings that students enjoy most.

"The Village of Ben Suc" presents a vivid eyewitness account of the 1967 Operation Cedar Falls campaign. This was a massive United States–South Vietnamese military exercise aimed at pacifying the so-called "Iron Triangle, a rural Communist Party stronghold immediately northwest of Saigon. Schell recounts swooping into the titular village aboard a squadron of sixty helicopter gunships while he was embedded with a company of enthusiastic American soldiers primed for combat with a tenacious and cunning foe. The soldiers, teenagers outside the United States for the first time, find themselves instead deposited into a tranquil and bucolic community that regards them with bemusement, exasperation, or weary resignation. We observe the Americans' bewilderment and frustration as they attempt the futile task of identifying enemy agents, equipped at best with a few words of broken Vietnamese. When communication proves hopeless, the soldiers instead cite the villagers' demeanor or clothing in distinguishing friend from foe. A man riding a bicycle and a young couple enjoying a picnic are among the many shot and killed for wearing "the V.C. uniform," the *áo bà ba* or "black pajamas" to the Americans, a loose-fitting ensemble ubiquitous in the rural South. "What are you going to do?" a US Army major later concedes to Schell. "We've got people in the kitchen at the base wearing those black pajamas" (120).

The situation only deteriorates from there. Dozens of purported communists are seized on spurious grounds, likely destined for indefinite detention in the South Vietnamese military state's notoriously brutal political prison system. On several occasions, Schell witnesses South Vietnamese soldiers beating and torturing their captives. Meanwhile, residents designated as civilians are driven from their homes before the village and surrounding jungle are pummeled by B-52s and fighter jets, artillery barrages, and napalm. In theory, with American troops having completed "the military half" of the operation, the villagers are to be relinquished to South Vietnamese officials tasked with winning "the other war—for the hearts and minds of the people."

“‘We can’t do it for them,’ a USAID official explains to Schell. ‘They have to learn to do it themselves someday’” (134–35). But the Americans, citing security concerns, opt not to inform South Vietnamese authorities until twenty hours before the campaign is launched, at that point the largest military operation of the entire war. Schell portrays a series of hapless Vietnamese administrators scrambling at a moment’s notice to provide food and shelter for some ten thousand unexpected refugees. Inevitably, the refugee accommodations—envisioned on paper as modern villages showcasing the irresistible allure of America’s technological and material bounty—amount to little more than hastily assembled shacks, enclosed by a makeshift barbed-wire perimeter. The piece concludes with American bulldozers leveling the smoldering ruins of Ben Suc, while thousands of abruptly impoverished villagers shiver in the dark, wondering where their next meal will come from.

Equal parts tragic and absurd, Schell’s narration encourages us to consider the Cedar Falls campaign as a microcosm of the Vietnam War’s senseless destruction and arbitrary cruelty. And this is largely how it was interpreted upon publication in 1967, famously filling nearly the entire July 15th issue of *The New Yorker*. For many readers, “The Village of Ben Suc” made a mockery of liberal pretensions that military intervention would bestow modernity and enlightenment upon Vietnam, chipping away at the confident assumption that American victory was both inevitable and just. Jane Fonda, for instance, credits it with inspiring her to demonstrate against the war.¹ And it remains a staple of the American Vietnam War canon; in 2024, the *New York Review of Books* published a new edition with an introduction by actor and essayist Wallace Shawn (a childhood friend of Schell’s).² As an undergraduate reader nearly forty years later, “The Village of Ben Suc” seemed to affirm everything I had been led to expect from the Vietnam War: hubris, devastation, and futility. And without exception, my Leeds students have responded as I did—at least at first glance.

But when I revisited the essay as a (hopefully less naïve) assistant professor preparing my Global Vietnam War syllabus, what struck me most this time was a character mentioned only in passing: Schell’s unnamed interpreter. After all, in addition to eyewitness reportage, Schell provides a

lengthy history of Ben Suc suggesting a seamless Communist Party ascent to overwhelming support and legitimacy in the region. “How could he know any of this?” I wondered, noting a brief admission on page 112 that Schell does not speak Vietnamese.

