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STAYS ALIVE
WHEN ITS
CULTURE IS
ALIVE.**

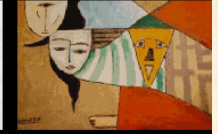
**HOPE NEVER DIES
IN THE
INDOMITABLE
VIETNAMESE MIND**

- **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.

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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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Black April (1975-2015)

We take time on April 30, 2015:

1. to mourn the death of so many young men and civilians, Vietnamese and Americans who died during the war---a war initiated by the communists under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan and company who had destroyed Vietnamese land, culture, freedom, civility, and equality. I lost two close friends in the 1960's: an 18 year-old student who failed his baccalaureate exam on his first trial. Distraught, he enrolled in the army, although he had the chance to retake the exam that year. He died on the battlefield six months later. A 20-year old college student, my classmate, also died when a VC missile hit his house in Saigon killing the whole family, parents and siblings.
2. to pray for those whose lives had been "shattered" beyond repair for having lost either parents or relatives during the war, for having suffered under communist oppression or in re-education camps, and for living under communist "peace."
3. to fight and pray for human rights in Vietnam, a land battered by a 21-year war that left people stunted and traumatized. This is the reality of communist "heaven on earth." Without rights, there would be no freedom and the chance to earn a decent living. Four decades after the war, the per capita GDP is about \$3,000, only slightly higher than that of Cambodia and Laos. Recently a physician classmate had to ask for state help to fix his house's leaking roof. The help won't come until a year down the road while he got wet each time it rains. US friends did help him out.
4. to help and pray so that these people to have basic human decency to stand tall despite their poverty and basic freedoms to simply stand tall.

Vietnamese Reeducation Camps

NGHIA M. VO

Reeducation camps were nothing new to the communists who designed them to control their adversaries and keep themselves in power: they are thus imbedded into their repressive regime. When the communists officially took power in North Vietnam in 1954, they used many such camps to keep northern nationalists, Catholic natives of Quỳnh Lưu district in Nghệ An, and adversaries away. Twenty one years later, when the north-south war ended on 30 April 1975, they sent high ranking South Vietnamese officials and officers to the same northern camps allowing the 1975 losers to meet the 1954 losers for the first time. (1)

It was an ironic meeting indeed as the older detainees had hoped the newcomers would win the war against the communists and come to liberate them. For both, the future was bleak. The old timers needed to spend more time in the camps. The newcomers on the other hand, began to realize for the first time



VN Reeducation Camps... that their stay in these camps could last as long as two decades.

Goals of the reeducation camps

The purpose of the reeducation camps was to introduce a real *hell* to “punish people and to frighten others with a special police force made up of beings devoid of conscience and entirely devoted to the government in power.” (2) The techniques used were many, including locking opponents away, beating, torturing, starving, demeaning, dehumanizing, and killing them if necessary. All these activities were necessary for the communists to enforce their rules in order to take over, annihilate, and assimilate another society. Behind the call for cooperation, equality, patriotism, lay the ruthless and hideous face of revenge, killing, and extermination displayed in the communist reeducation camps.

Incarceration

Although simple, the first goal required an elaborate scheme designed to catch all the southern military personnel and government officials into a huge net. This crucial first step was essential for the neutralization and assimilation of the southern state for the diverse, free thinking southern society would not surrender itself easily. As proof, 130,000 southern people took to the seas and escaped abroad right after the fall of Saigon. This was the first of the many waves of free thinkers who opted to abandon everything, including their properties and beloved homeland, in order to preserve their freedom and to get away from the communist reeducation camps.

On May 3, 1975, three days after the fall of Saigon, all South Vietnamese officials and military personnel were ordered to report to local authorities: generals from May 8th to 9th, colonels from May 8th to 11th, and the remaining officers from May 8th to 14th with their badges, uniforms, and guns. Most of them, except for high ranking officials, were sent home after filling out a questionnaire detailing their personal history and past activities from 1954 until 1975.

On June 10th, unlisted soldiers and low-ranking officials were ordered to report to certain areas along with clothing and a 3-day food supply. They were sequestered at schools, gymnasiums, theaters and sent home after a 3-day reeducation course.

High-ranking officials, majors and above, were ordered to report on June 15 with a thirty-day food supply and were either shipped or flown to northern camps. Officers from captains and below had to report on June 23-24 with a ten day food supply. Despite being warned by northerners who had moved to the south in 1954 and knew of the communists' dark intentions, that detainees might be imprisoned a long time, southerners had no choice but to submit to the new authorities. The latter painted the scheme as a clemency policy to allow southerners to clear out their capitalistic thoughts. (3) When the mid-level officers reported to the authorities, they were held in schools and fed with brown rice, fried pickled cabbage, fat meat cooked with brine and thin cabbage soup by one of the best restaurants in Cholon. The waitresses told them the communists brought the rice and some money and told them to cook for the detainees. Despite the money, the restaurant still lost money but had to comply for fear of consequences. (4)

From Saigon, they were then transported aboard Soviet made Molotova trucks to a previous South Vietnamese military installation (Trạm Lớn and Long Khánh for the III Corps, Chi Lăng for the IV Corps) like a “consignment of pigs to the market.” (5). They were left pretty much to themselves, ordered to do menial work, cook for themselves, and listen to communist propaganda while their paperwork was being processed. In some camps, they were told to write their biographies and to criticize themselves at the end of each day.

