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STAYS ALIVE
WHEN ITS
CULTURE IS
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**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.**

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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 66

APRIL 2014

Vietnam: The Land of the Reeducation Camps

This special newsletter is dedicated to the 1970s and 1980s communist reeducation camps in Vietnam. Reeducation camps were nothing new in the world for the communists started sending their enemies or anyone who opposed them to their gulags in Siberia as early as the 1920s. The gulag is recognized as an instrument of political repression in the Soviet Union according to article 58 of the Russian Soviet Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) Penal Code. The Chinese communists adopted the Soviet gulag system; the Hanoi communists then aped the Chinese. By 1950, they began sending their enemies to the reeducation camps in North Vietnam. After 1954, they sent Hanoi citizens to the camps in the northwestern mountains of Vietnam. These prisoners remained there until they met the first South Vietnamese who were sent to these camps after 1975. By that time, northerners had lived in the camps for 21 years.

Although things have changed, the Hanoi regime remains as oppressive and repressive as before: a simple mentioning of transparency or demand for freedom would land any Vietnamese into another "reeducation camp" or its modern version.

During this April month, as the overseas Vietnamese mourn the 39th year of the Fall of Saigon, they also witness the 39th and 60th year of TERROR AND OPPRESSION in South and North Vietnam, respectively.

39 Years of Terror and Oppression (1975-2014)

Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, a former ARVN captain spent six years in reeducation camps after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Following his release, he collected "information of rape and bribery" against communist officials, for which he was sentenced to death. The sentence was commuted to life imprisonment on appeal (<http://sacei07.org/Newsletter57.pdf>, reproduced below in section IV).

Singer Viet Khang (<http://sacei07.org/Newsletter41.pdf>) is serving time in one of these unnamed jails for writing and singing a song opposing China, which is considered as Vietnam's benefactor. Any demonstration about the Chinese takeover of the Paracel Islands would be immediately disrupted. A recently planned commemoration of the Paracel Battle was called off by Hanoi in order not to offend China (newsletter #65).

Hanoi thus turned out to be no more and no less a *nguy* (puppet) of the Chinese. What is bad is that four decades after the so-called liberation of the South, Hanoi remains a Chinese puppet --the LONGEST SERVING CHINESE PUPPET in Vietnamese history. It owes so much to China that it has to:

- 1) offer lands to China in compensation for their assistance during the war (part of the northern borders of Vietnam, Paracel, Spratley Islands),
- 2) quash any demonstrations against China,
- 3) allow China to build Chinese villages inside Vietnam (Binh Duong...) so that the Chinese could one day takeover Vietnam?
- 4) and allow China to extract bauxite in Vietnam and mess up the environment. Workers at these plants are Chinese who were isolated inside Chinese compounds and removed from the local Vietnamese populace. What are the Chinese doing in these compounds is beyond anyone guess.

The following picture taken on July 1, 2012 in front of the Saigon Notre Dame Basilica illustrates the point. As a Vietnamese-French demonstrated against the Chinese in front of the Basilica, he was questioned by the secret police who asked him, "Who are you and where are you from to protest for Vietnam [against the Chinese]?" The man answered, "Although I may look like a French, I have a Vietnamese heart. And you who look like a Vietnamese, but what kind of heart do you have?"

During and after the war, the Hanoi communists used to carry long knives although westerners pretended not to know about them. Douglas Pike, however, had warned them:

The meaning of the Hue Massacre seems clear. If the communists win decisively in South Viet-Nam (and the key word is decisively), what is the prospect? First, all foreigners would be cleared out of the South, especially the hun-

Continue on next page

dreds of foreign newsmen who are in and out of Saigon. A curtain of ignorance would descend. Then would begin a night of long knives. There would be a new order to build. The war was long and so are memories of old scores to be settled. All political opposition, actual or potential, would be systematically eliminated. Stalin versus kulak, Mao versus landlord, Hanoi communist versus Southern Catholic, the pattern would be the same: eliminate not the individual, for who cares about the individual, but the latent danger to the dream, the representative of the blocs, the symbol of the force, that might someday, even inside the regime, dilute the system. Beyond this would come communist justice, meted out to the "tyrants and lackeys." Personal revenge would be a small wheel turning within the larger wheel of Party retribution. But little of this would be known abroad. The communists in Viet-Nam would create a silence.

Douglas Pike

After suppressing the South Vietnamese military and intellectuals, they suppressed religious leaders and their communities: Catholic churches and Buddhist pagodas were closed and priests and monks were sent to reeducation camps. Where were the western voices that condemned the Ngos for their dealings with the Buddhists in 1963? Where were the Jane Fondas, the antiwar activists? What a SHAME. They kept SILENT, a golden silence that allowed the communists to continue their execution and persecution of the South Vietnamese people.

Where were these feisty politicians who decided to bring down the Saigon government? They had become LAMBS in front of the invading Vietnamese communists: all they could do was to shamefully turn their faces away. And the destruction of the South Vietnamese society went on... On the hands of these Fondas, antiwar activists, meek politicians, the blood of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese... Of course, the Hanoi communists did THEIR killings, but the above westerners approved them with both hands and feet.



After killing the South Vietnamese in their reeducation camps, suppressing South Vietnamese religious leaders, and taming the weak westerners, the Hanoi communists suppressed freedom in the South, "raping" Saigon and the South Vietnamese society, stealing 20 tons of gold from the Saigon National Bank, taking everything from cars, radios, bicycles, scooters, gold, diamonds, war materiel, ... to send back to Hanoi and enrich themselves. Communists who stayed in the South divided properties, banks, cars, offices, buildings, even prostitutes...between themselves.