In 2017, an episode of the *New Yorker Radio Hour* podcast featured a conversation about the article between Schell and the historian Christian Appy, recorded prior to Schell’s death in 2014.³ The podcast, which I assign to students after they’ve completed the text, reveals that Schell was just twenty-three years old when he accompanied Operation Cedar Falls, fresh from graduation at Harvard and just weeks after he arrived in Vietnam and bluffed his way into securing press credentials. “If one of your classmates visited the Donbas and, within weeks and without speaking a word of Ukrainian, wrote a 130-page parable of that conflict,” I ask, “How far would you take their word for it?”

So what, in the absence of relevant training or experience, informs Schell’s historical impressions of the village? It is surely the interpreter, Schell’s only conduit to the many residents he interviews and arguably the most significant figure in the piece, however obscured. At this point I remind students of works we’ve read on Communist Party mobilization in what became North Vietnam. These demonstrate that violent intimidation—absent in “The Village of Ben Suc”—was also a factor alongside inducements like nationalist fervor or land reform in building what became a formidable mass rural political movement. Did communist techniques differ in the South? Or is Schell’s depiction of a peaceful rise to uncontested support in Ben Suc implausible, given what we know from recent scholarship based on Vietnamese sources regarding Communist Party coercion in the North? And, in a village contested by the United States and warring Vietnamese authorities, how forthcoming might villagers be when questioned by an American and his Vietnamese interpreter amid a band of menacing soldiers? How faithfully has the interpreter represented villagers’ responses? Can we trust the interpreter’s authority or intentions, not least given that Schell tells us nothing about them?

Here I draw students’ attention to another set of academic works that employ newly accessible Vietnamese archival documents to reassess Communist Party diplomacy and public relations.

They reveal the extent of Communist Party efforts to foster overseas sympathy by, for instance, meticulously scripting seemingly unsupervised tours of North Vietnam for American antiwar activists, or by furnishing the evidence cited in the celebrated 1967 International War Crimes Tribunal championed by Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre.⁴ Indeed, after the war it emerged that Phạm Xuân Ẩn, a *Time* magazine correspondent beloved by American journalists for facilitating their reporting, had been a Communist Party agent all along.⁵ Did Ẩn or a similar figure condition Schell's excursion? Was Schell's interpreter—the basis of much of his account—a Communist Party affiliate? We may never know, but it is not inconceivable, and at the very least this uncertainty over the circumstances that enabled “The Village of Ben Suc” should give readers pause.

To be clear, my objective is not to discredit Schell, but rather to demonstrate the necessity of interrogating our sources and the perils of being lulled by compelling storytelling into overlooking the flaws inherent in all historical texts. And beyond its value in encouraging students to approach historical narratives critically, “The Village of Ben Suc” is also instructive in illustrating how scholarship on the Vietnam War has developed. Drawing heavily on journalistic accounts like Schell's, many early English-language histories of the Vietnam War were informed by the American antiwar movement. Often described as the “orthodox” position in Vietnam War scholarship, they are characterized by a focus on the American dimensions of the conflict and by strong criticism of the strategic if not moral basis of American intervention in Vietnam. Though not strictly speaking an academic work, “The Village of Ben Suc” is consistent with this “orthodox” approach. But as Vietnamese-language materials have become available, more recent work by Vietnamese-proficient scholars now allows instructors to identify the gaps in American-focused accounts like Schell's, and to illuminate the Vietnamese origins and protagonists of the conflict. Tellingly, perhaps, when I assigned “The Village of Ben Suc” to Vietnamese students as a visiting professor in Vietnam, they had no need for my prompting; the first topic of discussion was their skepticism of Schell's credibility as narrator.