By the end of three to four weeks, as they ran out of money and food and became restless, discipline got tighter. They finally realized that the first camps they were in were just triage camps and they would be incarcerated for a long time. The ten- or 30 day-day session would become a three to twenty years of imprisonment in hard labor camps where the real work would begin.

Overall, more than one million men and women--the cream of the southern society--were sent to the camps. (6) With all active males locked up, the communists had free hands to reform and assimilate the southern society. They took over all government buildings, private businesses, banks, lands, houses, properties, gold, monies, cars, all the way down to the prostitutes. (7) Rapacious, they then hauled the bounties back to the North. This period could be called the ransacking or more appropriately the “rape” of South Vietnam, the extermination of the southern society.

Incarceration gave the communists the “legal” right to mistreat and dispose of any detainee the way they wanted it, whether through torture, confinement, starvation, lack of medical care, or hard labor. It basically legalized the killing, mistreatments, and unusually harsh punishment. It condoned and looked away at the mistreatments imposed on the inmates by asserting that the latter were jailed because they were *a priori* guilty even without trial or conviction. That was the difference between democracy and communism. Hanoi's Prime Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch accused the South Vietnamese of being criminals for having fought against the revolution. Thus according to him, they needed to be incarcerated and reeducated. (8) On the other hand by using that same reasoning, Hanoi and the communists were guilty of two things: 1) of invading South Vietnam and violating the 1954 Geneva Accords and the 1973 Paris Accords; 2) of torturing, killing, mistreating detainees under their care. By doing that, they

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had committed crimes against the Vietnamese people and against humanity.

B. Starvation

Food rations in the beginning consisted of gruel twice a day causing prisoners to starve and lose weight. They soon lost their hair, their bones became brittle, their teeth decayed. As conditions stabilized, their rations went up to 16 kilos (32 pounds) of rice per month in certain areas especially in the South, only to be cut down to 12 kilos (24 pounds) a month of a combination of flour, corn, cassava or manioc, sweet potato, and *bo bo*. (9) The latter was imported grain used to feed horses. Therefore, these grains were coarse, hard, and almost impossible for detainees to chew. Once ingested, they cause flatulence, abdominal cramps, constipation then diarrhea inflicting grave discomfort and pain to detainees.

Hunger which had become pervasive because of the lack of food caused them to dream all the time about food. At night, the rumbling of empty stomachs prevented them from sleeping, which adversely affected their health status. (10) In their hunt for food, they turned to rats, lizards, centipedes, birds, grasshoppers, and snakes, any animal that moved as short term substitutes.

In northern camps, the only way to get food was to forage in the fields for cassava roots, grains, berries, and even grass. They tried any kind of wild plants and fruit they judged edible. And many got poisoned as a result. They developed constipation then dysentery for eating wild bananas that contained a lot of tannin. As northern camps did not even carry medication to control dysentery; they dragged themselves to the bathrooms ten or twenty times a day and finally died as result. Twelve men in a camp of 500 died from eating wild fruit and vegetables. (11)

Hunger caused inmates to do strange things. They fought for and positioned themselves to get the last drop of soup or rare morsels of meat. They watched the food handlers carefully to make sure that all the portions were equally divided among them. One spoon more or less could cause fights to break out. On many occasions, rice that spilled on the ground was rapidly scooped up and consumed by inmates. In their fight for survival, many lost their manners and reverted to their basic instincts. Those who were not fast enough or did not fight lost out.

A few would do anything to secure an extra bowl of rice. They became the much feared, yet despised “antennas” of the communists by reporting any illegal activity or unwise comments against the jailers. The unwise person got shackled and punished whether the report was correct or falsified, while the antenna received his reward. Others would volunteer to clean the pigsties in order to steal some rice reserved for the pigs. The *bộ đội* (communist soldiers) valued their pigs so much that they fed them “white” rice while inmates received only “red” or coarse rice or even mildewed rice. One inmate volunteered to dig a well for another for a few sugar cubes: one cube for the first meter of well and two cubes for the second meter and so on.

The *bộ đội* used food as a weapon to their advantage. To punish detainees, besides isolation, they simply withheld their rations causing them to cry of hunger and to toe the line. There was no bigger deterrent to opposition than starvation.

Executions, tortures

At a Nghệ An camp, detainees were ordered to carry fresh human wastes with their bare hands to fertilize the fields. They were not allowed to bathe in the pond or wash their hands. On their way back to the camp, they were forced to eat with their dirty hands. (12) Random beatings were common as to be the norm. Detainees were beaten “whenever the “guard felt like it” and wherever he had the urge to do it, often without rhyme or reason. Many were brutally beaten because they had stopped to rest during work or on the way back to the camp.