"They fought each other over houses, cars, prostitutes, and bribes. Soldiers and officials ...were confronted with what seemed to them an almost fairy-tale richness, theirs for the taking. It was as if the city had been invaded by a swarm of locusts." (Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong memoir*, 289)

After bringing the South Vietnamese society to its knees, Hanoi moved to suppress all freedoms. Anyone who challenged the communist credo, anyone who raised the question of freedom, multi-party society was jailed and suppressed.

This was the history of Vietnam, a story of the communist conquest of North and then South Vietnam. Dear westerners who are now sitting in the ivory towers of U.S. universities, dear antiwar activists who are now walking in the hallways and corridors of Congress or U.S. institutions, dear members of the press, do NOT tell us that Ho Chi Minh was a hero who had brought peace to Vietnam. We are the witnesses to Ho's and his communists' killing of the Vietnamese in general. They had brought war to Vietnam, caused 3-5 million Vietnamese deaths, and changed the Vietnamese society for the worse. They took over Vietnam to impose their communist rule, not to bring prosperity, peace, or pride to Vietnam. In their jails, languished freedom fighters who really fought for Vietnamese freedom. Among them is Nguyen Huu Cau, the Prisoner of the Century who had been jailed for 37 out of 39 YEARS under the communist rule.

Now, they send the bloggers to jails:

<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Vietnamese-police-fabricates-evidence,-distorts-witness-statements-to-convict-blogger-30540.html>
<http://nhhtam.tumblr.com>

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NGUYỄN HỮU CẦU

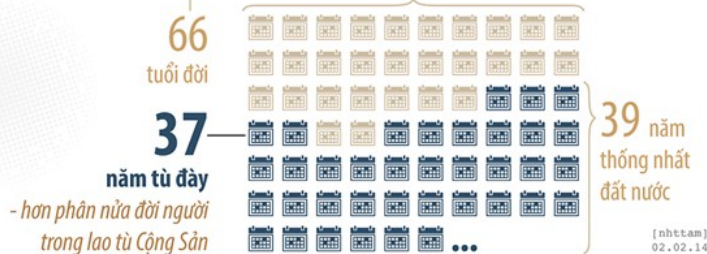
Người Tù Thế Kỷ



"Tại sao ông cháu lại phải bị ở tù suốt gần 38 năm? ... Những năm tháng ở tù đối với ông cháu thật là tàn nhẫn và vô nhân đạo."

- Yên Nhi, 14 tuổi, cháu nội.

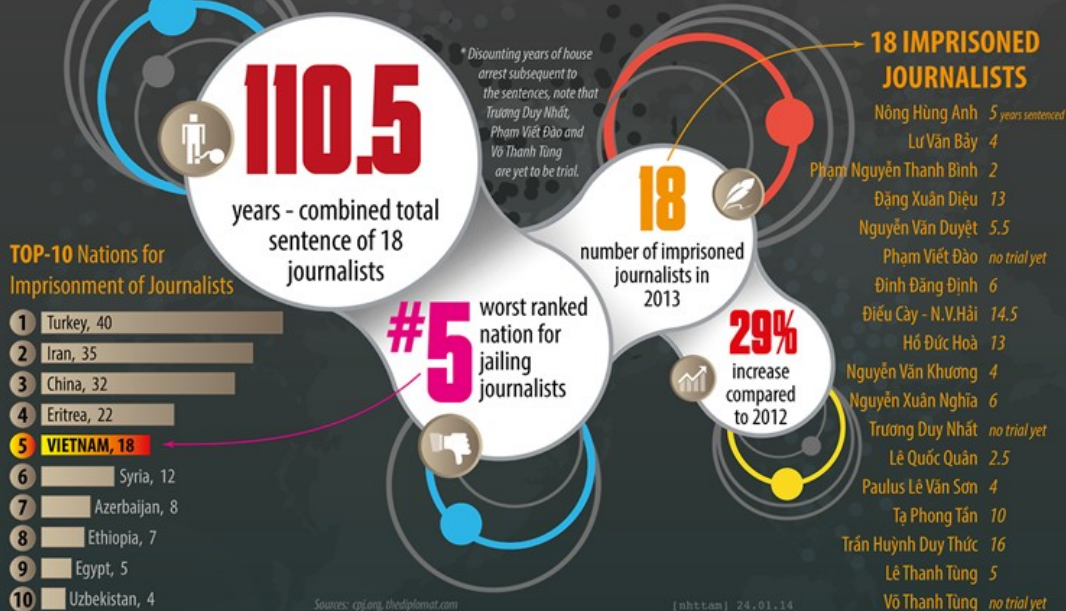
Dữ kiện: rfa.org, voatiengviet.com, vietnamhumanrightsdefenders.net



JOINED UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL? ... NO BIG DEAL!

VIETNAM MADE **TOP-10** FOR IMPRISONMENT OF JOURNALISTS

2013 Report by Committee to Protect Journalists



SACEI's Masterlist of Books About Reeducation Camps in Vietnam

At the request of readers and researchers in this field, SACEI is proud to make this master list available to help them in their work. The list is in no way exhaustive and will be updated on a regular basis. Some books have been published in small quantities and are now out of print. Others, especially Vietnamese editions, are usually self-published in very small quantities, without ISBN numbers, and therefore very difficult to locate.

