SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE

To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 131 SEPTEMBER 2019

SACEI

www.sacei07.org

A COUNTRY STAYS ALIVE WHEN ITS CULTURE IS ALIVE.

HOPE NEVER DIES IN THE INDOMITABLE VIETNAMESE MIND.

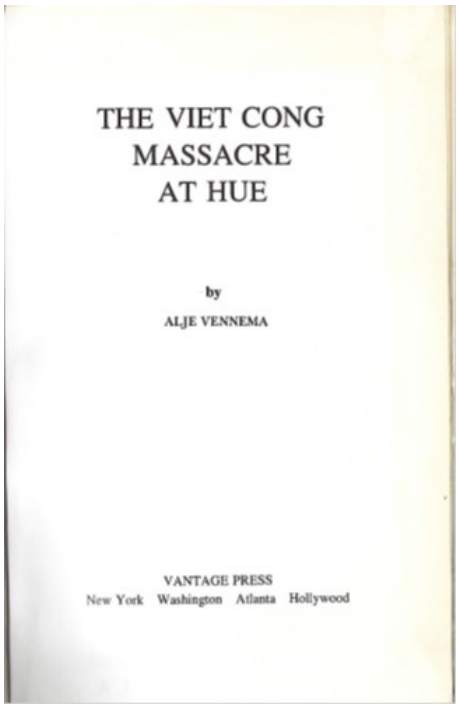
- **SACEI Newsletter updates you on the latest news about Vietnamese-America.**
- **It serves as a link between SACEI members and those who are interested in the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American culture.**

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

The Hue Massacre 1

The Things They Made Me Carry: Inheriting a White Curriculum 4

The Hue Massacre



Citizens trying to identify plastic bag containing remains of loved ones recently found in mass grave - killed in Hue massacre (Feb. 1968 Vietnam, Tet Offensive).

During the 26 day-occupation of Huế (Jan 31-Feb 26, 1968), the communists proceeded with the execution of thousands of people, locals as well as foreigners, civilians as well as government officials, priests, teachers, physicians as well as laborers, adults as well as children, Catholics as well as Buddhists. Only after the war ended that mass graves had been discovered in and around Huế. (1) At least 2,800 people were executed and thousands more were missing. (2) Victims were found bound, tortured, and sometimes buried alive. Others were clubbed to death. Ben Kiernan called it "the largest atrocity of the war." (3)

Eyewitness accounts

When the PAVN troops arrived in Huế, they quickly made rounds of the "liberated areas" armed with lists of names and addresses of the Huế citizens. For the communists, the war against civilians was as important as that against regular forces.

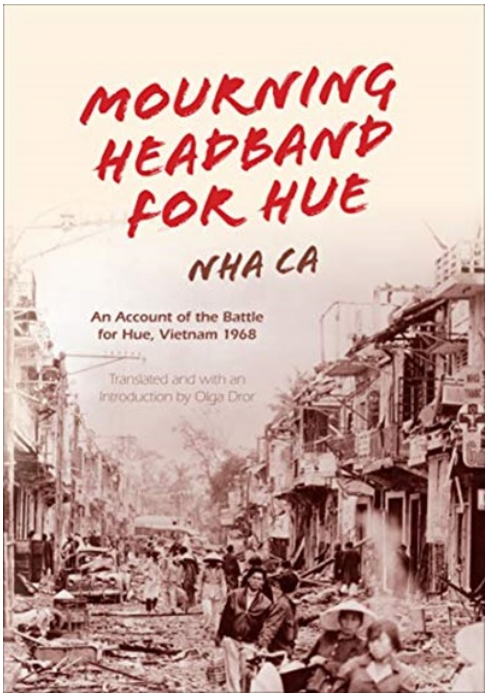
Dr. Horst Gunther Krainick, a German pediatrician from the University of Freiburg, Germany came to Huế in December 1960 to help establish a medical school at the University of Huế. Dr. Krainick and his wife, Elizabeth hoped to return to Germany after the end of the school year and graduation of the small class of senior medical students. As non-combatants and medical workers, they hoped they would be left alone. But they did not know that they were listed—though not by name—as Item 65 of the Right Bank target list.

On the fifth day of the occupation, a well-armed squad wearing red arm bands, neat uniforms and boots arrived in a Jeep and a Volkswagen bus and proceeded to search the building. They came back three hours later and took away the Krainick as well as Dr. Raimund Discher and Dr. Alois Altekoester. The four bodies were later found in a shallow grave in a potato field a half a mile away, all victims of the executioner's bullets. (4)

Continue on next page

Vietnam's Catholics...