There were cruel forms of torture known only to the communists. Detainees, especially those who had never face the communists before, were able to witness for the first time the wickedness of their jailers. Detainees were confined to isolation holes, wells, rooms, or tiger cages depending on their availability. Anything cramped space could be used to detain or torture the detainees. Holes were dug out on the ground; they were about four feet deep and small enough to prevent the detainee from squatting or standing fully upright. A wooden board was used to cover the opening. A few hours in the hole would render anyone miserable, let alone a day or two. In the north, detainees were shackled at the ankles to a railing. The punishment called for a nine-day shackling session at a time. Once released from the shackles and after suffering in that position for nine consecutive days, the detainee could no longer walk; he could only crawl. At the Hà Giang Camp, the detainee was spread eagle on a board with four limbs tied to the four corners of the board. A hole was cut in the middle to allow the detainee to satisfy his physiologic needs. In that position, he could not defend himself against rats that would gnaw at his buttocks all the way to his bones. He would die in pain in a week. At K20 Camp in Ben Tre Province, the detainee would be tied in a spread eagle position on the clay ground with a log placed under his back. During daytime, he was burned by the sun and at night, the mosquitoes would take care of him. After one single day of such treatment, the detainee would either cry for forgiveness or have passed out.

Cadres and *bộ đội* were free to distort the truth and sow innuendos and suspicions that resulted in widespread confusion, resentment, distrust, and fear among detainees.

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Many executions were made on the spot without due process while other were just bureaucratic formalities. As one detainee fought back when he was caught escaping from a camp, the *bộ đội* simply “[bayoneted] him right through the mouth to the back of his neck.” (13) On another occasion, when prisoners became rowdy during a meeting in a camp, the “feared and fawned upon chief of the labor camp, a clever and cruel person” had no qualms about pulling out his gun, “pointing it at the middle of the prisoner’s head and pulling the trigger.” (14) The sudden execution of a random prisoner immediately reestablished order in the camp.

Executions were part of the deal in other camps as well. At the Minh Lương camp, forty-four prisoners were waiting for the execution call at one time. Twice a week, loudspeakers blared the names of the convicted (without any trial) followed by an “account of offenses against the country, a conviction, and a death sentence—never a defense or last rite.” All the crimes were the same for all prisoners who were led to the forest. Eleven pistol shots. Then it was over. This was typical of communist expediency. One prisoner in the camp murmured, “No law, no reason, no mercy.” (15)

Many more random executions have been reported elsewhere. (16). Desbarats found that “two thirds of the executions occurred in 1975 and 1976 mostly in Saigon and the Mekong Delta and involved high ranking officials. A Berkeley group of human rights researchers had estimated the number of political killings to be “65,000 after Hanoi took over Saigon.” (17) This was based on statistical analyses and computations of one million people going through reeducation camps. Aurora foundation later raised the number to more than 160,000 detainees dying in the camps. (18). Metzner, on the other hand, suggested a 250,000 number. (19)

Hard labor and poor medical care

A ten-hour daily work was followed by three-hour political indoctrination and an hour of self-criticism. A typical schedule was as follows:

- 0530 hours: communist national anthem
- 0700-1200 hours: work
- 1200-1300 hours: lunch
- 1300-1700 hours: work
- 1700-1800 hours: dinner
- 1800-2100 hours: political indoctrination
- 2100-2200 hours: self-criticism
- 2200 hours: bedtime

At the Da Bàn camp, inmates had to move big tree trunks from the forest to the camp after cutting them down. All the work was done by hand, without chain saw or forklift. Each trunk was about three feet in diameter and fifteen feet long. It had to be carried by hand from the work site to the river and then rafted back the camp. The water was cold and full of leeches; the mountain river could be sixty feet wide and the current swift and dangerous in certain areas. If not careful, they could be crushed by the trunks, stabbed by branches, or drifted by the currents against the big rocks lining the course of the river. (20)

In the malaria-infested forests of the highlands, they were ordered to build their own camps (Bù Gia Mập, Bù Lợi, Da Bàn) where none had existed before. In building the dwellings, they basically dug their own graves. If they did not die from exhaustion, malnutrition, they eventually died from malaria. Under these working conditions, they could catch any tropical disease, especially tuberculosis, which was endemic in Vietnam and many detainees had died of advanced tuberculosis as no drugs were available at the local dispensaries or hospitals.

Although physical labor was hard, the combination of beating, torture, indoctrination, humiliation, starvation made life in the camp much harder to tolerate. The real purpose of the reeducation process was to diminish, to debase, to starve and to annihilate the individual, (21) who no longer felt himself as an individual but a cornered beast. From there to a downhill course and death, the path was not long for the weak and those who did not believe in themselves.

In Trạng Lớn, Hiệp Tâm, and Phú Quốc camps, (22) the most cruel work assignment was to clear out land mines. Without any training, mine detector, or special equipment, inmates were down on their knees, huffing, puffing, and sweating profusely due to a combination of anxiety and fear, uncovering and defusing the mines one by one. The order from the cadre was to lift up the mine and carry it to the jungle. By following the cadre’s method, one of the inmates was blown up and a few got injured. At the Minh Luong camp, inmates were told to clear two separate parallel paths fifteen yards apart in a minefield. Ropes were tied to opposite ends of a log. A team of three men on each side pulled on the ropes while walking on the cleared paths. They detonated the mines by dragging the log on the ground between them. One inmate blew off his hand while another suffered a wound on the lower leg. The wardens replaced the log and the two injured prisoners and work continued as if nothing had happened. (23)

There was no first aid kit in most camps. Bandages and antiseptics were nowhere to be found and medical personnel was non

