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The Easter Offensive



Special
Issue

The Enemy

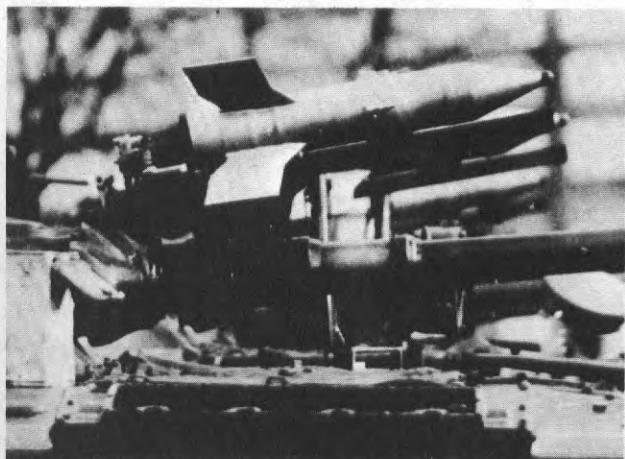


Soviet T-34, Medium Tank



Soviet 122 MM Field Gun

There is no doubt that the North Vietnamese came fully prepared to "annihilate" the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, as evidenced by the Soviet weaponry displayed on this page, which have been used in the Easter Offensive. No pretense any longer to an insurrectionary war, fought by destitute, poorly armed guerrilleros...



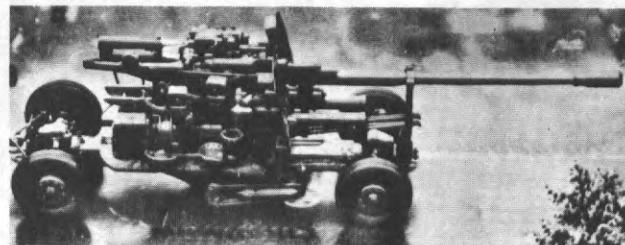
Soviet AT-3 Sagger Type Antitank Missile Wireguided



Soviet SA-2 Guideline Surface to Air Missile



Soviet T-54 Medium Tank



Soviet 100 MM Antiaircraft Gun KS-19





The Communists paid a fearful price (above) for the capture of Quang Tri (May 1, 1972). Earlier, the population (300,000 for the whole province) had almost to a man elected to leave home and fields and ancestral grounds to go south rather than stay over with the "liberators."

Opposite:
The last stage of a SAM-2
surface-to-air missile captured
in Quang Tri in April.



Among the captured in the Dong Ha-Quang Tri fighting are 15-year old boys like the one shown here on the left. Born in Nghe An province in North Viet-Nam, he was fighting in Regiment 102 of the 308th Division when captured in Dong Ha on April 16, 1972. Above, another North Vietnamese POW receives medical treatment at the hands of South Vietnamese rangers.



Opposite:
Quang Tri literally became a
graveyard for the 200 Russian-
made tanks committed by the
North Vietnamese in the fight
for that one province.





Assorted Communist weapons captured in the Dong Ha-Quang Tri fighting.



HANOI IN A CORNER

The North Vietnamese invasion, now entering its third month, is stalled on every front. This, no doubt, must have produced quite a few jitters in Hanoi, especially in the headquarters of General Giap and First Secretary Le Duan, the main architects of this last gamble. The present paper is an attempt to delve in some depth into Hanoi's motives and aims in launching its latest offensive, the environment in which it operates, and the chances of Hanoi's pulling off this last gamble.

Hanoi's environment

Strange as it may seem, some commentators and analysts appear to accept the image of Hanoi as a totally unchanging and unchangeable quality in the present war raging in Viet-Nam. To these commentators and analysts Hanoi's inordinate obstinacy becomes a kind of virtue, indestructible because of what Claude Julien of Le Monde calls Hanoi's "implacable logic." It goes without saying that Hanoi is only too happy to see so much "understanding" abroad of its increasingly isolated position.