Father Urbain and Fathy Guy, two French Benedictine priests lived at the Thiện An Mission in the tall pines in a bluff south of the city. When the fighting began, several thousand local peasants came to the monastery seeking refuge followed by communist troops. Father Urbain's body was found in a common grave with ten other victims near the monumental tomb of the Emperor Đồng Khánh (1883-89). Father Urbain had been bound hand and foot and buried alive. Father Guy's body was found nearby. He had been shot in the head. (5)



The area occupied for the longest period of time by the communists was Gia Hội, a large triangular section of land east of the walled city of Huế on the northern bank of the Hương River. Besides a popular market place and several commercial streets, it was Huế's residential suburb with rich farmlands. Being devoid of government headquarters or military installations, it did not carry the same strategic importance as the Triangle or the Citadel. Caught undermanned during the Tết Offensive attack, the ARVN had decided to use its available units to fight enemy troops in the Citadel and the Triangle first before taking on the ones in Gia Hội.

This decision spared Gia Hội from the extensive physical destruction related to street fighting seen in the Citadel and the Triangle. But it left the communists in total control of the area for more than three weeks. They ripped down all the South Vietnamese flags and called for the flag of the National Liberation Front (NLF) to be flown in its place. Since no one had an NLF flag, permission was given to fly a Buddhist flag in its place.

On the second day civil servants, military personnel and police were called to report to Gia Hội High School. They were told that nothing would happen to those who reported on time and if their attitude was good. People were afraid and most hid in their houses and bunkers. The announcements became tougher as days went by. People were told they would be shot if they were discovered hiding. Informants began making rounds and pointed out to the communists the homes of officials or ARVN officers. (6)

Phạm Văn Tường worked as a janitor at the government information office. He and his family—his wife, eight children, and three nephews—spent much of their time in a bunker on the side of their house. One day, four men in black pajamas came to the door of the bunker. "Mr. Pham, the information office cadre, come here." He climbed out of the bunker with his five year-old son, three year-old daughter, and two of his nephews. There was a burst of gunfire. When the rest of the family came out, they found all five of them dead. (7)

Grieving widow crying over plastic bag containing remains of husband recently found in mass grave - killed in Hue massacre (Feb. 1968 Vietnam, Tet Offensive).

Discovery

Between 1968 and 1969, more than 2,800 bodies were recovered from four major mass graves.

A few months aftet the battle, about 1,200 civilian bodies were recovered from recovered from 18 hastily concealed mass graves.

A second major group of graves were discovered in the first seven months of 1969.

In September 1969, three Việt Cộng defectors led the U.S. 101st Airborne Brigade through the royal tombs areas, and through the most rugged country of central Vietnam to the Đá Mài Creek bed deep in double canopy jungle ten miles south of Huế. There spread out for nearly one hundred yards in the ravine were skulls, skeletons and shards of bones of the men of Phủ Cam, washed clean and white by the running brook. The skulls showed they had been shot or brained with blunt instruments. Huế officials later released a list of 428 names. About 100 were South Vietnamese service men, about 100 were students, and the rest were civil servants, village

Continue on next page

and hamlet officials, government workers and ordinary citizens. (8)

In November 1969, a major mass grave was found at Phũ Thư Salt Flats near the village of Lương Viên, 10 miles east of Huế halfway between Huế and Đà Nẵng.

Legacy

There is no word to express the sorrow of the Huế inhabitants when asked about that 1968 tragic event. They just cried and cried. For them, it was their personal "Holocaust." Although their country was at war against the communists, they could not figure out how babies, women, elderly men, foreign workers—all innocent civilians—could be murdered in such a cold-blooded manner. Not only were they murdered, the story was also called propaganda or a "myth." (9) Although the communists continued to deny the accusations, in 1988 or more than twenty years after the war they admitted that "soldiers may have committed mistakes." (10)

In 1968 the novelist Nhã Ca, born Trần Thị Thu Vân, was returning to her city of birth, Huế, to attend to her father's funeral when she was stuck in the city during this tragic event. Having witnessed the tragedy of the war, she published a book titled *Giãi Khăn Khô cho Huế*, which later received a Presidential Award. After 1975, she was jailed for two years for writing the book, which was also banned the same year. Her husband, the poet Trần Dạ Từ was jailed for twelve years. They later immigrated to Sweden then the United States. Her book was translated into English as the *Mourning Headband for Huế* by Olga Dror, a former Soviet citizen who was knowledgeable with communist tactics. (11)

The PAVN soldier and historian Nguyễn Ngọc said, "I don't know whether the order to kill them came from the local commanders or higher up. But they killed the people they'd arrested. Some had worked for the South Vietnamese government or for the Americans, but there were people who were wrongly arrested, too, maybe because of some personal grievance and they were all killed. This is a smear against the revolution, a stain on the revolution's record." (12)