The list is divided into two groups: those published in English and the others in Vietnamese. All of them are published in the U.S. This does not mean that no book about reeducation camps has been published in other western countries: it simply means that we have not been able to access them so far.

Please forward to Sacei (sacei007@yahoo.com) the name of any book that is not listed in this master list. Your contribution to the knowledge of the Hanoi reeducation camps is deeply appreciated.

Thank you.

English

1. Vo, Nghia. *The Bamboo Gulag. Political Imprisonment in Communist Vietnam*. Jefferson, McFarland, 2004.
2. Chat Dang et al. *The Vietnamese Mayflowers of 1975*. Book Surge, 2009.
3. Doan Van Toai. *The Vietnamese Gulag*. New York, Simon Schuster, 1986.
4. Huynh Jade. *South Wind Changing*. St Paul, Graywolf Press, 1994.
5. Huynh Sanh Thong. *To Be Made Over. Tales of Socialist Reeducation Camps in Vietnam*. Yale SEAS, 1988.
6. Le Huu Tri. *Prisoner of the Word*. Seattle, Black Heron, 2001.
7. Luu Van Thanh. *The Inviting Call of Wandering Souls*. McFarland, 1997.
8. McKelvey, RS. *A Gift of Barbed Wire*. Seattle, U Washington Press, 2002.
9. Metzner, EP et al. *Reeducation in Post War Vietnam*. Texas A&M University Press, 2001.
10. Nguyen Van Canh. *Vietnam Under Communism*. Stanford, Hoover Press, 1983.
11. Tran Tri Vu. *Lost Years: My 1632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps*. Berkeley, U California Press, 1988.
12. Freeman, James. *Hearts of Sorrow. Vietnamese American Lives*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989.
13. Nguyen Chi Thien. *Hoa Lo/Hanoi Hilton Stories*. New Haven, Yale SEAS, 2007.
14. Dinh Ngoc Que. *Memoirs of a Priest Imprisoned in the Reeducation Camp*. Pro Tech Printing, 2000
15. Nguyen Ngoc Ngan. *The Will of Heaven. A Story of one Vietnamese and the End of his World*. New York, Dutton, 1982.

Vietnamese

1. Nguyễn Huy Hùng. *Hồi ức Từ Cải Tạo Vietnam*. (Memoirs of the Vietnamese reeducation camps) Orange County, CA, 2004.
2. Hà Thúc Sinh. *Đại Học Máu*. (The Blood University) NT Printing, 1993.
3. Lý Tòng Bá. *Hồi Ký 25 Năm Khó Lửa*. (Memoirs of Twenty-five-year- Warfare) Westminster, Tú Quỳnh, 2005 (6th Ed).
4. Tống Viết Minh. *Một Thời Để Nhớ*. (A Time to Remember) Orange County, CA, 2011
5. Văn Hải Nguyễn Xuân Hùng. *Trong Vòng Kẽm Gai*. (Inside the Barbed Wire) Westminster, CA 2011.
6. Nhiều Tác Giả. *Chuyện Người Tù Cải Tạo* (tập 2). (Stories about the Prisoners of the Reeducation Camps) Viễn Đông, 2007.
7. Hoàng Thời. *Trong Lao Tù Cộng Sản*. (Inside the Reeducation Camps) Xuân Thu, 1993.
8. Hoàng Long Hải. *Vết Nám (Hồi Ký Từ Cải Tạo)*. (The Black Spot-Memoir of reeducation Camps) Văn Mới, 2010.
9. Phạm Gia Đại. *Những Người Tù Cuối Cùng*. (The Last Prisoners of the Reeducation camps) Westminster, 2011.
10. Hoàng Thời. *Trên Đất Tù Cộng Sản*. (On the Land of the Communist Reeducation Camps) Đại Nam, 1993.
11. Đỗ Văn Phúc. *Cuối Tần Địa Ngục*. (The Communist Hell) Five-Star Printing, CA 2008.

Although *The Bamboo Gulag* also discusses the reeducation camps, the civilian jails and methods used to control inmates (executions, tortures, thought reform, starvation, hard labor, confinement...), we will limit the discussion in this section to the location of the northern and southern reeducation camps. Besides the basic camps, additional ones had been built a few miles away from the main camp by the prisoners themselves to accommodate for the large influx of inmates showing up for reeducation. By mid-1975, Vietnam had become the land of the reeducation camps: anyone who was not a communist, was an enemy to the system, therefore sent to jail to:

- 1) corral, kill, and suppress *all* enemies and dissidents;
- 2) facilitate the control of the South Vietnamese society.

"If they can't pin you down as a reactionary, then you are a pseudo-pacifist. If you're not a pseudo-pacifist, you're a bourgeois-nationalist. If you're not a bourgeois nationalist, you are a decadent. If you're not a decadent, you're a hooligan. And hooliganism, decadence, bourgeois-nationalism, and pseudo-pacifism are all forms of reaction." (Nguyen Mong Giac in Huynh Sanh Thong, *To Be Made Over*, 117)

All males (and some females) were sent to reeducation camps or local jails. Again not all the reeducation camps will be discussed in this section.

Treatment in northern camps was in general worse than that in southern camps. The combination of hard work, cold weather, lack of food, clothing, and medications, the presence of lice, and the harsh treatment reserved to inmates "destroyed and killed them slowly day by day." All these factors affected their health and contributed to the high mortality in northern camps.