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-existent. The treatment of abdominal colic was “young buds of guavas,” for tooth aches kitchen salt, and for colds “crushed garlic to be injected in the nostrils.” (24) A lieutenant Colonel died of a horrible death. In the last three days of his life he passed stool 20 to 30 times a day until he was completely dehydrated. When he could not walk, he crawled; when he could no longer crawl, he dirtied his own bed-platform. (25)

Amputations were done without anesthetics by a nurse. Three or four inmates simply held the patient down while the nurse—not even a doctor--performed the operation with a handsaw sterilized in hot water. The patient cried and struggled and fainted as the procedure went on as if nothing had happened. Of course the stump got infected and the patient eventually died because of lack of antibiotics. Six men in a camp died in a similar fashion. (26)

Cải tạo or Thought reform

The culmination of the reeducation process was the attempt to change the mind of the inmates and to break their spirits in order to make them into new “socialist” people or render them obedient (27) so that they could no longer resist the system.

The indoctrination began the day they were sent to the labor camps with constant reminders that since they owed “blood debts,” they had to pay for them. It was followed by daily self-criticism and punishment by food withdrawal and confinement to dark rooms where they were shackled for many days or weeks in a row. In the South, they were confined to conex--metallic cargo containers--that were hot like ovens during days and cold at night. A light was left on all night long to prevent the detainee from sleeping. Through intimidation, beating, isolation, starvation, and deprivation of sleep, the communists intended to break the will of the detainees. In the North, detainees who were not giving blankets and warm clothing shivered from the cold weather—there was no heating system-- and could not sleep with temperatures hovering at 30 degrees Fahrenheit at high elevations at night.

Detainees were terrorized, subjected to ruthless rounds of punishment, taunting, and tortures, and even threatened with execution. (28) As “the power of their masters was total and totally arbitrary,” (29) *cải tạo* broke many detainees spiritually and mentally. As a result, tens of thousands of detainees died of mistreatment, despair, starvation, malnutrition and diseases. Others bore permanent physical and psychological scars that would hound them the rest of their lives. These scars widened the chasm between oppressors and oppressed, northerners and southerners and left minimal room for reconciliation. Whatever faint admiration a few might have for the steeliness of the socialist army that had defeated them would soon be replaced by a loathsome disdain and hatred for the communists.

Many were so upset at the communists and their oppressive system that as soon as they were released from the camps, the first thing they did was to try to escape from Vietnam if they had the resources or later through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) that allowed them to emigrate abroad.

The reeducation treatment was so arbitrary, unjust, and irresponsible that it rendered their captives “utterly cynical, concerned only with getting out of Vietnam or with the survival of themselves and their families in a society from which they were completely alienated.” (30)

II. Northern reeducation camps

The reeducation camps were scattered throughout Vietnam, North and South and estimated to range from a few hundred to more than a thousand, because of the way they were set up. One camp could have five to six sub-camps. Some were old prison camps left over by the French and used by the communists to detain northern nationalists when they took over North Vietnam in 1954. Many were brand new constructions built by the detainees themselves in the middle of the forests, in deserted areas or in the highlands.

“There were more reeducation camps than schools. There were over 600 district reeducation camps, more than 100 provincial camps and more than 20 national camps.” (31) Some camps did not have a name: one camp was known as 3721 (later called Bù Gia Mập). Camps set up in the jungles or mountains carried an alphabet letter followed by a number. Camps in the Phú Yên-Cung Sơn districts in central Vietnam were labeled as T-50, T-51, T-52, T-53, and T-54. (32) The Thủ Đức camp (close to Saigon) had a sub-camp located in Hàm Tân close to Phan Thiết, some ninety miles away. The frightening camp Cổng Trời (Gate to Heaven) from where only a few inmates would walk out alive, therefore its ironic name, was not listed in any camp directory.

Northern camps were notoriously worse than southern camps because they were established decades earlier, their wardens had been trained in the Soviet Union and communist China in the role of torturing inmates, and because of their close proximity to Hanoi leadership. This was why high level South Vietnamese officials and officers were shipped there first. Being older than detainees in southern camps, they harbored various medical problems (high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, cancer...) which required close medical attention. Yet, northern like southern camps lacked everything from medical personnel to basic medications. The harsher weather, stricter rules, location of the camps in remote northern highlands, lack of food, medications, and family visitations compounded the problem and made life tougher for detainees sequestered in the north. (33)

At the northern Thanh Phong camp that lay close to the Chinese border, the detainee mortality was so high that Hanoi had to

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close the camp. "When you got sick, you died. There was no medical treatment. We ate only rice and some vegetables we picked from the jungles." said one inmate. (34)

If the southern *bộ đội* were cruel but unsophisticated, the northern wardens were cunning and knowledgeable. They knew how to break the inmates, play with their morale, and bend them to their will without even beating them. They, however, could be ruthless and cruel because they "considered themselves exiled too. For them, it was the end of the world. They were desperate. Their food was little better than ours."

Attached is one of the lists of the reeducation camps in Vietnam. (35) Although it contains many camps not seen in previous lists, no list can be called complete until Hanoi opened its files to the public.