“So what can we conclude about ‘The Village of Ben Suc?’” I ask. “Is it valuable only as a

‘strawman’ to be picked apart?” I don’t believe so, and I would never assign readings solely on this basis. Whatever one makes of the piece, Schell’s initiative as an aspiring journalist is remarkable. And although, like all sources to varying degrees, it provides an imperfect account of the past, it is not in my view without redeeming qualities. “Setting aside what the interpreter provides,” I suggest, “what can we learn from the events Schell witnesses firsthand?” For some students, Schell effectively juxtaposes high-minded if self-serving American modernization ideology with its violent, chaotic application in Ben Suc. Perhaps Schell’s foremost success is in pursuit of his primary objective, dispelling official assertions that American conduct in Vietnam was everywhere effective and beneficent. To that end, I distribute copies sourced from the Texas Tech Vietnam Center and Archive of US military press releases, prisoner interrogation transcripts, and after-action reports, each evasively anodyne.⁶ “Does Schell, whatever else, demonstrate that there’s much more to the story than these official reports acknowledge?” I ask. Everyone nods.

Other students, citing recent Vietnamese-source scholarship on the South Vietnamese state, suggest that American officers’ disparaging attitudes toward South Vietnamese officials hint at the challenges South Vietnam faced in establishing itself as a legitimate nationalist alternative.

Conversely, several Vietnamese students commented that the piece helped them appreciate the resonance of the Communist Party movement in the rural South, in ways which the party slogans still ubiquitous in contemporary Vietnam could never convey. One student, among those initially most skeptical of Schell, noted that her family had been staunchly anti-communist during the war, and that reading the piece evoked a new sense of empathy with villagers rallying to the Communist Party following the traumatic dislocation Schell describes. Inclined in some cases to regard Communist Party institutions as officious and aloof, several students praised “The Village of Ben Suc” for elucidating the historical circumstances that once vivified the Communist movement, even if all agreed that it must be read with caution.

For all its shortcomings, I suggest to students, “The Village of Ben Suc” may well stand as the most insightful account we have of Operation Cedar Falls. All historical sources have limitations, and the narratives we construct from them are inherently incomplete. I also share a series of

interviews with Cedar Falls survivors conducted in 1983 by the Boston-based WGBH-TV television network, largely affirming Schell's account. But these were recorded during a far more repressive period in Vietnamese politics, with villagers likely to feel even more constrained in speaking to American reporters.⁷ Perhaps someday I'll have the chance to visit the reconstructed village of Ben Suc for myself, to inquire after eyewitnesses and to consider with students the methodological challenges and rewards of oral history decades later.

Author Biography

Sean Fear is a lecturer (assistant professor) in International History at the University of Leeds. He is writing a book, under contract with Harvard University Press, on the political history of South Vietnam's Second Republic (1967-1975). During the 2022-23 academic year he served as a visiting professor at Fulbright University Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City.

Footnotes

¹ "The Village of Ben Suc," *The New Yorker*, July 15, 1967, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1967/07/15/the-village-of-ben-suc>; "By the Book: Jane Fonda Likes to Curl Up with a Good Book, Among the Dead," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/books/review/jane-fonda-by-the-book-interview.html>.

² <https://www.nyrb.com/products/the-village-of-ben-suc>

³ "A Rookie Reporter in Vietnam Captures the War's Futility," *The New Yorker Radio Hour*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/rookie-reporter-vietnam-captures-wars-futility>.

⁴ Pierre Asselin, "National Liberation by Other Means: US Visitor Diplomacy in the Vietnam War," *Past & Present*, no. 264 (2024); Harish Mehta, "North Vietnam's Informal Diplomacy with Bertrand Russell: Peace Activism and the International War Crimes Tribunal," *Peace & Change* 37, no. 1 (2012): 64–94.

⁵ See, for instance, Larry Berman, *Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent* (HarperCollins, 2007).

⁶ Virtual Vietnam Archive, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/>.

⁷ “The Vietnam Collection,” GBH Open Vault, <https://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/vietnam/interviews>.