A. NORTHERN CAMPS (*Gulag*, 93-116)

1. *Son La Camp*—Built by the French many decades ago, they housed ARVN soldiers imprisoned during the 1971 Lam Son 719 invasion into Laos.
2. *Lao Kai Camp*—Close to the Laotian border, they previously housed ARVN commandos who were dropped in 1962 to do spy work in North Vietnam.
3. *Ha Tay Camp*—This is where Tran Van Tuyen, renowned lawyer, former South Vietnamese senator, deputy prime minister, and critic of Thieu died. Although Thieu did not kill his opponent, the communists did.
4. *Nam Ha Camp*—Many unexplained deaths occurred in the Ha Tay and Nam Ha camps, which were show cases camps for foreigners.
5. *Yen Bai Camp*—Housed 15,000 to 20,000 inmates along with 400 colonels.
6. *Nghe An Camp*—Close to the Laotian border, it was run by the Cong An (Public Security Agency) and known as the worst northern camp.
7. *Lang Son Camp*
8. *Vinh Phu Camp*

B. SOUTHERN CAMPS (*Gulag* 68-92)

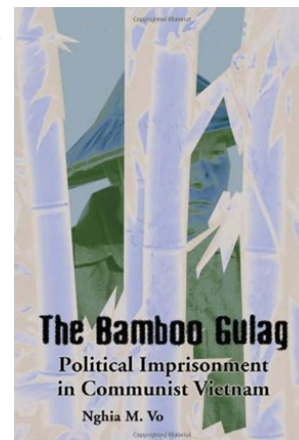
1. *Kien Giang Camp*—Inmates died of diarrhea or from explosion of mines they were ordered to remove.
2. *Trang Lon Camp*—Used as a screening camp.
3. *Xuan Loc I and II Camps*
4. *Hoc Mon Camp*—Heroic behavior was noted among many inmates of this camp. They all died confined in conex.
5. *Bu Gia Map and Buu Loi Camps*—Group torture was recorded in these camps for staging hunger strike.
6. *Da Ban and A-30 Camps*—Noted for physical abuse and corruption.
7. *Katum Camp*—Close to the Cambodian border, it was the worst camp in the South.

Besides these military camps run by military personnel and the Cong An (secret police), were local jails run by civilian authorities. There were also unnamed camps known only to Party members and designed to sequester and break down any opponent of the regime: the typical example is Nguyen Huu Cau, which is discussed below. Overall, there were more jails and camps than schools from 1975 to 1982. Vietnam had become a huge jail camp where southerners were confined either in military camps or civilian jails where their future was not good at all, to say the least.

The goals of the reeducation camps were:

- 1) to isolate and confine all males, especially the leadership of the South Vietnamese government (military and civilian), and
- 2) to break them physically and mentally so that they could no longer present any threat to the Hanoi regime.

The Bamboo Gulag: Nghia M. Vo



Nguyen Huu Cau: Prisoner of the Century

Nguyễn Hữu Cầu has been languishing in communist jails for 37 out of the 39 years since the communists took over South Vietnam. At age 67, he has spent more than half of his life in jail. A former captain of the territorial forces of the Republic of South Vietnam, he spent six years in various reeducation camps following the Fall of Saigon. Released in 1981, he was sentenced to death for having collected "allegations of rape and bribery" committed by two high level Vietnamese officials. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment on appeal.

According to PEN's information, Nguyễn Hữu Cầu, 67, is a poet, songwriter, human rights defender and anti-corruption activist. He was arrested by public security police on 9 October 1982 for having authored an 'incriminating' manuscript of songs and poems. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu had reportedly noted allegations of rape and bribery committed by the two high level officers on the back of the pages of the original manuscript.

Nguyễn Hữu Cầu was accused of committing 'destructive acts' that were supposedly 'damaging' to the government's image and on 23 May 1983, he was sentenced to death. His mother submitted an appeal on his behalf and a year later, on 24 May 1985, the Court of Appeals commuted his capital sentence into life imprisonment. The manuscript was reportedly not used as evidence in the trial against him, in order to protect the two officers concerned.

In the many years since, Nguyễn Hữu Cầu has reportedly been held in harsh solitary confinement. He has apparently now lost most of his vision and is almost completely deaf. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu suffers from a serious heart condition, which is worsening because of the lack of adequate medical attention and the deplorable prison conditions. He was recently reported to be in very poor health, according to his daughter who returned from an authorized periodical visit to the camp deep in the jungle. Concerns for his well-being are acute. Nguyễn Hữu Cầu is being held at forced labour camp K2 Z30A Xuan Loc, Dong Nai province, Vietnam.

<http://www.pen-deutschland.de/en/2013/03/28/vietnam-sorge-um-gesundheit-des-inhaftierten-journalisten-nguyen-huu-cau/>

Nguyễn Hữu Cầu's personal life was no less tragic than his civilian one. While being jailed, his wife left him for another man and took with her their young son. The latter was adopted by his stepfather and was given the name of Trần Ngọc Bích. The two siblings from then on lived apart.

Nguyễn Hữu Cầu's daughter, Nguyễn Thị Anh Thư was left to be raised her grandmother. Anh Thư went through difficult times during her childhood. While growing up, she had to sell odds and ends to bring money home so that her grandmother could raise her or buy bus tickets to pay visit to her father in jail. The 'orphan' girl did get to know her father in jail and slowly got attached to him. Over the years, she became his confidante and strongest supporter. She spread news about his health status and was his link to the outer world.