NOTES

1. Vennema, Alje. *The Viet Cong Massacre at Hue*. Vantage Press, New York. 1976: pp. 129-139. The book no longer in print, can be downloaded here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/djqzeu6kxe8wc7s/MassacreAtHue-searchable.pdf?dl=0
2. Hosmer 72-76 https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2008/R475.1.pdf; Ward, Geoffrey; Burns, Ken. *The Vietnam War. An Intimate History*. Alfred Knopf, New York. 2017: pp. 289-289.
3. Kiernan, Ben. *Vietnam. A History from Earliest Times to the Present*. Oxford University Press, New York. 2017: p. 444.
4. Oberdorfer, pp. 213-214.
5. Ibid, p. 214.
6. Ibid, pp. 224-225.
7. Ibid, p. 229.
8. Ibid, p. 215; https://www.historynet.com/tet-what-really-happened-at-hue.htm.
9. https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrg/porterhue1.html
10. Richburg, Keith. Twenty years after Hue, Vietnamese admit "mistakes." *Washington Post* 3 February, 1988: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/02/03/20-years-after-hue-vietnamese-admit-mistakes/263c2b5b-2942-46d7-8d17-17fe35682f83/
11. Dror, Olga. Learning from the Hue Massacre. *NYT*, 20 February, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/opinion/hue-massacre-vietnam-war.html
12. Quoted in Ward and Burns. *The Vietnam War*, pp. 289-289.

The Things They Made Me Carry: Inheriting a White Curriculum *Thu Anh Nguyen*

February 1, 2018
https://teachingwhilewhite.org/blog/2018/2/1/the-things-they-made-me-carry-inheriting-a-white-curriculum

It was a dream job: teaching ninth and twelfth graders English Literature at the first racially inclusive school in the nation's capital. I was told that 70 percent of my curriculum was predetermined by the department, but that I'd have control over 30 percent of the curriculum. I was excited to choose my texts, and to make really brave choices. Surely the school knew who they were hiring: an Asian female who went to an all-women's college, who wrote her Masters thesis in poetry as a study of Asian-American and immigrant identities. I imagined I was hired because I was bringing my unique self to the English department, a self that was in stark contrast to the almost all-white faculty.

Before I could be my brave self, I had to settle in. The first year teaching at any school is challenging. You are trying to master the curriculum, and also understand the students and faculty. You are trying to understand where you fit into all of it. I was already nervous about the fact that I was not only the only Asian person in my department but also the youngest person. Too many parents tried to slyly slip questions about my college and graduate work into conversations. I felt like I needed to prove myself, so I tried to lay low. I accepted the 70 percent of the curriculum I was given, and even let others dictate the 30 percent that was supposed to be my choice.

In English 12, which was a coveted class that typically only senior members of the department got to teach, I accepted teaching texts such as *Beloved, Paradise Lost, The Sound and The Fury,* and *The Things They Carried.* I have loved William Faulkner since reading him in high school, and I learned to love teaching Milton because I like rising to the challenge of teaching difficult texts. But then there was Tim O'Brien's novel about the Vietnam War. I tried to tell myself that *The Things They Carried* was hard too, and that therefore I should also love it — all of my colleagues who taught it chose it because of the figurative language, the book's Bible references. The book allowed them to impress students with words like "chiasmus." With so many reasons that the book should be taught, whenever I fumbled at teaching *The Things They Carried,* I thought it was my fault.

My sense of not being good enough to teach that text propelled me to learn more. I spent most of that first year diligently auditing my department head's classes even with a full schedule of my own, hoping that her love of the novel was going to magically infect me. I took copious notes, and then I tried to teach my classes exactly as she had taught hers. My students were generous and thoughtful, and I honestly don't think that they heard the false notes that I was increasingly attune to in my teaching. No matter how hard I worked, how many notes I took, and how well I mimicked my colleagues, I never learned to love that book.

I never loved it because I never was able to be myself while teaching it. How could I teach *The Things They Carried,* which is about what white men carried, and also be a Vietnamese immigrant, the daughter of a man who fought alongside Americans in the Vietnam War, and then was imprisoned for it? How could I teach Tim O'Brien's version of the Vietnam War that actually has no Vietnamese people in it? When I've said this to people in the past, they were always shocked: How can a book about the Vietnam War have no Vietnamese people in it? The main scene that describes Vietnamese people has them symbolized as water buffalo (my white colleagues had a whole lesson built around this water buffalo metaphor as if it was the most exciting thing in the world to discover that the animal represented my people).

Continue on next page

The Things They Made Me Carry...

Like the water buffalo, Vietnamese people are shot and killed. They have no personalities. No families. They are just the backdrop for American bravery and grief.

One of the main metaphors in *The Things They Carried* is that American soldiers were not just carrying backpacks full of rations, ammunition, photos from home, and other items necessary to make it through the war, but they were carrying the toll that the Vietnam War took on them. Teaching that text for a year took a huge toll on me. I have never before or since then taught with so little of my heart.

