

Vietnam Under Communism

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By Stephen J. Morris

But let us not forget that violence does not and cannot exist by itself: it is invariably intertwined with *the lie*. They are linked in the most intimate, most organic, and most profound fashion: violence cannot conceal itself behind anything except lies, and lies have nothing to maintain them except violence. Anyone who has once proclaimed violence as his *method* must inexorably choose the lie as his *principle*.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*

Few political parties have so successfully enshrouded themselves in political mythology as have the Vietnamese Communists. For thirty years, the party's leaders managed to persuade many Western intellectuals and journalists that the movement they led was a nationalist movement, that it expressed the will of the Vietnamese people, and that for them, Communism was merely a means to nationalist ends, not the ultimate end itself. Even today, when the truth has been shown to be the complete opposite of this mythology, the extent of the political fraud that was perpetrated by the Vietnamese Communists is imperfectly understood, when it is not simply denied.

I

In the wake of America's abandonment of Vietnam in 1975, many Vietnamese who had served in the administration or armed forces of the Republic, or who had had some other association with the United States, were apprehensive about their future under the new Communist regime.

The North Vietnamese leaders, though euphoric in victory, were still mindful of their future needs. They did not want openly to fulfill the prophecies of their enemies that they would conduct a great bloodbath, and they also hoped to acquire billions of dollars of U.S. aid to help in "socialist construction." Moreover, they were concerned that their takeover of the south be as painless for them as possible. The first six weeks of Communist rule in the south were thus a superb demonstration of the politics of deception.

In May 1975, all members of the armed forces and civil administration of the defeated government were ordered to register with the new authorities. In June, they were called upon to report for "reeducation"; they were to report on certain days and at certain specific locations, according to their rank and their civil or military position. In Saigon, the regime began by ordering all soldiers and noncommissioned officers of the former South Vietnamese army (ARVN), as well as low-level administrators and policemen, to report for "reform study" for three days. These study sessions were held in Saigon from 7 A.M. to 4 P.M. Personnel were allowed to go back home in the evening.

Then on June 11, 1975, the Military Management Committee issued a communiqué calling upon all *senior* officers of the former army, all police officers, and "personnel of the puppet administration in various branches belonging to the legislative, judiciary, and executive systems of the United States and its puppets," as well as members of "reactionary political parties" holding any official title within those parties, to report for what seemed, again, to be a relatively brief period of reform study. The individuals concerned were told:

Persons gathering for study should bring along enough paper, pens, clothes, mosquito nets, personal effects, food or money for a month beginning from the first meeting.

Finally, on June 20, an official communiqué ordered all *junior* officers of the ARVN (from second lieutenant to captain), junior police officers, and intelligence cadres to report for reeducation at various locations. Once again the clear intimation was that the reeducation courses would last for a short time.

Yet while the NCO's and ordinary soldiers were detained only for the brief time stated, the officers and civil servants of rank were shifted away to special camps in the countryside. Most of the senior officers and civil servants, and prominent figures in political parties, were deported to North Vietnam. Today, seven years after incarceration, most have still not been released.

These "reeducation" camps are forced-labor camps, employing political indoctrination. The inmates include not only military, police, and intelligence officers, former government officials, and staff of non-Communist political parties, but also, it appears, the entire membership of the elite ARVN units (the Marines, the Rangers, paratroopers, and Green Berets), participants in the Phoenix program, and village chiefs. Those inducted into the camp system have never been charged with any crime. In fact the whole process of arrest and detention lacks any legal basis.

How many people are there in the camps today? The Communist authorities say 20,000. But what the Vietnamese Communists say has no necessary correlation with the truth. The best available evidence suggests that the number is 200,000 in the south alone.¹

Inmates are forced to undertake manual labor—yet their food rations are totally inadequate for that. My own interviews with refugees who were inmates indicate that by late 1978 the rice ration had dropped to between 400 and 470 grams per day. Today, with Vietnam's overall food situation even worse, that ration has undoubtedly dropped further. Meat is normally provided only on national holidays. Medical supplies are virtually nonexistent. Thus malnutrition and disease are slowly killing off the inmates. For most, the only hope of release is if a relative is able to bribe an appropriate official. Those caught trying to escape are usually executed.

Thus Hanoi has avoided the international and domestic problems that would arise if it carried out a wave of executions. It can kill its enemies slowly and quietly, while extracting labor from them in the process.

Apart from the "reeducation" camps there is an enormous prison system in Vietnam today. It has become the "waiting room" for tens of thousands of priests, monks, political figures, artists, writers, journalists, and lawyers. In fact a sizable chunk of what might be called the intelligentsia of South Vietnam has been arrested and incarcerated in this prison system. To the new authorities, the precise attitude one had toward the former regime is irrelevant; people supportive of Thieu find themselves herded together with his most vehement critics. And among those critics are not just conservatives, liberals, and social democrats. Many idealistic members of the Communist-led National Liberation Front and even of the North Vietnamese army are also incarcerated. *Their* reversal of fortune occurred when they dared after 1975 to express concern over unfulfilled promises of liberty and equality.