As his eye sight was decreasing, she noticed it and sounded the alarm.

"Since when did you have this problem?" she asked.

"It has been a long time. But I did not want to tell you to cause you to worry. I had some eye surgery sometime ago; but my eyesight keeps getting worse with time."

In August 2009, after visiting her father in jail, Anh Thư cried out:

"I insistently beg uncles and aunts to love (sob)...love my father; to speak up so that he could be released home. I would be very grateful to you (sob). A normal person (sob) who stayed in jail for ten years would already be miserable (sob); and we are not talking about his 28 years. He cannot stand it (sob)."



Nguyễn Hữu Cầu

During all this time, her brother, Trần Ngọc Bích, did not know his real father as no one told him. As he wanted to further his life, he applied for membership to the communist party. It was then that the Cong An broke the news to him. From then on, he started visiting his father in jail and also noticed his gradual health deterioration.

As Anh Thư was crying out for help, the Cong An went on the defensive and said,

"We told him to write and ask the government for clemency."

"I have written and sent out five hundred letters, but have not gotten any answer," claimed Nguyễn Hữu Cầu.

http://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/health-condition-of-decades-long-prisoner-nguyen-huu-cau-is-worse-08092010151643.html

PS. We are aware of the release of Nguyen Huu Cau on March 23, 2014.

Memoirs of a Priest Imprisoned in Communist Reeducation Camp (1975-1988): Father Dinh Ngoc Que

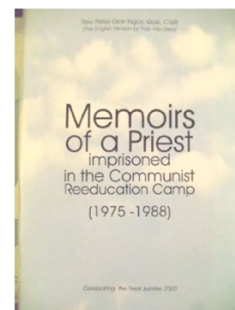
The book reveals:

1. Repressive measures against religions

Religious practice was prohibited in the reeducation camps. Masses had to be performed clandestinely behind bathrooms or walls or in potato fields. Anyone getting caught would be severely punished. Church properties were confiscated and turned into storage areas, vehicle repair shops. This was even worse than under the Diem or Thieu regimes.

In reeducation camps, priests were badly treated because they were considered to be subversive elements. The author was ordered to go to the forests alone to cut eight bamboo trees on a Sunday because he was a priest. Thirty-nine priests were moved to the Thanh Cam Camp, Thanh Hoa province where they were detained under strict supervision.

Outside the camps, in the Bui Chu district, one priest had to take care of six to seven parishes and in a particular parish, he could conduct only a few masses a year. As religious training curriculum was censored and priests not allowed to ordain new ones, shortage of priests is big.



2. Repressive measures against enemies of the proletariat

Any social group other than the proletariat was considered to be enemy of the people and must be liquidated. South Vietnamese officials and military officers, which fell into this group had to be reeducated or liquidated. Mai Chi Tho, the interior minister in 1988 admitted that the number of long-term detainees was 500,000. (*Memoirs of a Priest*, 14)

Inmates, therefore, suffered from tortures, which were more barbaric than those applied to any communist country. They were starved and forced to do hard labor in order to break down their mental system. They were denied standard medical care: a butcher's knife was used to cut out an inflamed appendix. Inmates were shackled until they developed ankle sores which got infected requiring amputations that were performed with a regular saw and without anesthesia. Teeth were removed with a pair of pliers. Prisoners were encouraged to beat prisoners to death...

Eight Years in Reeducation Camps: Dr. Nguyen Kim Quy

Speech made in July 1991 by Dr. Nguyen Kim Quy, Ph.D, professor of French and Latin at Eastern Washington University, to Antony Rotary Club, France, about Stendhal and author's eight years in communist reeducation camps.

I never know why I have loved so much Stendhal and his novels. And this, from my *lycée* [1] time when I read and re-read with pleasure the scented pages of *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *La Chartreuse de Parme*, despite the aversion of my father, a fervent, even extremist Catholic. Talking about this, I remember the question that Mr. Victor del Litto, president of the Stendhal Club, asked me point blank during my last stay in Grenoble, France, four years ago: "Why do you love Stendhal?" This left me puzzled as I did not know how to answer. During my interviews for my position of Professor of French and Latin in the United States, I faced the same question. Frankly, I confess that I am totally ignorant of the reasons of my fondness for this marginal but genius writer –who was quite unknown, and perhaps very unpopular among the readers of his time. In effect, for me, to love Stendhal is similar to loving a woman or a man. One loves or does not love, that's all. More true with Stendhal, there was at the beginning a sort of very gentle love at first sight. Crystallization, to re-use a word from Stendhal in *De l'amour*, [2] will only come slowly, and a long time afterwards. And when love struck (*coup de foudre*), no "victim" does not know it; naturally, there is no explanation.

Years have passed. And now, I see myself before a blank page, trying to find a new explanation if possible –or rather impossible. I love Stendhal, perhaps due to his novels, and in his novels, because of his immortal heroines, so beautiful, so gracious, who exert an irresistible seduction not only of the heroes, their lovers, and the readers like me with a sensitive soul, but also of the harshest contemporary critics such as Paul Valéry, Jean-Paul Sartre and Julien Gracq, among many others. In addition, I love in his works the fairytale perfume, so enthralling, so everlasting, and also present in Marcel Proust's writings, that atmosphere so enchanting and timeless, made of blended fiction and reality, altered to provide me solace from life's many "bitter truths" (*après vérités*) to use Stendhal's own words, and to make me dream of bluer skies and purer sounds, for my eternal hymns to love and beauty.