I could not face another year of teaching something that was so against what I knew to be true, so I needed to come up with the solution. That was when I decided to wield the 30 percent teacher's choice in the curriculum that I was promised. I chose to teach *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by Le Thi Diem Thuy. It is a novel written by a Vietnamese refugee about the harrowing journey and resettlement of six Vietnamese refugees in late 1970s' San Diego. This wasn't just about using a Vietnamese perspective though. *Gangster* is beautifully written. In many ways, its broken narrative is a much more realistic reflection of post-traumatic stress disorder than O'Brien's perfectly crafted allegories. It has a compelling female protagonist who clearly had thematic ties to other characters we read that year, such as Caddy from *The Sound and the Fury* and Sethe from Morrison's *Beloved.* If I sound like I am trying to defend my choice, it's because I felt like I had to defend my choice. The other three teachers of English 12 that year were all veteran teachers, one was my department chair, and they all had chosen the 70 percent of the curriculum that I had inherited. They had been nicknamed the Holy Trinity, and to me they felt untouchable. Of course, students revered them. They had been at the school for decades, had made the English department what it was. It's only with many more years of teaching under my belt now that I realize how unhealthy that situation was. Schools need to be wary of setting up new teachers — especially new teachers of color — in impossible situations in which they are alone in a group of long-standing white faculty. I was never going to feel powerful in that situation.

So at first, I wasn't brave enough to completely jettison O'Brien; I taught some chapters of *The Things They Carried* alongside *Gangster.* As I was finally able to teach about the Vietnam War through a Vietnamese family's eyes, I found my true voice again. And once I found my voice, my students found me. I still have my student evaluations of me from that year, the ones that said that *Gangster* was their favorite book we read because it wasn't like anything they had read before, and it felt real. It felt real because it *was* real — because it i*s* real to tell the story of the Vietnam War through a Vietnamese perspective. Why hadn't anyone else before me thought of that? Why would they have?

I honestly believe that no one else had questioned teaching *The Things They Carried* because no one else was a faculty member who was actually a Vietnamese immigrant. No one else reacted as viscerally as I did to that text. There are so many clear and good arguments for diversifying the faculty of our schools, as there are measurable benefits to having faculty of color. I also think that schools need faculty of color because that is the only way they are going to find out what they are missing. Hiring faculty of color means that a schools doesn't just gain new perspectives, but they will have to re-examine long-held ones. Hiring me meant that after my first year teaching *The Gangster We Are All Looking For,* given the enthusiastic response from students, I was asked to share my lesson plans with my other colleagues so that they too could teach it alongside *The Things They Carried*. No matter where I teach, hiring me means that an Asian, female, immigrant experience will allow me to look at the curriculum through those lenses.

Continue on next page

The Things They Made Me Carry...

When asked about how *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* reflects the experience of Vietnamese Americans, Le Thi Diem Thuy said:

> I will allow that every element in this book came from a personal passion, to wrest Vietnam the place (homeland) back from Vietnam the war, and to show Vietnamese people who carry entire worlds — of grief, of longing, of love — within them, and have something to say about those worlds. Who they are, what they have to say, and how they say it, is not incidental to the story, it is the story.

We need to make sure that when we tell our students stories, they have the whole story. Every person in the story has to have a voice. I am honored that my calling is teaching, and that I am able to give voice to people that were previously unheard. Recently, I met with parents of an Asian student who wanted to hear about my current school's curriculum. Their specific question was, "How are we represented in the curriculum?" They wanted to know when their child could see himself in something we studied. I felt proud that I was able to answer that I taught *Inside Out & Back Again,* a novel in verse about a Vietnamese immigrant's experience. Through that book, I am able to teach about immigration of many other cultures as well. The parents were satisfied, but they also expressed surprise. "How long has this been in the curriculum?" they wondered. "We had no idea." It wasn't until I answered them I realized it myself: "We have been teaching it for three years." *Since I started teaching at this school.*

Like the backpacks worn by the soldiers in *The Things They Carried,* teachers are weighed down with the baggage of a pre-existing curriculum, a curriculum that has sometimes existed for so long, no one even knows why it still exists. Maybe the faculty has not changed composition for years, and they cannot see why the curriculum should change. Diverse faculty provide new lenses. Faculty of color in mostly white independent schools offer fresh perspectives. When I was able to finally envision a curriculum that felt true to my experience, I felt a huge weight lifted off of me. We as teachers should not let our students carry the burden of curriculum that does not reflect who they are; we should lighten their loads. We should all feel the weightlessness that comes with being our true selves.

Thu Anh Nguyen is Equity, Justice, and Community Coordinator for the Middle School at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. She teaches sixth grade, and also writes and performs poetry.