

Protest and Rock-and-Roll during the Vietnam War

The Vietnam war was a long, costly and divisive conflict from 1955-1975 that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. The conflict was intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the US and the USSR. More than 3 million people (including over 58,000 Americans) were killed in the Vietnam War, and more than half of the dead were Vietnamese civilians.

With the Cold War intensifying worldwide, the US hardened its policies against any allies of the USSR, and by 1955 President Eisenhower had pledged his firm support to South Vietnam provided them with training and equipment from the US military and CIA. By 1962, the US military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the 1950s.



USA Response to the Vietnam War

Opposition to the war in the US bitterly divided Americans, even after President Nixon signed the Paris Peace Accords and ordered the withdrawal of US forces in 1973. Communist forces ended the war by seizing control of South Vietnam in 1975, and the country was unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam the following year.



The Vietnam conflict has been called “America’s first rock-and-roll war” because of the predominance of rock music that permeated the American experience there. As draft quotas were raised and deferment and exemption loopholes closed, an overwhelming number of military personnel belonged to one generation: the average age of combat soldiers was 19 and, according to some figures, 90% were under 23 years of age.

Therefore, many GIs imported their tastes in music into the war zone. Rock music was the most popular genre, and beads and peace symbol were worn with and on many uniforms.

As history has proven, music helps to define a generation and the US soldiers imported their musical preference into the war zone. It is interesting to note that there was not significant separation in music tastes between enlisted men and officers. Many songs of the period were inspired by the Vietnam War with even the most popular musical artists being influenced, for better or for worse, by the plight of the soldiers forced into battle. For instance, "Purple Haze", by Jimi Hendrix, a former "Screaming Eagles" paratrooper, made reference to a slang term for the M-18 violet smoke grenade, used by the United States armed forces.

Unlike the 1940s – when Americans thought the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and Nazi aggression in Europe justified the sacrifices of war – young people in the 1960s were deeply suspicious of the government's decision to go into Southeast Asia. As the military's commitment grew and the body counts piled up, many couldn't understand what they were fighting for.

Much of popular music in the 1960s was another means of protest for an audience that was against the Vietnam War. Several now-influential music artists used their talents to appeal to a wide audience that was against the war. This is shown through Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'," the anti-war concert poster at Berkeley, John Lennon's "Give Peace A Chance," Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, and Edwin Starr's "War." Not only has music been a direct means of anti-war protest, but the culture of peace and love, seen especially in the Woodstock festival, has also pervaded the minds of the public.

After the Vietnam War

In the US, the effects of the Vietnam War would linger long after the last troops returned home in 1973. The nation spent more than \$120 billion on the conflict in Vietnam from 1965-73, this massive

spending led to widespread inflation, exacerbated by a worldwide oil crisis in 1973 and skyrocketing fuel prices.

Psychologically, the effects ran even deeper. The war had pierced the myth of American invincibility and had bitterly divided the nation. Many returning veterans faced negative reactions from both opponents of the war (who viewed them as having killed innocent civilians) and its supporters (who saw them as having lost the war).