During the Vietnam War, as an ARVN [3] officer, I always carried in the pockets of my fatigues the lyric masterpiece *Truyện Kiều* by our great national poet Nguyễn Du, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and a novel by Stendhal that I read in between two battles, in the trenches, in the barracks, or during snacks... Nguyễn Du, Baudelaire, and particularly Stendhal helped me escape from the callous reality which, as Nerval [4] said, is *not always the sister of Dream*. I often allowed myself to be charmed by the niceties of an imaginary life with all its splendor, filled with pink clouds, first loves, endless kisses, of a life which has no name in this world. Death relentlessly stalked us, but the prose of Stendhal, better than wine and woman, or hashish [cannabis] in Baudelaire's poetry, gave me the amazing courage of defying it, right in its face: that I forgot about death is to say the least, I squarely disdained it. Exactly like the Stendhal heroes Julien, Fabrice, Octave, Lucien, etc...

The post-war events would show better how novels, especially those of Stendhal, kept me under their charm, both tyrannical and beneficial.

Continue on next page

Eight Years...continued

We are in 1975. The shameful peace, imposed by global superpowers on our poor country on April 30, put an end to a war not less shameful, and sounded the death knell for South Vietnam, from now on delivered into the hands of tormentors from the North, victorious in spite of themselves. On that day, I became all of a sudden "prisoner of war" and "enemy of the people," without knowing exactly why. The new government, pretending to be "revolutionary" and red to the tips of fingernails, quickly gave itself a "magnificent" task: sending to prison all the Southern officers and officials. From there began all our miseries. But my suddenly awakened faith in God, and my unalterable passion for Stendhal and his novels saved me not only from the ugliness of life, but also from the brutalities of death, which now revealed itself a thousand times more threatening and hideous than during war time. So, thanks to God and Stendhal, I was able to survive my eight years of incarceration, hunger, sufferings, and deprivations inside multiple forced labor camps, and my horrible descent into hell.

Communist hell, of course. But no language could enough describe the atrocities inside a prison run by Vietnamese Communists – aka Viet Cong. Believe me, they are born jailers, demonstrating an outstanding vigilance and experience. No detention site, fictional or real, that I know of, not even the Gulag Archipelago of *Solzhenitsyn* nor The House of the Dead by Dostoyevsky, could match the Vietnamese so-called reeducation camps regarding what I call their "refinement of cruelty": here, they kill in a scientific, progressive, dreadfully soft way, by forcing permanent hunger. To better control us, these bastards skillfully exploited the lowest, most degrading instinct of a man: the need to eat. At least, in their jails, Stendhal's heroes could eat and drink at leisure: in addition, Fabrice had the chocolate from Clélia, and Julien, the champagne and cigars sent by Mathilde. Regarding us, regarding me, each day, we were forced to watch ourselves dying slowly like tracked animals, practically living a despicable, humiliating, degrading death expressly invented by the Viet Cong –our compatriots. A delayed death that dragged, and dragged, associated in the mind of each prisoner with powerless rage, the shame to have been reduced to constantly thinking, each day, of our empty stomach and the means to fill it.

The officers were ordered to present themselves to the "people's committees," to make preparations for a reeducation course which, according to the official bulletin using a vague and misleading language, would last only ten or thirty days depending on their ranks. It was June 1975. However, nobody ever had a doubt that for all of us, it would be a long voyage through the night worthy of Céline, which lasted eight, or ten, or even fourteen years, and for several, a simple one-way departure, a goodbye to the world and to life, literally. We were first detained in camps in the South. Then one nice day, it was decided to transfer to the North about one hundred thousand "elements" judged the most "reactionary," that is, the most dangerous, including the archbishop of Saigon Nguyễn Văn Thuận and a good number of generals.

At sea. In some old coal cargo ships confiscated from the "puppet government." We were handcuffed, we were locked up by the thousands in the hulls, we were thus reduced to the condition of cattle. The transit lasted three days. Three centuries. We lacked air. Water too. Food was virtual: for the whole day, each detainee received two moldy biscuits, a kind of military ration made in China, as big as two matchboxes, just enough to not starve. Above us, only a black ceiling. Around, inert bodies piled against each other and covered all over with coal residues. Heat exerted its injurious rule. From the first hours, a noxious, asphyxiating fume poisoned the crowded hulls. Everywhere, the silence of death.

From the port of Haiphong where we finally landed, to the different concentration camps, we still had to go through another journey not less frightful, which lasted about two or three days, by train or trucks. As a safety measure, we were told, the doors and windows had to be completely shut, and this, under a burning sun. In these rolling furnaces, suffocation was such that several prisoners, older and already quite weakened by the sea ordeal, succumbed before reaching destination.

The prisons of North Vietnam reserved for us, about thirty, I think, were all located in the mountainous areas where lived less advanced minority people, or the families of deportees and political exiles since French occupation and after Dien Bien Phu, near the Chinese and Laotian borders, where mosquitoes were the size of flies, or almost. On the way, kids and old women, pushed by the hate for us, long nurtured and incessantly rekindled by a vulgar propaganda, threw at us handfuls of pebbles or garbage, and yelled demeaning insults. I tried, like my comrades in misery, to swallow my tears. Tears of shame, of bitterness, of rage.