A former pro-NLF student activist, Doan Van Toai, who served 28 months in a Communist prison, escaped from Vietnam with two partial lists of such people in May 1978. In October 1978, the French journalist Roland Pierre Paringaux, on assignment in Vietnam for *Le Monde*, raised the question of imprisoned revolutionaries with Huynh Tan Phat, former president of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, and now vice-premier of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Phat's response was:

One must beware of those who disguise themselves as revolutionaries in order to play the enemy's game. There are army camps and camps of the ministry of the interior [security]. If you have lists of

names, address your inquiries to the ministry, it will undertake to answer you.

(*Le Monde* October 5, 1978)

Torture is widespread in Vietnamese prisons today. It has been attested to, on the basis of personal experience, by Hoa Hao Buddhist activists like Nguyen Van Coi, and An Quang Buddhist activists. Many prominent prisoners, including Buddhist leaders, have died as a result of their treatment. And it is here that, in Solzhenitsyn's phrase, the lie becomes intertwined with the violence: the most common reason given for torturing prisoners is the demand for a confession of "employment by the CIA."

In addition to "reeducation" camps and the prison system, a third element in the network of special punishments devised by the Communist regime is the system of New Economic Zones (NEZ). The NEZ's are previously uncultivated and uninhabited areas of the countryside, usually barren, to which are sent certain categories of the population considered potentially disloyal. These categories include relatives of "reeducation"-camp inmates, dispossessed urban capitalists, ethnic Chinese, ex-NCO's from the former army of the Republic of Vietnam, families with a member who served in the army or administration of the French colonialists before 1954, and the unemployed.

When the regime deports people to one of the NEZ's, it expects them to support themselves by farming. Yet the land is usually unsuitable, the deportees usually have no experience of farming, and the regime provides few if any tools, fertilizer, or advice. Little wonder that many deportees consider their assignment a death sentence. The only way to avoid the rigors of life in the NEZ's is by bribing camp leaders to provide official travel papers or by escaping secretly with hope of finding a hiding place in Saigon.

It is not known how many people have actually been deported to the NEZ's, but the number of people in the social groups targeted for deportation runs into several million.²

Finally, there is one missing dimension of the repression. During the war some 220,000 Communists/NLF members defected to the side of the South Vietnamese government. By doing so these *chieu hoi* automatically entered the top of the Communist blacklists; to the Communists, "betrayal of the revolution" is one of the worst crimes anyone can commit. The *chieu hoi* were promised protection by the government, and by the United States (for whom many of them worked). This promise turned out to be as reliable as all the other U.S. commitments to South Vietnam. Since 1975 there has been no public announcement by the new regime as to the fate of the *chieu hoi*.

II

Over the last year or two, the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes has been questioned by many American liberals, who assert that from the point of view of the victims of such regimes, it all amounts to the same thing: torture is torture. Yet—aside from the many other ways in which the distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism holds true—the fact is that it *does* matter, very much, to the victims. For one thing, under the purer forms of totalitarianism, many more people are subjected to special forms of deprivation such as prisons, forced labor camps, and exile. In other words, the Gulag takes in a greater percentage of the population. For another thing, under a totalitarian regime *everybody* is a victim in some way or other.

The impact of the Vietnamese totalitarian state on everyday life of those subjects *not* persecuted—i.e., those outside the Gulag of "reeducation" camps, prisons, and New Economic Zones—is detailed in an important new book by Nguyen Long.³ Long had been a student activist opposed to the Thieu and Diem regimes and to American policy in Vietnam. He was jailed twice for his political activities. This, however, did not prevent him from studying in the United States, where he acquired a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1970's. On his return to Vietnam he became academic dean of the Buddhist

Van Hanh University in Saigon. From there he welcomed the end of the war, expecting a period of national reconciliation and the humane social reforms the National Liberation Front had promised. He was to be bitterly disappointed. Though he did not fall into any of those social categories consigned to the Gulag, he directly experienced the pall of fear, poverty, exploitation, and corruption which has been visited upon the majority of Vietnamese by the New Order.

As long shows, the society over which the Communist party rules is totally politicized. There is no such thing as an autonomous social organization. All Vietnamese are compelled to join a party-controlled organization (such as the Vanguard Children's Association, Ho Chi Minh Youth, the Peasants' Association, the Women's Association, the Patriotic Intellectuals' Association, the Elders' Association, and so forth). The purposes of each organization—indoctrination, surveillance, and explaining party policies and problems—are determined by the central party authorities. Every individual is expected to display loyalty to the party and its goals.