Let us look briefly into Hanoi's "implacable logic." Hanoi has spent thousands of broadcasting hours and probably millions of tons of paper to expound its conviction that it cannot lose the war, comes what may including the total, physical destruction of North Viet-Nam. This is taken by some to mean that, unable to lose the war, Hanoi necessarily would win. That this conclusion does not really follow has--unfortunately for the South Vietnamese--occurred to but a few. Hanoi's analysis therefore bears looking into, point by point:

1. Viet-Nam is one. The 1954 Geneva Agreements having never been meant for a permanent division of Viet-Nam, Hanoi's delegation in Paris let it be understood that "every Vietnamese has the right to fight wherever there is aggression" on his territory and flatly denied there was an invasion, because a country cannot possibly invade itself. That this is pure sophistry should be apparent to anyone who cares to look into the situation of the two Germany's or the two Koreas, whose division was also never meant to be a permanent condition.

Beyond even these analogies, we have no stronger defender of the two-Vietnam concept than Hanoi itself. Witness:

- Its careful camouflaging of its role in the creation of the National Liberation of South Viet-Nam (NLFSVN). The NLF was created on December 20, 1960 following a decision taken earlier at the Third Lao Dong Party Congress in Hanoi in September of the same year.

- Hanoi's inordinate outrage at the International Control Commission for its

majority report, dated June 2, 1962 confirming that "in specific instances there is evidence to show that armed and unarmed personnel, arms, munitions and other supplies have been sent from the Zone in the North to the Zone in the South with the object of supporting, organising and carrying out hostile activities, including armed attacks, directed against the Armed Forces and Administration of the Zone in the South" and that "the People's Army of Viet-Nam has allowed the Zone in the North to be used for inciting, encouraging and supporting hostile activities in the Zone in the South, aimed at the overthrow of the Administration in the South."

- Hanoi's going to great lengths, during 1965-68, to "prove" the "illegality" of U.S. bombings of North Viet-Nam -- provided one accepts the theory that the war in South Viet-Nam was essentially a local insurgency, born out of supposed inequities found in the society of South Viet-Nam.

- Hanoi's careful nurturing of a "Republic of South Viet-Nam" (again, note the playing on words since the official name of South Viet-Nam is "The Republic of Viet-Nam"), giving it a "Provisional Revolutionary Government" recognized by fifteen Communist countries (including Hanoi, where the PRG is represented by Nguyen Phu Soai). As a consequence of this myth-creating attempt, every Communist capital is now burdened with two "embassies" from Viet-Nam, one representing the North and one the (Communist) South.

- Hanoi's insistence that there be "four parties" to the Paris Talks, two of which represent Hanoi and an unnamed (unnamable) capital of South Viet-Nam.

- Hanoi's latest acting out of this sick joke when, on March 5, 1971, Hanoi's National Assembly, Third Legislature, dutifully read out one fourth of its membership from the roll call as these 89 "southern deputies" were said to represent no one any longer in the scheme of things in North Viet-Nam.

Yet now, all of a sudden, one hears references to "Viet-Nam being one" and that "the Vietnamese cannot be said to aggress upon themselves." Which is one to believe? Hanoi's two-Vietnam image or this new one-Vietnam concept? The time is probably come that Hanoi be exposed for what it is, a sad schemer at the end of his ropes, who should not be allowed to deceive the world any longer.

2. The reality of socialist internationalism. For many years, Hanoi has pictured itself as the spearhead of "socialism" in Southeast Asia, the home of revolutionary struggles in Indochina. Based on this definition of its role, Hanoi has successfully appealed for international "socialist" solidarity, a major factor that helped Hanoi see through the worst years of bombing during 1965-68. The presence of Ho Chi Minh as a leader in Hanoi helped muster both Soviet and Chinese backing for he was one of the last surviving senior Bolsheviks, a man who had done more than his share for international communism during the 1920's and 1930's, acting as an agent of the Komintern and rising to a post in the Central Committee of that organization. (In October 1929, when the Komintern decided upon the creation of an Indochinese Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh--then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc--acted in this capacity, i.e. a Central Committee member of the Komintern, having the final say in practically every matter relating to the creation of the ICP. See Nhan Dan, January 5, 1970, for the full text of this "Top Secret" memorandum that detailed Ho Chi Minh's functions at the time.) Now that Ho is dead, there is no one in Hanoi with his stature to impose Hanoi's views onto the two competing Communist giants. This explains why the Soviet bloc, as distinct from the Chinese bloc, in the Communist world had to rally behind Le Duan and give him the prestige needed on the occasion of his 65th birthday (April 6, 1972)--a simple fact that reveals there is no love lost between the Soviet and the Chinese factions in Hanoi.