The detainees

A description of the reeducation camps would be incomplete without detailing some of the detainees who lived, toiled, and suffered in these camps year in and year out until their captors decided to release them. They were called "prisoners of conscience" because they fought for their freedom despite losing the war in the end. Besides, they were never tried before a jury nor convicted of any war crime, just thrown into jails like criminals and tortured. On the other hand, had there been a trial, the communists would be the ones to be convicted of war crimes, oppression, torture, as well as crimes against the Vietnamese people and humanity.

Many high-ranking officers and officials were detained up to eighteen or nineteen years without trial or charges. They were left to rot in jails right in Hỏa Lò Jail, in the heart of Hanoi. Among them were General Bùi Văn Nhu of the Saigon police and Colonel Trần Văn Thắng, former director of the ARVN military security.

General Lê Minh Đảo, commander of the 18th ARVN division and General Lý Tòng Bá, commander of the 25th ARVN division were jailed in northern camps for 17 and 13 years respectively.

Hoàng Xuân Tựu, Senator (1967-1973) and vice-president of South Vietnamese Senate, died at Nam Hà camp in 1980 after five years of incarceration. Senator Trần Thế Minh (1967-1973) died at Nam Hà Camp in 1977 of poisoning. His family had to bribe camp officials to have his body exhumed and brought back to Saigon for burial. The cemeteries of Nam Hà Camp were littered of graves of thousands of "puppet soldiers and civil servants."

Trần Văn Tuyên, attorney and former President of the Saigon Bar Association was interned at various camps in the north. A former Saigon congressman, he was the leader of one of Saigon's opposition groups. When he was sent to northern camps, he was treated poorly and committed suicide in 1976.

Father Hoàng Quỳnh, former leader of the anti-communist forces at the northern Bùi Chu-Phát Diệm dioceses before 1954, was tortured to death at Chí Hòa Jail in early 1977. Dr. Phan Huy Quát, a physician and former South Vietnamese minister, was left to die at Chí Hòa Jail.

Venerable Thích Thiện Minh who was one of the Buddhist leaders calling for the cessation of bombing of North Vietnam, died at the Hàm Tân Z-30D reeducation camp after a long period of torture and mistreatment.

And the list goes on and on. (36) It is estimated that 32 Generals, 366 Colonels, 1,700 LTC, 5,500 Majors, and 72,000 Captains interned in the various camps, most of them in northern camps. (37)

Orderly Departure Program (ODP)

In the face of the huge number of people rushing out to the high seas—therefore the name of boat people—trying to escape an oppressive communist regime in an attempt to reach other Southeastern Asian shores, on 30 May, 1979, UNHCR (United Nations High commissioner for Refugees) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a program for legal emigration from Vietnam, known as the Orderly Departure Program, or ODP. The ODP was intended to make it possible for persons wishing to leave Vietnam to do so in a safe and orderly manner, rather than having to join the ranks of the Vietnamese boat people. This pertains only to family reunion and other humanitarian cases.

Questions were soon raised about Vietnamese motives since communist Vietnam was at the root of the boat people phenomenon. Was it a ploy for Vietnam to enhance its sinking international standing? Was it trying to dump unwanted elements, like the ethnic Chinese, many of whom having made payment to the government in order to get out were still stuck inside Vietnam because no third-country would accept them? While discussions were ongoing, the boat flow continued unabated and by the end of June, 1979, only 6,700 people had departed legally from Vietnam, most of them going to France. (38)

Facing lukewarm reaction from ASEAN countries, Vietnam promised to crack down hard on "illegal" boat departures. Overnight, boat arrivals plunged drastically from 56,941 in June to 9,734 in August causing ASEAN countries to reopen their shores.

Sea escapes, however, were not joy rides; they were filled with horror stories:

"...wanton killings, rape, abductions. We had people with gold fillings torn out of their mouths; infants thrown in the water in front of their mothers; people dipped in fishing nets into the sea until they drowned; people attacked with harpoons and ice

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picks. The tales of rapes—they passed the girls around like bees finding a field full of flowers.” (39)

In late 1979, under the ODP the U.S. and Vietnam exchanged the first lists. Those listed on both lists would be eligible for resettlement. The U.S., which had no consular relations with Vietnam, had to rely on UNHCR as an intermediary to bring the list to Bangkok. The U.S. list had 4,000 names of people with family links or pre-1975 employees of the U.S. government it wanted out of Vietnam. The Vietnamese list had 21,000 names of people—it wanted to get rid of—most of them ethnic Chinese living in the Chinese suburb of Saigon who had paid their way out of the country. Since the match was only a dozen names, it took 18 months to clear 1,700 people for departure.

As clandestine departures dropped, orderly departures rose, although they were mostly Chinese for a long time. By 1982, boat arrivals slipped to 43,800 while ODP departures rose to 10,000 for the first time. In 1984, there were 24,865 boat arrivals compared to 29,100 ODP departures. Despite the program’s success, problems remained. The U.S. by 1982 wanted specific groups of people of particular priority to the program: American citizens, current and former reeducation prisoners, Amerasian children, etc...it could admit as immigrants instead of simply dealing with family reunion cases, which were counted as refugees.