All policy is made by the Communist party leadership in Hanoi, and transmitted through provincial party committees to city, town, and village authorities. Power is also exercised “horizontally” from party to government at each administrative level, though at the lower levels of power, party and government offices frequently overlap, and most party members are also government officials. Though the party is the ultimate source of power, it prefers to remain in the background, delegating to the government the task of dealing directly with the people. Long cites the Orwellian official description of the structure of power: “The party leads, the government manages, and the people are the collective masters.”

The foundation of Vietnamese Communist party power is the public-security apparatus, with its armed military units as backup. This apparatus penetrates every institution at every level, collecting information about and policing the attitudes and activities of the Vietnamese people.

There are two types of public-security operative—the overt official and the covert agent. Overt officials are uniformed and earn salaries along with the special privileges and perquisites accompanying all power-elite jobs. Covert agents are plainclothed, often work in ordinary jobs, and receive no regular salary for reporting upon their neighbors; they are usually people with politically or socially “unsound” records who work as spies in order to avoid deportation to “reeducation” camps or New Economic Zones. Others are prepared to inform upon their neighbors in return for official favors.

The ordinary citizen is not always aware who the covert agent is, and thus must be very careful in public lest he give away something that can be used against him. “Reactionary” anti-Communist views are one thing the agents are on the lookout for, although few people are foolish enough to manifest such sentiments openly. The agents are also looking for unemployed persons, who are deported back to their native village or else to the New Economic Zones, and for people seeking to flee the country (when discovered they are arrested and their property is confiscated).

Another important task of the public-security apparatus is supervising the residence habits and movements of Vietnamese citizens. Each household has a “household booklet” in which the number of permanent residents and temporary visitors is recorded. They may be checked at any time by security cadres, and the house searched. (According to Long, for the first two years of the Communist regime, checks of “household booklets” and searches by security cadres were made after midnight.) Permission to travel from one area of the country to the other must be sought from the public-security office; the reason for the journey, the exact dates of departure and return, and a specific outline of the route to be taken must be given before permission is granted. Usually only part of a family may travel at any one time, so as to prevent escapes abroad. Upon arrival at the district one is visiting, one must immediately report and register with the local public-security office there.

In Vietnam today the concept of privacy has been abolished, both by the public-security apparatus and by the military, the twin props of the Communist regime. Long writes:

In mid-1976 a young Northern soldier came to my house in the conduct of a military census. He entered the front door without knocking, went through the living room and into the dining room. My nine-year-old daughter, playing at the foot of the stairs, called out that someone was there. As I went down the stairs, I saw him already sitting at the dining table as casually as though he were in his own home. I was startled, but this young man's conduct brought me face to face with habits that have developed from many years of life under a collectivist regime, which condemns individualism and cares nothing for privacy. . . .

In the Vanguard Children's Association (equivalent to the Soviet Young Pioneers), children meet once a week under the supervision of cadres:

At the Vanguard meetings children were asked to talk about their parents, their brothers and sisters, living conditions at home, and what the family had done during the week.

It is not surprising that as a result of this all-embracing set of social controls and surveillance, the most basic forms of social relationship have been altered:

Life in the family has become a succession of hypocrisies necessary to protect its members, with the husband hiding his real feelings from his wife and children for fear his family might unwittingly reveal them in public. Contact with neighbors and the community has been reduced to using officially structured language to falsify emotions and protect oneself from the inquisitive security agents.

Hand in hand with the imposition of social controls has gone the imposition of controls on cultural and intellectual expression. At the end of May 1975 the new revolutionary authorities began a campaign to eradicate what they described as "reactionary" and "decadent" culture and replace it with a revolutionary and "healthy" one. The Military Management Committee ordered that all reactionary and decadent books and magazines be banned. According to the new authorities:

Reactionary books are those whose contents serve imperialism's aggressive designs to enslave our people. Decadent books are those which debase people and incite them to follow their animal instincts such as obscene books containing nude pictures.

Ho Truong An, who before his escape from Vietnam was responsible for "evaluating" literary works in the national library, has given a more specific breakdown into types of reactionary and decadent literature⁴:

- A. Works which oppose Communism in any way; for example, books by Gide, Pasternak, Koestler, Solzhenitsyn, and numerous Vietnamese writers such as Vo Phien and Vu Khac Khoan.
- B. Decadent works: Erotic literature is especially singled out here, but the list includes Henry Miller, Elia Kazan, Françoise Sagan, D.H. Lawrence, Erskine Caldwell, Hermann Hesse, and the French existentialists Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus. The Vietnamese school of writers known as *San Tao*, who had guided the reading public into new currents of Western thought, were accused of having received American imperialist money in order to poison the reading public with an existentialist literature which is "more dangerous than nuclear radiation."
- C. Romantic works: The authors include Carson McCullers, Erich Segal, Somerset Maugham, and many Vietnamese writers. These are condemned as "writers who ignore the miseries of the society around them in order to write about individualistic love in a bourgeois and lazy life." Many Vietnamese poets who celebrate the beauties of nature and romantic feelings are also included here.
- D. Works on philosophy and religion, because "behind every religious system and every philosophical school the literature of a capitalist state aims gradually to destroy the will of mankind to struggle, and to debilitate man's spirit."