Life in the northern camps was more than hellish. No possibility of escape. We were desperately surrounded by endless mountain chains forming solid natural walls. And then, even if we successfully reached them, how to survive up there the cold, hunger, thirst, and physical exhaustion? We were housed in old, low barracks with thatch roofs. We slept on a sort of communal bed made from rough wood planks, without mats, pillows, or pads, to wake up in the morning, our face and body like a sieve from bug and mosquito bites. Furthermore, the cold was at its extreme. For mere clothing, we were each given a blue uniform of coarse fabric to be used for two years, and a minuscule, frayed cover of bad wool. No sandals, socks, nor hats. It's up to us to figure out, we were told, or too bad! In winter and during the rainy season, it was impossible to sleep, as the cold and humidity became so intolerable, unforgiving, and it was forbidden to make a fire inside the barrack.

All this, however, were nothing compared to hunger, the worst of torments. In effect, our food ration was limited to a bowl of manioc [cassava root] for one of our two daily meals. No breakfast. No rice. No milk nor sugar. No meat nor vegetables. The manioc given to us was sun dried, and thus, in time of bad harvest, could be fed to pigs, which, I guess, would even have refused to eat it, as it had a blackish color, a doubtful if not sour taste, a fetid odor. But hunger trumped over disgust and choice. With this horrible sustenance, men, even the strongest ones, after a few months, had a pale complexion, a haggard look, a gaunt appearance. After a year, they became walking skeletons. With the brain becoming doughy, we could not think nor react. Forgetting their dignity, many only thought about food, and that was completely normal. Worse, we thus lost any veiled intention of struggle, of revolt, of self-respect, and all of this perfectly in accordance with the plan of our jailers. Malnutrition and the lack of vitamins and medications led to many unavoidable serious illnesses, such as avitaminosis and beriberi, that, with malaria, would not wait to gently send, each day, to the other world one or two poor devils.

The survivors, they continued to chew even more dry manioc, to be hungry, to be sick, and above all, to work hard. The guards

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Eight Years...continued

never stopped rehashing that work was the source of all glory, and that in the beginning, the first man, meaning our ancestor, was a monkey, and that monkey, from routinely climbing up trees to pick fruits, getting down in the fields to sow grains, running in the forest to hunt hares, in short, working hard, had gradually lost its long hair to become handsome and smooth like we are today. That the lazy, the parasitic, the hairy people, we were blasted in our ears, had, as a result, to be eliminated from communist paradise!

For the daily labor, we were divided into several companies and sections, and went to work in the fields for eight hours a day, six days a week, Sunday being reserved for political education and diverse menial jobs. We had to change job, company, and companions roughly every six months, and toiled on everything: to plant cabbage, lettuce, rice and corn –that we did not otherwise have the right to eat. Or to go early in the morning to the forest or the mountain to cut wood or bamboo. To build or repair houses, bridges, roads with rudimentary tools from antiquity. Or to till the soil by pulling the plow in place of oxen, to care for water buffalos, to raise pigs, what else could I say? In brief, to do everything that for us –captains, colonels, and generals– was till then totally unknown, strange, bizarre and as a result, very exhausting. Add to this the hunger, the cold, the physical deterioration, and the moral depression, and you understand why the mortality rate was so high in the camps.

In particular moral depression. It killed with the same cruelty as did starvation or diseases. In misfortune, one cannot afford missing moral strength and spiritual resistance. Without the redemptory intervention of our spirit, the death sentence was irrevocable and accepted no reprieve. Many were those who spent months, even years, to lament on their lot, to nurture the useless regret of a happiness, a glory, or a love lost forever, or to desperately cling to a repugnant reality. For those, death would not miss them.

But this was exactly what I had done at the start. I cried profusely, like everyone else, at our first Christmas. And like everyone, I was terribly hungry, hardly moved and often fell down from tiredness. The strength of my body and mind slowly but surely faded away. Then one day, watching helplessly one of my dear friends dying in the appalling and degrading condition of an animal about to be butchered, I trembled of fear. "I do not want to die in this way," I repeated to myself with blind anger. The thought of Guillaumet in Saint-Exupéry's *Terre des hommes*, who, exhausted, obstinately walked in the snow for days to avoid dying, suddenly came to my mind, quite appropriately. And so, energized by a mysterious divine breath, I decided to relaunch my former challenge to insolent Death, the *pallida Mors* in the poetry of Horace, with which I have more or less successfully grappled since the war, and which had always missed me, thank God. Above all, I stridently vowed, I must never capitulate.

Thus, I began again to say my prayers at night, and to re-read with the passion of former lovers the novels of Stendhal, mentally of course. From then on, I lived in a different realm, visualizing that I was already dead in this world, similar to Octave in *Armance*. I forgot, I tried to forget, jailers and camps, hunger and disease, my rags and my desiccated body –everything that could ceaselessly bring back to me the hideousness of hell. I prevailed over my misery by not thinking any more of the beautiful women that I had known, or even loved in my life, and who turned now into a reality more inaccessible, further away than dream itself. Conversely, I solely dreamed of Stendhal's heroines, Mathilde, Mrs. de Rênal, Clélia, la Sanseverina, *Armance*, Mrs. de Chasteller, among others, whose sublime image, eternally young and beautiful, quite gently freed me from this cruel and trivial reality for which I thought I was not made for, even before my incarceration. Thus my days went by, calm like water under the bridge, and I would even say happy, under the shade of "flowering" (*en fleurs*) lovers, more or less Proust-like, more or less out of the ordinary, but faithful, I hoped, till my last breath –the only women who ever came to console me in my prisons, to bring me peace and the sun. Thanks to them and their permanent and comforting presence, my prison, without ever been paradise like those of Julien Sorel and Fabrice del Dongo, still lost its grim look to allow me to drag, to the letter, my life, or rather my death, in an as dignified as possible way, till March 18, 1983, the date of my release. Already eight years!