By 1985, as the U.S. debated on the issues of priority and reciprocity, it deferred final decisions on many ODP people who had been interviewed. This resulted in a backlog that rose to 22,000 cases. Vietnam imposed a moratorium on new interviewing until the caseload was cleared. In January 1986, the last two U.S. interviewers were asked to leave the country. While the U.S. and other countries worked on their backlog, by 1987 Southeast Asian countries began to see a new rise in Vietnamese boat arrivals. (40)

ODP departures resumed in 1988 following the passing in December 1987 of the Amerasian Homecoming Act—which set a numerical target for admission and funding for the special resettlement of Amerasian and their families. There was still no agreement on resettlement of the reeducation prisoners. That would come almost two years later on 30 July, 1989, when the U.S. and Hanoi finally allowed the released reeducation center detainees closely associated with the US along with their close relatives to leave for the US.

The first group of 190 former reeducation detainees arrived at San Francisco airport on January 1990. The flow of detainees then just kept pouring out and by 1991, the ODP departures totaled 86,451 worldwide including 21,500 detainees and their families and nearly 18,000 Amerasians. From 1991 to 1995, orderly departures averaged more than 66,000 people per year before tailing off in 1996.

In all, the US accepted 140,000 former reeducation prisoners and their families and 40,000 Amerasians. (41)

The violence and cruelty committed by the communists against South Vietnam and its people did not stop after 30 April, 1975. Not happy with defeating their enemies, they went on to destroy them, their society, and their way of living. They sent more than one million of southerners to the reeducation camps, of which 160,000 died of starvation, torture, and diseases. The terror unleashed on the southern population forced them to escape as boat people, of which more than 100,000 died at seas and many more inside South Vietnam.

Overall more than a quarter million of additional people died in order for Hanoi to complete the assimilation of the southern society after the war ended. (42) This was the price of conquest. In the hands of Hồ Chí Minh-Lê Duẩn and the communist party, who had engineered and pursued the conquest of South Vietnam, lay the blood of these million people.

When the southern General Robert E. Lee surrendered to the northern General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox court house on April 9, 1865, signaling the beginning of the end of the US Civil War, Grant allowed southern soldiers to return home without being held prisoners or prosecuted for treason. Officers were allowed to keep their side arms and horses. He also gave food rations to Lee’s starving army, doing a lot toward healing the country. When the communists took over Saigon, all men were sent to reeducation camps, their properties confiscated, and the rest driven out of the country by boats. This inhumane treatment will only keep the nation forever divided.

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VN Reeducation Camps...



Panoramic image of the reconstructed parlor of the McLean House. Ulysses S. Grant sat at the simple wooden table on the right, while Robert E. Lee sat at the more ornate marble-topped table on the left.

Courtesy of Wikipedia

NOTES

- Freeman, J. *Hearts of Sorrow*. Stanford, Stanford University Press. 1989: 239; the following Youtube presentation chronicles the history and horror of the communist reeducation camps in Vietnam from its beginning in 1954 until 1996 or later. This presentation should be viewed in its entirety in order to understand the criminality of the communist system. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiR5sCwFpeA#t=178>)
- Courtois Stephane et al. *The Black Book of Communism*. Boston, Harvard University Press. 1999: 755. This is an excellent book about the terrors and crimes committed by the communist regimes worldwide.
- Vo, Nghia. *The Bamboo Gulag*. Jefferson, NC, McFarland. 2004: 53-62. This is a concise depiction about the communist reeducation camps in Vietnam, which are sometimes called concentration camps.
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- Truong Nhu Tang. *A Viet Cong Memoir*. New York, Vintage books. 1985: 289.
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- Huynh Jade, 58; Le Huu Tri. *Prisoner of the Word*. Seattle, Black Heron. 2001: 54.
- Pham X. A. *Catfish*, 20.
- Freeman J. *Hearts of Sorrow*, 218.
- Ibid, 231.
- Ibid, 261.
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- Huynh Jade, 57.
- Metzner, xiii.
- Jamieson NL. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley, University of California press. 1993: 365.
- Tran Tri Vu, 23.
- Chanoff D. *Portrait of the Enemy*. New York, Random House. 1986, 193.
- Vo, Nghia. *Bamboo Gulag*, pp. 114-116.

VN Reeducation Camps...

34. Robinson. *Terms of Refuge*, 196.
35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiR5sCwFpeA#t=178>
36. Vo, Nghia. *Bamboo Gulag*, pp. 169-175.
37. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiR5sCwFpeA#t=178>
38. Robinson, *Terms of Refuge*, 57.
39. Ibid, 170; Vo, Nghia. *The Vietnamese Boat People*. Jefferson, NC, McFarland. 2006: 142-151.
40. Ibid, 172-175.
41. Ibid, 198.
42. A total of 3 million Vietnamese died during the North-South Vietnamese War or approximately 1.5 million each for North and South Vietnam.