Both Hanoi and Saigon radio soon began to celebrate the success of their campaign of prohibition, listing how many tons of “decadent” and “reactionary” books and magazines had been turned over to the revolution.

It is often argued in defense of Communist regimes that while they deprive their people of liberty they at least provide them with social and economic justice (adequate food, clothing, education, and health care). The peculiar moral reasoning underlying this argument need not concern us here, since its factual assumption—that Communist regimes do provide socioeconomic justice—is false. Nguyen Long demonstrates this convincingly with regard to Vietnam.

In Vietnam today, all goods and services are allocated according to one’s political status and one’s economic class. Party members have first priority, government officials and those designated “working class” second priority, and everyone else comes last. Special, restricted-access stores (a feature of all Communist countries) are a fact of life in Vietnam. The leading party members (Politburo and Central Committee) have the best local and imported food available to them. High-ranking cadres have their own special stores, where medium-quality produce is available to them. Low-ranking cadres and ordinary citizens are excluded from these stores.

Food purchases are in any case limited by ration cards. Long does not indicate whether party cadres are included in the rationing system, but he points out that in April 1978 the amount of food available to laborers was reduced from 35.2 to 26.4 pounds per month, for government employees from 26.4 to 19.8 pounds, and for “common citizens” from 17.6 pounds to 13.2 pounds. The bulk of this ration is potato and sorghum, while rice, especially white rice, has become a luxury food.

For the “common citizen” the official food ration is insufficient, and must be supplemented. But since wages are too low to enable the purchase of good food on the black market, ordinary citizens are often compelled either to sell their property and personal possessions so as to be able to supplement their diet with black-market purchases or else to purchase waste food.

Medical care in Vietnam is administered with similar concern for social and political status. The best hospitals are reserved for party members and their families. Other hospitals are reserved for middle- and lower-level cadres, government officials, and ordinary citizens, but they are subdivided into sections in which the quality of care and nutrition varies considerably. In order to be admitted to one of these hospitals, citizens must go through a lengthy and complex bureaucratic process.

Medicine is also dispensed according to one’s social or political status. The ordinary citizen can only purchase a limited variety of medicines, most of which are manufactured in Vietnam, and they are generally the least effective. Workers and government officials are in a second category; if they become seriously ill, they can acquire medicines imported before 1975 (including antibiotics such as tetracyclin, aureomycin, and penicillin). The best-treated category is that of the party workers, who have access to all the best medicines, usually imported.

Long relates an anecdote in which the question of privilege in today’s Vietnam is asked and answered definitively:

In a regular evening meeting of my household cluster, a citizen bravely asked: “Why are all the best foods, clothes, medicines, and supplies reserved for the cadres and party members?”

The presiding cadre coolly answered: “Because they should be spared worries about their material life, in order to enable them to devote their time, energy, and zeal for the people. What else do the people expect?”

III

It is not hard to understand why the Vietnamese people might want to leave their country. The problem is that the Communist party does not want them to leave. And departing Vietnam without first receiving the government's permission is considered a hostile act against the state, an insult to the "people's power." Anybody apprehended while attempting to leave the country illegally is automatically sent to prison or a "reeducation" camp for a period determined by the local authorities. It is usually at least eighteen months, and often longer.

Nevertheless, since the victory of the North Vietnamese army, tens of thousands of people have been prepared to take the risk. Their story has been told in *The Refused*, a recent book by an Australian journalist, Barry Wain.⁵ Though much of the book deals with the inhospitable reception accorded to the refugees from Indochina by neighboring countries and the world community generally, Wain also attempts to pinpoint the responsibility of the Communist governments of Indochina, and the Vietnamese government in particular, for the exodus of their citizens.

For the first few weeks after the conquest of the south in 1975, people thought that life under the new regime might be tolerable, but by late 1975, as the ugly truth behind the "reeducation" charade became apparent, many concluded that they had to find a way of leaving. Because Vietnam is surrounded by three other Communist regimes, and the ocean, departure by boat was the only possibility. In 1975, 378 people reached another Southeast Asian country by boat from Vietnam. In 1976, 5,247 managed to do so. In 1977, 15,690 were successful.

