

Truong Nhu Tang

The 'Liberation' of Vietnam

We excerpt here, with permission, from an extraordinary article appearing in the current issue of The New York Review of Books.

Truong Nhu Tang, a founder of Vietnam's National Liberation Front and minister of justice for the Viet Cong Provisional Revolutionary Government, fled his country on a boat loaded with 40 refugees in November 1979.

On May 15, 1975, I was standing on the official dais reviewing the first Victory Day parade in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon until several months earlier). The crowd marching by waved the flags of both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Hanoi) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (Viet Cong). The troops, though, bore only the North's colors. I asked the four-star general standing next to me where were the famous Viet Cong Divisions 1, 5, 7 and 9. The general, Van Tien Dung, commander-in-chief of the North Vietnamese army, answered coldly that the armed forces were now "unified." At that moment I began to understand my fate and that of the NLF.

Unfortunately, when the war [ended], North Vietnamese vindictiveness and fanaticism blossomed into a ferocious exercise of power. Hundreds of thousands of former officials and army officers of the Saigon regime were imprisoned in "re-education camps." Literally millions of ordinary citizens were forced to leave their homes and settle in the so-called New Economic Zones. One month after the "re-education" program was imposed, few of those arrested were released. I asked the communist leaders why they didn't free the people in the camps as promised. I was told that the authorities had said only that the former officials and army officers of the Saigon regime should bring with them food enough for a month. The government had never promised that the term of "re-education" would last for a month!

A rigid authoritarianism settled down over the entire country, an authoritarianism supported by the third largest army in the world, although Vietnam is among the 20 poorest nations in the world. And where in all this are the feelings of the common people? Members of the former resistance, their sympathizers and those who supported the Viet Cong are now filled with bitterness. These innocent people swear openly that had they another chance their choice would be very different. One often hears sentiments such as this one: "I wouldn't give them even a grain of rice now. I would pull them out of their hiding places and denounce them to the authorities." At the same time, the myth of Ho Chi Minh, the great patriot, has dissolved to nothingness.

The radical and hidden nature of the Northern takeover resulted in the displacement of virtually every moderate and neutralist element. There was simply nothing to stop the most rapacious and destructive communist

plans from being carried out. Carpetbagging Northern officials fought each other, sometimes at gunpoint, for the best offices, the most comfortable houses, the most lucrative positions.

Despite their misfortune, the people still kept their sense of humor: they frequently ridiculed the party's slogans. Formerly Ho Chi Minh called on the population in the North to double and triple their efforts to liberate their brothers and sisters of the South. Nowadays one hears the same slogans lightly changed as follows: "Everybody should double his efforts to buy a radio and bike for the party officials, and triple his production so that the officials can have a new house and a pretty girl friend."

Throughout the country, the people have passively resisted forced collectivization. The Party for its part tries to ascribe economic failure to natural calamities and the destruction of war, but in fact the underlying causes are social and psychological. On the one hand, there is widespread popular discontent, and, on the other hand, the failures of a totalitarian regime. Behind the facade of unanimity, the silence and resignation of the population, there is the threatening reality that the Party's daily, Nhan Dan (Pravda of Vietnam), can no longer dissimulate: "Our plant and other equipment run at only 50 percent of their capacity." Theft of public goods and property is common. There is no close cooperation between the different bureaucracies, and sometimes these clash. We know what will become of the regime if this situation persists. The cadres work less because they no longer believe in their communist leaders. In June 1981, Hoang Tung, party theoretician and editor of Nhan Dan, in a desperate effort to save the situation, asked Moscow to grant a billion rubles to Vietnam to save the country from collapse, an indi-

cation of Hanoi's deep dependence on the Soviet Union. Moreover, Hanoi allowed the Soviets to build piers and other facilities to service nuclear submarines at the former U.S. supply base Cam Ranh Bay.

Vietnam is now practically an instrument of Soviet expansionism in Southeast Asia. There are at least 10,000 Soviet advisers in Vietnam today. Since joining Comecon in June 1978, Vietnam has steadily become an integral part of the Soviet system, especially so because the leaders of Hanoi have transposed to Indochina the Soviet mode of Eastern Europe. Le Duan, the secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party, told the fourth Party congress on Dec. 26, 1976, that "Vietnamese revolution is an integral part of world revolution," and he firmly insisted that "the Vietnamese revolution is to fulfill the internationalist duty and the international obligation it owes to the Soviet Union. In my talks with party leaders, I told them: 'You can make a revolution without clothes, but you cannot make a revolution by hunger, repression and building gulags.'" I protested that they had cheaply sold Vietnam's independence to the U.S.S.R. The Vietnamese people hated the Soviets intensely, calling them "Americans without dollars"; many Western visitors have been attacked by the children and the people because they were mistaken for Russians.

Certainly the occupation of Cambodia does not mean the end of the regime's international ambitions. Because of its consistent military and ideological involvement in the revolutionary movements in the region, and the support and military power of the Soviet Union, Hanoi has the will and also the means of exporting the revolution beyond the borders of Indochina when conditions permit.

Not many people can believe these things, just as they could not believe in the past that the North would take over the South and set up a communist regime. But the truth is that for the first time in our history, people have risked their lives to leave Vietnam; large numbers of Vietnamese never tried to flee their country to escape French domination or the American intervention. The refugee exodus began in earnest as the active population was systematically drafted into the protracted war against Cambodia and occupied Laos. For the first time since 1945, when famine killed 2 million people, Vietnam has been facing grave and widespread food shortages because its national leaders have sacrificed their people in order to fulfill the obligations of "internationalism."

The golden opportunity to harness the energy of 55 million people to rebuild their shattered country came in April 1975, when foreign involvement ended. That was the moment to initiate a policy of national reconciliation without reprisals, to establish a representative government that would include a spectrum of political parties and pursue a foreign policy of nonalignment. That was the moment to foster a spirit of brotherhood and focus the country's attention on the task of national reconstruction.



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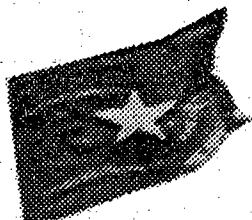
The communists, however, chose aggrandizement rather than reconciliation. The moment of military victory was the moment they began to eliminate the NLF. Many of my friends lamented, "They buried the NLF without even a ceremony." At the simple farewell dinner we held to formally disband the NLF in 1976, neither the party nor the government sent a representative. It was a gesture of scorn toward the nationalistic and democratic principles for which the Viet Cong had bled so copiously and which the international liberal community had sustained so faithfully.

In their incessant and predatory pursuit of concentrated power, the communists have divided Vietnam instead of healing it. Their strategy has been to dislocate as much of the social fabric as possible in order to preclude the formation of a coherent opposition...

Political power is now being concentrated in the families of Le Duan, Ho Chi Minh's successor, and of Le Duc Tho, Kissinger's Paris adversary...

I was given the opportunity to work for this government. After the communists had eliminated the NLF and imprisoned most of those they considered potential enemies, they offered me the position of vice minister of nutrition. I refused. I could not ally myself with a regime that had proved itself inhuman and that the people hated so passionately. During the 1960s, I gave up a good job to fight for certain ideals—which are still the ideals of the Vietnamese people: independence, democracy and social welfare. I have now to acknowledge my responsibility for the disastrous state of my country.

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