One year later. After many unsuccessful attempts to escape out of the country, failures, disappointments, and a new imprisonment, this time like a fateful boat-people, I was able, during a dark night, with my younger sister, to board a small fishing boat which, one day, brought us to the American naval base at Subic Bay, Manila, after floating aimlessly for eight days and eight nights on the Pacific ocean, in the middle of a storm. But this is another story. I stayed for a year and a half in two refugee camps in the Philippines before arriving to the United States on January 25, 1985. I promised to myself to one day go to Lourdes [\[5\]](#) and to write something about Stendhal. Within five years, I succeeded in fulfilling these two promises. My Ph. D. thesis was awarded the University of Oregon Faculty's commendations, and Mr. del Litto agreed to have it published by Droz, Geneva, Switzerland, as part of his Stendhal collection, rightly under the title *La prison dans l'œuvre romanesque de Stendhal* (The Prison in the Works of Fiction of Stendhal). I can never thank enough God to have thus saved me by granting me a soul very romantic, very dreamy, and to have inspired me with this irrational passion for literature, and paradoxically for Stendhal, who, as one remembers, was not always kind to Him.

I have already passed the age of vain nostalgias, but each Stendhal novel invariably shines on me like the sparkle of a rediscovered paradise. A piece of my broken life. I could no longer live without dreaming. Like in earlier times at the bottom of communist hell. What a cureless bore to always cling to reality, to not read each day one of those Stendhalian pages vibrant with love, joy, perfume. After all, to imitate Pascal in his famous *pari*(bet), what are you going to lose reading a Stendhal novel? Nothing, I would say! But if you win, you will have a sky full of dreams, before and with you. And to finish, I allow myself to cite for you the last lines of my book about the Stendhal prison, which becomes henceforth "a true nirvana, certainly utopian (which prisoner had experienced the fates of Julien and Fabrice?), but infinitely precious for all of us thrown into this masquerade ball called life, in this world of the twenty fifth hour where man, behind his prison bars and less lucky than Stendhal heroes, is on a perpetual quest, like Henri Beyle [\[6\]](#) during his life, for an impossible bliss, for a Lethe [\[7\]](#) that no longer flows, for a drop of tear that is not yet shed."

Antony, France, July 1991
Portland, Oregon, August 2012
Dr. Nguyễn Kim Quý, PhD

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Professor of French and Latin, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA
 Former ARVN Captain
 English translation by Chat V. Dang, Hien V. Ho, and Anne R. Capdeville, August 2013

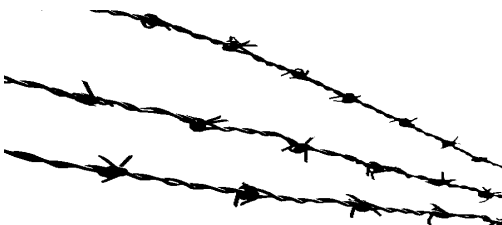
- [1] French high school
- [2] Of Love
- [3] Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam
- [4] Gerard de Nerval (1808-55) was a romantic French poet whose works stressed on the significance of dreams.
- [5] Lourdes, a town in the south of France, is a major Catholic pilgrimage site.
- [6] 19th century French writer known by his pen name Stendhal.
- [7] In Greek mythology, name of a river, the water of which when drunk will induce complete loss of memory.

The Hanoi Killing Camps



http://www.choices.edu/resources/supplemental_vietnam_camps_painting3.php

the conex--a hollow container used to transport goods or military hardware overseas.



Graphic depiction of the "Killing Camps" by Quyen Truong, whose father had been sent to "die" in the various Vietnamese communist reeducation camps: emaciated, physically wasted, and crippled bodies of prisoners who were housed in straw huts built by themselves. They were so hungry and physically wasted that they were unable to move around: laying almost immobile and silent on their death bed, they were waiting for Death to visit and take them away.

Many of them were markedly bloated with swollen bellies and legs: signs of severe protein malnutrition (Kwashiorkor). Since these prisoners were fed two bowls of soup a day with tiny morsels of fish or meat, their protein intake being almost nil, their intravascular fluid began leaking into the tissues of the legs and bellies causing distended abdomens and legs. In fact they may look like this African child in this picture.



In the reeducation camps reigned an unwritten code of violence. Prisoners were beaten for any conceivable or unconceivable reason for they were at the whims of their jailors. They were beaten for being slow, failing to give an appropriate answer, doing something that their jailors did not like, or being on the way of the jailors. As one prisoner was standing in front of the camp fence daydreaming—who would not day dream, if he were sent to a reeducation with no future in sight? --a cadre passing by began beating him while accusing him of plotting to escape. After the beating, the prisoner was sent to



This Painting is part of a lesson plan, *Vietnamese Re-Education Camps: Examining History Through Art*, published by the Choices Program.