Then in December 1977 the Vietnamese army launched its first major attacks against the Communist regime of Pol Pot in Kampuchea (Cambodia). Vietnam's action escalated a long-simmering struggle for power in Kampuchea and infuriated China, which supported Pol Pot. Now the Vietnamese Communist leaders decided that their local ethnic Chinese minority (numbering 1.5 million) was a potential "fifth column." In March 1978 the Hanoi leaders confiscated all large-scale business enterprises in South Vietnam, which were overwhelmingly Chinese-owned. In April the small-business markets in Saigon were cleaned up, and in May the regime introduced a new currency reform, which effectively wiped out savings. All the dispossessed were told that they would have to leave for their native villages, if they had come from the countryside, or else they would be deported to New Economic Zones, to start a new life as agricultural laborers. Many decided they could not accept the perils of life in the NEZ's, and would try to take their chances on the high seas. At the same time, in what was formerly North Vietnam, the regime began a separate campaign of harassment against ethnic Chinese residents, who in their thousands were driven out on foot to China.

In the south, the number leaving by boat soon increased dramatically, averaging more than 5,000 safe arrivals a month in Southeast Asia between April and July 1978, rising further to 12,540 in October and to 21,505 in November. The great majority were ethnic Chinese, who constituted a mere 3 percent of the population.

In December 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia, overthrowing the Pol Pot regime, and driving it west to the Thai border. In response to this action, China invaded Vietnam in February 1979. The war lasted one month, but China failed to dislodge the Vietnamese troops. What did result was a heightening of the anti-China hysteria of the Vietnamese Communist leaders. They then began an all-out racist pogrom against Vietnam's ethnic Chinese residents. Wain summarizes the process as it unfolded in the northern half of the country:

Although once again no decision was announced, security officials began calling on Sino-Vietnamese and explaining that they had two choices: leave the country or be regrouped at "concentration points" away from economic centers that would become in effect New Economic Zones exclusively for ethnic Chinese.

The tactics employed in the north were crude. First Sino-Vietnamese cadres in responsible positions in the party, armed forces, and other branches of the state were dumped. Ordinary ethnic Chinese

were dismissed from government posts, and employers were told not to hire them. Their children were barred from schools. Their food rations were stopped, or they were threatened with such a fate if they did not meet a specified deadline to leave. A curfew was imposed on them in some areas, preventing them from leaving their homes, during the hours of darkness. Their mail was censored, their homes looted in some cases, and a few were jailed without cause. Security officials who went knocking on doors to spell out the choices followed up with warnings over loudspeakers that if Sino-Vietnamese did not leave, their protection could not be guaranteed. The pressure was maintained by regular house meetings in streets where ethnic Chinese lived. They were asked to explain why they were taking so long to depart.

These procedures seem to have been completed by the middle of 1979. By July of that year 240,000 Sino-Vietnamese had arrived in China; 30,000 to 40,000 had arrived in Hong Kong. Northern Vietnam had been cleansed of its ethnic Chinese minority.

The removal of ethnic Chinese from *southern* Vietnam was entrusted to a section of the Public Security Bureau. Generally PSB officials used middlemen to recruit refugees and arrange for payment of fares. Prices were subject to negotiation, but tended to average 5 to 8 taels of gold per adult, half-price for children, those under the age of five or six free. Half the fee went directly to the government of Vietnam, 40 percent covered the cost of the boat, fuel, and provisions, and 10 percent was for the boat owner and organizer. However, Wain informs us:

It was common for the PSB officials to solicit and receive bribes in addition to the negotiated payment. This was what they took on the side for their services; it did not have to be declared and passed on to the government. The bribes were paid in gold, jewelry, furniture, and anything else of value. Rolex watches were especially coveted.

The deportation program in southern Vietnam, though never publicly announced, was administered in a highly professional manner. Although the program was intended for ethnic Chinese, ethnic Vietnamese could join the boats if they could produce identity papers showing they were ethnic Chinese, and if they could pay the fees. False papers were supplied by middlemen and sometimes by the PSB itself. The PSB even sponsored the building and refitting of boats for the refugee trade.

Impatient with the pace of these operations, the Hanoi regime hit upon the idea of using large foreign freighters to accelerate the deportations. It arranged for local ethnic Chinese business associations, such as the Rice Exporters Association of Vietnam, to use their network of contacts throughout Southeast Asia to organize the freighters. Profits from the trade were then unevenly divided among the Hanoi regime, the local middlemen, and the foreign racketeers. With thousands of refugees at a time being deported on the large ships, Hanoi's profits were enormous. For example, on the ship *Huey Fong*, 1,700 adults each paid 12 taels of gold, of which 10 went to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This amounted to a \$4-million profit on one ship alone. Thus the refugee trade became a major source of foreign exchange for Hanoi, outstripping the coal industry as the country's main export earner.

As the departing ethnic Chinese handed over their property to the regime, they signed a statement along these lines:

I am very happy to give all this property to the Vietnamese government. The government is very good to give me the opportunity to go abroad to see my family.