LIST OF VIETNAMESE REEDUCATION CAMPS

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>1. Saigon-Thủ Đức Region</p> <p>Camp An Dương
Bạch Đằng
Chí Hòa
Đại Lợi Hotel
Đại Nam Hotel
Camp Hóc Môn Thắng Lợi
Phạm Đăng Lưu
Tô Hiến Thành
Thủ Đức
Cảnh Sát Saigon
Cảnh Sát Quốc Gia</p> <p>2. Sông Bé Region</p> <p>Camp Bù Đốp
Bù Gia Mập
Bố Lá
Long Nguyên
Phước Long
Phước Bình
Phú Lợi</p> <p>3. Đồng Nai Region</p> <p>Camp Xuyên Mộc
Xuân Lộc
Biên Hòa
Long Thành
Long Giao
Long Khánh
Hố Nai
Gia Rây (Z-30)
Trảng Bờm
Suối Máu</p> <p>4. Tây Ninh Region</p> <p>Camp Trảng Lớn
Bầu Cờ
Đồng Ban
Cây Cay
Katun
Tây Ninh</p> | <p>5. Cửu Long Region</p> <p>Camp Gò Nhun
Vĩnh Long
Bến Gia
Bầu Sen
Châu Thanh</p> <p>6. Hậu Giang Region</p> <p>Camp Bạc Liêu
Bầu An
Can Bình
Chương Thiện (D18)
Sốc Trăng
Trà Chốt
Cồn Cát</p> <p>7. Tiền Giang Region</p> <p>Camp Cái Bè
Mỹ Tho
Vương Đào</p> <p>8. Bến Tre Region</p> <p>Camp Ba Tri
Bầu Sen
Bến Giá</p> <p>9. Minh Hải Region</p> <p>Camp Kinh Ngang
Quản Long
Cây Gù
Rạch Ruộng</p> <p>10. An Giang Region</p> <p>Camp Chi Lăng
Cái Làng
Long Xuyên</p> | <p>11. Kiên Giang Region</p> <p>Camp Kinh Một
Hà Tiên
Phú Quốc
U Minh
Rạch Giá</p> <p>12. Thuận Hải Region</p> <p>Camp Hàm Tân (Z-30D)
Bình Tuy
Chân Chùa
Da Mai
Phan Rang
Phan Thiết</p> <p>13. Darlac Region</p> <p>Camp Ban Mê Thuột</p> <p>14. Quảng Nam- Đà Nẵng Region</p> <p>Camp Tiến Lành
An Đầm
Đà Nẵng</p> <p>15. Nghĩa Bình Region</p> <p>Camp An Khê
Ba Tơ
K18
Qui Nhơn
Quảng Ngãi
Trà Bồng</p> <p>16. Phú Khánh Region</p> <p>Camp Ngân Điền (T51, 52, 53,
Nghĩa Phú
Lạc Chi (A 30)
Lu Ba</p> |
|--|---|---|

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VN Reeducation Camps...

17. Lâm Đồng Region
Camp Di Linh
Đại Bình
Madagui
Đôn Dương

18. Gia Lai-Kontum Region
Camp Gia Trung
Pleiku

19. Thừa Thiên Region
Camp Nam Hà

20. Hà Bắc Region
Camp Yên Thế

21. Hà Nam Ninh Region
Camp Ba Sao (Đầm Đùn)
Ninh Bình
Nam Định

22. Hà Sơn Bình Region
Camp Ba Vi
Hòa Bình
Hà Tây

23. Nghệ Thanh Region
Camp Con Cuông
Thanh Chương

24. Vùng Hà Tây Region
Camp Hà Tây

25. à Sơn Bình Region
Camp Hà Sơn Bình

26. Hà Tuyên Region
Camp Hà Giang
Nghĩa Lộ
Quyết Tiên (Cổng Trời)

27. Yên Bái Region
Camp Liên Trại 1

28. Hoàng Liên Sơn Region
Camp Phố Lu
Sơn La
Phong Quang

29. Vĩnh Phú Region
Camp Vĩnh Quang (A, B)
Phú Sơn
Vĩnh Phú (Tân Lập)

30. Vịnh Region
Camp Tam Đảo

31. Thanh Hóa Region
Camp Thanh Lâm
Thiếu Yến (Ly Ba So)



In Search of My Father's Grave

Huỳnh Anh Trần-Schroeder

(To the children of Vietnam whose fathers never returned from the war)

The day I returned to my homeland,
Land of green meadows, of golden sands,
Of nurturing deltas, of majestic pinnacles,
Twenty years have passed, on the chime,
On the dusts of war, on the fumes of debacles,
On my deprived youth, on my uprooted life.
My mother's tears have dried,
Not from burnout grief of a harrowing past,
Or exhaustion from a lifetime strife,
Not from the healing balm of time,
But from my solemn promise,
That I would find the place of my father's demise,
Vestige of him left behind,
Her sorrow to relieve, her sufferings to appease.

The day I returned to my country,
I walked the paths of tears and grievance,
I walked all the battlefields, all the re-education camps,
I searched all the cemeteries, all the burial sites,
To find my father's steps, his grave,
To look for his whereabouts,
His embattled on-the-fireline in-and-outs,
His heroic on-the-field rises and falls.
I researched, I tried to recognize,
His weathered penmanship on some forlorn prison walls,
His last messages from beyond the grave,
Left behind for his bereaved family.

From the North to the South of the country, I pursued my walks,
Through forests now thick with regenerated stalks,
On meadows again green with grass and red with flowers,

Through valleys and mounts resounding of bird chirps,
On rice fields heavy with golden crops.
I walked on mound grounds overgrown with grass,
On bare hills of burned thorns, on lanes cushioned in leaves,
On frequented venues, on desolate passes,
In the hope of finding remains, grave or bones,
Of my soldier father of a cherished time, a bygone.

