This dissertation explores U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations through the transnational peace endeavors of American and Vietnamese ordinary citizens. The subjects of the study included Vietnamese refugees, children of American personnel and Vietnamese women, American and Vietnamese veterans and their families, relatives of fallen soldiers on both sides, and other civilians who experienced the impacts of war one way or another. The dissertation also highlights the roles of nongovernmental organizations and individuals who strove for peace and mutual understanding through transnational humanitarian and cultural activities. The study’s major argument is three-fold. First, American and Vietnamese ordinary citizens were active historical actors in their changing environments. Second, it was ordinary citizens of both countries who laid the groundwork for U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization. Third, the “universal human aspirations and emotions” (to borrow historian Akira Iriye’s words) played a significant role in U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations. This research reveals a plethora of boundary-crossing interactions between American and Vietnamese citizens, even during the times of extremely restricted diplomatic relations between the two nation-states. Bringing to center stage American and Vietnamese citizens’ efforts to solve postwar individual and social problems, this dissertation aims to bridge a gap in the scholarship on the U.S.-Vietnam relations.
Vietnam War: Vietnam War (1954–75), conflict that pitted the communist government of North Vietnam and its allies in South Vietnam, the Viet Cong, against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the United States. It was part of a larger regional conflict as well as a manifestation of the Cold War. Called the “American War” in Vietnam (or, in full, the “War Against the Americans to Save the Nation”), the war was also part of a larger regional conflict (see Indochina wars) and a manifestation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. Vietnam War. U.S. Marines bombing bunkers and tunnels used by the Viet Cong, 1966. The wars in Vietnam lasted 30 years. They began when France tried to restore colonial rule after World War II. Fear of losing Southeast Asia to the Communist-led independence movement brought U.S. backing to the French effort during the 1950s. French defeat resulted in a divided country, with the United States supporting the weak but pro-Western government of South Vietnam. When advice failed to stem the Communist tide, the United States in 1965 launched an air war against North Vietnam and committed ground troops to combat guerrilla insurgency in the south. American strength peaked at 540,000 in 1969, then rapidly declined. Growing numbers of Americans opposed the war on political or moral grounds, and public protest mounted. The Vietnam War pitted America against communism and was a classic example of Cold War conflict. The western allies had been victorious in Berlin, but communism had taken root in China. Eastern Europe remained under Russian control and in Vietnam the American feared threat of the spread communism seemed to be real. During the 1950’s, America had developed her Domino Theory. This was the creation of John Foster Dulles, America’s Secretary of State. He believed that if one country was allowed to fall to communism, the country next to it would be the next to tumble just as when one domino falls th