IV

When they began their assault on Cambodia in December 1978, the Hanoi leaders justified their actions by citing the enormous atrocities which Pol Pot had carried out against the Cambodian people. But subsequent Vietnamese behavior shows the true quality of their feeling for the Khmer.

The invading Vietnamese army prevented the planting or reaping of crops during 1979. All the food reserves of the Pol Pot regime (stored in warehouses, apparently for export) were consumed in the first months of the year. By mid-1979 Cambodia was on the verge of famine. As late as October 1979 the Vietnamese-installed government was denying any food shortage. Shortly afterward, the regime announced that it would accept aid if brought directly to Kompong Som or Phnom Penh.

The U.S., eager to send food, was reluctant to comply with the conditions laid down—it did not want to recognize the Vietnamese puppet government of Heng Samrin by dealing directly with it, and it was aware that most of the starving population was located far away from the government supply centers and there were no physical means to distribute the needed supplies. In late October 1979, President Carter appealed to the Vietnamese-installed government to permit a “land bridge” of trucks, operated not by the U.S. but by international relief agencies, to carry food from Thailand to the millions of starving Cambodians. The ruling Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Council “vigorously rejected” the plan, claiming, quite dishonestly, that its own distribution procedures were adequate. It later charged that those Western governments and relief agencies which were proposing the land bridge were really trying to aid the Pol Pot forces.

The charge revealed the true motives behind Hanoi’s callous intransigence: the Pol Pot forces had to be destroyed by whatever methods, and if this meant the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent Cambodians, so be it. Yet while Hanoi was unable to starve its former comrades to death, it was more successful with the civilian population. According to a carefully prepared report of the National Foreign Assessment Center of the CIA, *Kampuchea: A Demographic Catastrophe* (May 1980), in the first year of the Heng Samrin regime the population of Cambodia fell by 700,000. In other words, Hanoi’s ruthless imperial drive killed in one year as many Cambodians as died in *five* years of war, 1970-75. The death toll was also equal to the worst year of the Pol Pot regime. In this way the Vietnamese Communists furthered the decimation of the Khmer people.

Nor was this the end of the Kampuchean story. Once the new regime was in place, it began to round up all Kampuchea’s ethnic Chinese minority, and deport them to remote mountain areas or to Thailand.

V

In the light of their treatment of the Khmer, Vietnamese Communist behavior in Laos appears as something of a sideshow. Yet it must not be forgotten that the Vietnamese army helps keep the Communist Pathet Lao government in power. In the process it not only protects a Laotian mini-replica of Vietnam, complete with its own Gulag of “reeducation” camps and prisons, but also carries out large-scale massacres of the civilian population. The Hmong hill tribes have suffered most, since they fought on the side of the United States during the Indochina war (only to be abandoned without warning in 1975). Most of the Hmong refused to surrender to the new government, correctly fearing retribution in Pathet Lao “reeducation” camps (where approximately 40,000 others were originally incarcerated). Since the end of 1975, Vietnamese and Laotian government forces have launched air and ground attacks on the recalcitrant Hmong, drawing no distinction between soldiers and civilians. Entire villages have been wiped out. Thousands of men, women, and children have been massacred while trying to flee to Thailand.⁶

Even more disturbing has been the introduction of chemical and biological warfare into Laos by Vietnam. There is overwhelming evidence that since 1975 Vietnam has used not only napalm, but also a mysterious new poison gas against civilians in Laos. This gas, identified by both the United States Department of State and private

researchers as containing mycotoxin, is popularly referred to as “yellow rain.” The most important aspect of the “yellow rain” phenomenon is not the legal—its use clearly violates the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning chemical warfare—but the moral. “Yellow rain” is being used as a new, efficient method of exterminating not only guerrillas but also civilians *en masse*.

The U.S. State Department received reports of 6,504 deaths directly resulting from exposure to chemical agents in Laos between the summer of 1975 and January 1982. This figure has not been broken down into armed combatants and civilians, but since the attacks are frequently against entire villages and groups of would-be escapees, the percentage of civilians killed must be quite high. And the figure does not indicate total deaths, since it is based only on eyewitness reports received. A private researcher, Sterling Seagrave, believes that by the fall of 1979, between 15,000 and 20,000 Hmong had died from the biochemical gas attacks.⁷ The number killed up until the present is obviously much higher. In the wake of Vietnam’s invasion of Kampuchea in 1978, numerous reports of biochemical gas attacks began to emanate from there as well. Reports of victims’ symptoms were identical in both countries.