I walked the entire country,
In its width, in its length.
I walked each road turn, each river bend,
Each field expanse, each town alley.
I saw my father everywhere,
In places dark or fair,
In each grave, each mound,
In each empty burial ground,
In every remote site of political detention,
In every forgotten desolate prison.
As everywhere,
Each soldier's remain held my father's spirit,
Of noble endurance, of indomitable grit,
Each combatant's story was his story,
Of courage, of integrity,
Of stoicism, of intensity.

O, mother,
I did not find where my father was put to rest,
His former grounds of glory, of jest,
But I found his grave, his greatness,
His heroism, his selflessness,
In every parcel and corner,
Of the sky and the earth,
Of our homeland, his home and hearth.



Vietnam War Ended 40 Years Ago

William Stearman, PhD

A poll taken on this 40th anniversary would no doubt reveal that most Americans believe we should not have fought in this small obscure country half a world away, and do believe that the war there was unwinnable and that our huge expenditure of blood and treasure there was totally in vain. Most people are nonplussed at hearing that we got into World War II because of what is now Vietnam. In the 1930s, we somewhat tolerated Japan's rampaging all though China. However, when Japan invaded what is now Vietnam, we saw this as a threat to Southeast Asia and took the strong measure of promoting a boycott of critical oil, scrap iron and rubber deliveries to Japan. Japan, then realizing a now hostile US would try to prevent its planned invasion of Southeast Asia, sought to disable our fleet at Pearl Harbor as a preventative measure. Japan then proceeded to use its new-found base to invade and conquer most of Southeast Asia. President Eisenhower must have had this mind when he was asked, at April 7, 1954 press conference, about "the strategic importance of Indochina [Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia] for the free world." He then described the "falling domino" principle whereby "the beginning of a disintegration [in Vietnam] would have the most profound influences" leading to "the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the [Malay] Peninsula and Indonesia." He added that Japan, Formosa [Taiwan], the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand "would also be threatened." (He could also have added India.)

Eisenhower's "domino theory" was pooh-poohed by a number of people in the U.S., but, given the parlous unstable conditions in Southeast Asia, it was taken seriously by leaders there as well as in Australia and India and by leaders in Hanoi and (then) Peking. For example, China's famed Marshal Lin Biao stated in September 1965 that the defeat of "U.S. imperialism" in Vietnam would show the people of the world "that what the Vietnamese people can do, they can do too." In the late 19-60s, Indonesian leaders Suharto and Malik (not great friends of the U.S.) told U.S. officials that our first introduction of U.S. combat troops (Marines) in Vietnam in March 1965 helped embolden them to resist the October 1, 1965 Communist coup supported by China, which came very close to succeeding. (The two later told columnist Robert Novak the same thing.) Had this coup succeeded, the Philippines would have soon been threatened which could well have triggered our intervention under a 1954 treaty. Then we would have been facing a far more threatening adversary than in Vietnam. The 1965 introduction of US Marines apparently had a generally bracing effect in Southeast Asia. For example it also encouraged the British defense of Malaysia against a Communist invasion from Indonesia. By the end of the Vietnam War, even the victorious Communist side which lost over two million dead was too weakened to pose a threat to any country save nearby Laos and Cambodia. The war also bought precious time to enable the countries of Southeast Asia to strengthen their positions. In essence, we basically got into the war to prevent the toppling of dominoes in Southeast Asia and we succeeded. One could say that this was *a strategic* victory while the loss in Vietnam was a *tactical* defeat.

Was the war in Vietnam truly unwinnable? After "Vietnamization" had removed all U.S. combat troops from Vietnam, Hanoi, on March 30, 1972, launched its "Easter Offensive" with largest conventional attack of the war consisting of the equivalent of 23 divisions equipped with hundreds of Soviet tanks, long range artillery, rockets and surface to air missiles. The brunt of the fighting fell on the South Vietnamese ground forces with massive U.S. air support as well as naval and logistical support. The only American ground forces left were advisors and forward air controllers. South Vietnam forces eventually moved from the defensive to counter offensives and by mid-September 1972 were clearly winning. The Communist forces had lost about 100,000 killed in action, twice as many as the U.S. had lost in the entire war. Sometime after Hanoi's final 1975 victory, a former top commander in the South, General Tran Van Tra stated in the Party organ *Nhan Dan* that his troops had eventually reached the verge of defeat. Had the war continued some months further, the South could have emerged victorious by evicting all enemy forces from Vietnam. Facing defeat, Hanoi saved the day by offering substantial concessions sought by Henry Kissinger in previous negotiations. With the best of intentions, Kissinger took this bait and the resulting negotiations process brought South Vietnamese military operations to a halt. The 1973 Peace Accords broke down. The U.S. drastically reduced aid, and then Congress banned all U.S. military operations in Indochina sealing Vietnam's doom.

William Lloyd Stearman, PhD, Senior U.S. Foreign Service officer (Ret.)

National Security Council staff under four presidents, director NSC Indochina staff, Jan. '73 to Jan. '76, Adjunct Professor of International Affairs Georgetown University (1977 to 1993), author of memoir *An American Adventure, From Early Aviation Through Three Wars to the White House* (Naval Institute Press, 2012)