Confronted with these charges, Hanoi’s representatives first dismissed them as “slander.” Lately, however, they have tried to divert attention from the issue by denouncing the United States’ past use of defoliants like Agent Orange in Vietnam’s forests, and by inviting to Hanoi carefully selected groups of sympathetic American veterans of the Vietnam war to discuss the effects of Agent Orange and ways in which the U.S. might atone for its past sins. The ploy has worked perfectly. I know of not one member of the American antiwar movement, including prize-winning biologists and chemists, who has publicly denounced the Hanoi regime for using these poisons. Some, such as Matthew Meselson of Harvard, have attempted to discredit the “yellow rain” evidence (although Meselson now seems to have abandoned his earlier position). Once again, Hanoi has quite literally got away with murder.

VI

Today, as Vietnam rests securely within the Soviet bloc, one may wonder how anybody could have thought that the Vietnamese Communists were using “Communist means for nationalist ends.” Indeed, long before the alignment with the Soviet Union became public there was plenty of evidence of Vietnamese Communism’s “internationalist” goals. The doctrinal writings of Vietnam’s Communist leaders explicitly state that the party’s foreign-policy objectives consist not merely of eliminating “imperialist” (i.e., U.S.) influence over their own country, but also of participating in a global offensive—the “world revolution.” Thus the Communist party’s first secretary, Le Duan, wrote in 1970:

Our people are infinitely proud to stand in the forefront of the revolutionary battle fought by the world’s peoples against imperialism, mankind’s most dangerous enemy. . . . Ever since our party’s foundation, solidarity with the international proletariat and with the revolution in the colonial and the semi-colonial countries has been a most important obligation and a basic principle for our party. . . . Thus we have won greater support and assistance from the world revolutionary movement, our people have acquired the noble sentiments of proletarian internationalism, and have guarded themselves from bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalism. . . . Our internationalist line has encouraged our people to contribute actively to the revolutionary struggles of the world’s peoples.

That is why Vietnam today is not only colonizing Kampuchea and Laos, but also training Communist guerrillas from Thailand, and using its stockpile of American arms to supply Communist guerrillas in El Salvador.

The thesis of “Communist means for nationalist ends” was flawed not only in its failure to recognize Vietnamese Communist “internationalism.” It was even more seriously defective in that it ignored the domestic policy objectives of the party. A movement which uses “Communist means” (presumably, party organization and political tactics) for “nationalist ends” is not a Communist movement. For Communists, political commitment is

not merely to a set of tactics and methods for the seizure of state power. It is also commitment to a certain type of sociopolitical order to be created *after* the seizure of power. Le Duan again: “The seizure of power is not the end of the revolution; it is only the beginning.” The truth of that observation is manifested quite clearly in Vietnam today.

The Vietnamese Communist party, as we have seen, administers a totalitarian regime, whose domination of the population rests upon an all-pervasive police network, backed up by an armed militia, and upon a near monopoly over the allocation of the most basic goods and services. It is a regime which elicits loyal service from its party-state apparatuses by appealing to their most primitive material instincts—offering them economic and social privileges, and the right to engage in naked extortion.

The Vietnamese Communist regime exercises its power without any regard for the most fundamental values of the majority of its citizens, and continues to engage in overt, systematic racial discrimination against its ethnic Chinese minority. Furthermore, the regime pursues a policy of imperial aggression against its weaker neighbors, using biochemical warfare against civilian populations. It attempts to clothe its policies of naked repression at home and abroad in the farcical totalitarian rhetoric of “liberation.”

That such a regime could ever have won any popular support requires explanation.

In fact, there is no solid evidence that the Communists ever possessed the support of a majority of Vietnamese—either in their war against the French or in their war against the American-backed government of South Vietnam. Vietnamese political loyalties were always highly fragmented. Any explanation of the success of Vietnamese Communism would have to take account of that fragmentation, as well as of the political and moral failings of the opponents of Communism. It remains the case, however, that a necessary condition of ultimate victory was the acquisition of *some* popular support—and this in turn depended upon a strategy of political deception. Both the Vietminh and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam were organizations created for the purposes of political fraud.

The Vietminh, a front organization which the Vietnamese Communists founded in 1941, had as its ostensible goal the uniting of all persons, regardless of their particular aims, in the struggle against imperialism and colonialism. To preserve the fiction that the Vietminh was not being run by Communists for Communist aims but was rather a broad alliance of all Vietnamese nationalists, the Indochinese Communist party was formally “disbanded” in 1945—but despite the highly visible presence of non-Communists in the Vietminh, Communists or crypto-Communists really controlled the organization’s policy and direction. And as Ho Chi Minh admitted later, the party itself was not disbanded but merely went underground, resurfacing in 1951 as the Vietnam Workers’ party. Only after the party gained total state power in the north was the true nature of its activities revealed.

The second stage in the successful use of the “politics of deceit” was the founding of the National Liberation Front, established by the Vietnamese Communists in 1960 to mobilize mass support against the government of South Vietnam. Its platform was so broad, democratic, and appealing that most social groups could find something in it. But like the platform of the Vietminh, which promised freedom, equality, and economic justice for all, the NLF platform was a fraud, to be discarded upon the seizure of power in 1975.

As Truong Nhu Tang, a former NLF and Provisional Revolutionary Government minister, summarized his own experience:

The Communists are experts in the arts of seduction and will go to any length to woo you over to their side, so long as they don’t control the government. But once they are in power they suddenly become harsh, ungrateful, cynical, and brutal.

The Communist strategy of deception was aimed not only at the local population but also at Western public opinion. And its success there was considerable. In the early years of American involvement in Vietnam, domestic intellectual opposition to that involvement fed upon the illusion that the National Liberation Front was not a tool of Hanoi as the State Department claimed, but rather a spontaneous and independent reaction to “U.S.-backed repression.” Thus, the influential book of George M. Kahin and John Wilson Lewis, *The United States and Vietnam* (1967), reaches

... the inescapable conclusion that the Liberation Front is not “Hanoi’s creation”; it has manifested independence and it is southern. Insurrectionary activity against the Saigon government Began in the south under southern leadership not as a consequence of any dictate from Hanoi, but contrary to Hanoi’s injunctions.

Later, when Hanoi’s domination of the NLF became obvious to many, it was the Communists themselves who began to be sanitized in Western intellectual opinion. When Ho Chi Minh died, the New York *Times* eulogized him in an editorial:

Ho Chi Minh was a formidable foe who might have been a friend if this country had been more consistently faithful to some of its noblest principles, which he admired. . . . Ho turned to Communism as a means—not an end—to achieve his lifelong goal of freedom and unity for his homeland.

One of the *Times*’ most famous correspondents, David Halberstam, raised the level of adulation to a pitch of pure hero worship:

The higher he rose, the simpler and purer Ho seemed, always retaining the eternal Vietnamese values: respect for old people, disdain for money, affection for children. . . .

With Ho’s death, power was transferred in Hanoi without any crisis; his goals had always been his people’s goals, so there was no readjustment of his vision to be made. Judged by his impact on his own poor country, his life was an extraordinary success and a vindication; he was the greatest patriot of his people in this century.⁸

It was not just Ho who supposedly embodied his people’s hopes and aspirations. According to Frances FitzGerald, the kind of society the Communists wanted to create was at one with traditional Vietnamese values; hence, it was a society in which all the people would be able to take part:

Instead of merely trying to renew an elitist system [the NLF] was attempting to change that system and to bring the common people, the “children,” to participate in the affairs of state.⁹

The authors of these words were not Communists, or members of some fanatical radical sect. They were representatives of the mainstream of American liberal opinion in the period of the late 60’s and early 70’s. That such nonsense was not merely tolerated, but rewarded with Pulitzer prizes and other honors, suggests the extent to which the Vietnamese Communists had “captured” American intellectuals prior to 1975, just as they had “captured” the French intellectuals prior to 1954.

It is now abundantly clear that the heroic image of the Vietnamese Communist revolution was a figment of the Western romantic imagination. French intellectuals have admitted as much. To the degree that American intellectuals have not, but maintain a near-universal silence at the atrocities of Hanoi, they perpetuate a certain complicity in the suffering of the peoples of Indochina.

¹ One credible estimate has been given by Nguyen Cong Hoan, who, as a former “representative” of Phu Khanh province in the Communists’ rubber-stamp National Assembly, was able to visit several of the camps in his province. Extrapolating from his province to South Vietnam as a whole, he estimated that in 1977 there were possibly 340,000 prisoners in the camps, with 200,000 as the absolute minimum. See Theodore Jacqueny, “Human Rights in Vietnam,” *Free Trade Union News* 32, No. 9, September 1977.

² Some evidence has appeared recently which suggests that Vietnamese are also being deported to the Soviet Union, to work in remote regions like Siberia and thereby help pay off Vietnam's war debt. See Doan Van Toai, "What's Become of Vietnam?" *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 1982.

³ *After Saigon Fell: Everyday Life Under the Vietnamese Communists*, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 164 pp., \$8.00.

⁴ "Vietnam's Cultural Purge," *Index on Censorship*, Volume 7, Number 4, July-August 1978, pp. 3-7.

⁵ Simon & Schuster, 288 pp., \$16.50.

⁶ See, apart from Barry Wain's book, Jane Hamilton-Merritt, "Flight From Laos," *New York Times*, September 4, 1979.

⁷ *Yellow Rain: A Journey through the Terror of Chemical Warfare* (Evans, 1981). See the review of this book by Jeffrey Marsh in the March 1982 COMMENTARY.

⁸ *Ho* (Random House, 1971) pp. 14, 117.

⁹ Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Little, Brown, 1972), p. 211.