This matter of birthday greetings bears relating in some detail as it is indicative of quite a bit more than routine protocol. Regular protocol among Communist states usually calls for congratulatory messages from one top official to another, equivalent in rank, on the occasion of new official appointments. Thus, when a premier, for instance, is reelected or newly elected he would be greeted by his opposite number in a "socialist" sister republic. Rarely would he be greeted as a private person, on his birthday, unless he is Mao or Stalin or Ho Chi Minh when the two latter were still alive. For this reason, the birthday greetings sent to Le Duan must be seen as a personal homage and not as an honor owed him because of his capacity as First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party. He has been in this last post since 1960, yet this is the first time he has been so honored, and in the case of the Soviet Union, not just by Leonid Brezhnev--his counterpart--alone but also by Nikolai Podgorny and Alexei Kosygin who joined the First Secretary of the CPSU in presenting their greetings. (Moscow Tass International Service in English, April 6, 1972)

If the pattern of the Soviet greetings--the First Secretary joined by the State Chairman and the Premier--had been repeated in the case of all other Communist countries, there cannot be any doubt any longer as to the supreme ascendancy gained by Le Duan in the leadership struggle in North Viet-Nam. This would have solved the power vacuum left by the death of Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi. This, however, has not been the case:

- First, the Chinese did not breathe a word on the occasion.
- Second, the Soviet pattern has been followed to some extent in only one case. The East German party leader, Erich Honecker, was joined by Willi Stoph, Chairman of the GDR Council of Ministers, but not by the State Chairman, in his greetings to Le Duan. In the case of other East European countries, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland followed the normal practice of party leader to party leader only. Czechoslovakia is said to send greetings from the entire "Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee." (Prague CTK International Service in English, 7 April 1972) But no greetings apparently came from Albania, Peking's ally; Yugoslavia, an independent in the Communist world; and even Hungary. Outside Eastern Europe, Cuba's Castro did not send any greetings, but Kim Il-sung of North Korea did. No words were heard from Outer Mongolia.

The pattern of reporting on these greetings is also interesting:

- The Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Poland reported on these greetings in their international services in English. North Korea did the same.
- East Germany reported on them in its international service in German.
- But Romania and Bulgaria reported on them in their domestic services in Romanian and Bulgarian, respectively.
- China, Albania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Cuba and Mongolia remained silent.
- And strangely enough, even the North Vietnamese media do not breathe a word in this connection. No messages are printed in Nhan Dan, the official daily newspaper, or are broadcast on Radio Hanoi.

In conclusion, therefore, one should say that Le Duan's ascendancy in North Viet-Nam is less than complete. In the least, it appears that he had to tread carefully in his very home ground, Hanoi, for fear of antagonizing the Chinese and their faction in the Lao Dong Party. Thus, the Russian-inspired attempt to bolster Le Duan's prestige in the leadership conflict in Hanoi has in a way boomeranged, since the North Vietnamese themselves cannot learn of it even through their own

party-controlled media. The peculiar treatment given Le Duan's birthday, especially the contrast between the play-up by the Soviet and East European media and the peculiar silence affected by the Chinese bloc, shows how far Le Duan's prestige falls short of Ho Chi Minh's. It also reveals how deep the Sino-Soviet conflict can reach into the ranks of the Hanoi leadership. Not only is the "socialist internationalist solidarity" so much vaunted by Hanoi simply not there, the incident makes Hanoi's claim to charting its own independent course look less and less credible everyday.

J. Robert Moskin, Foreign Editor of Look Magazine, wrote in December 1970 after a visit to Hanoi that North Viet-Nam could go on forever based on this one fact: Whereas the United States was committed to full withdrawal from Viet-Nam, Hanoi could count on indefinite Soviet and Chinese help. (December 29, 1970 issue, page 21) While it is true that President Nixon's visit to Peking and Moscow has not brought about an abandonment of Hanoi by either one of the two Communist giants, it did achieve one basic purpose--to demonstrate in an irrefutable manner that Hanoi is not important enough to either Peking or Moscow for either one of these two capitals to go out on a limb for it. Thus, Hanoi's intransigence becomes an anachronism in a world where a Berlin and a SALT talks agreement become possible, where Bonn-Moscow and Bonn-Warsaw treaties could not only be envisioned but also signed and ratified.

That Hanoi itself has realized the severity of its plight--a situation for which it alone is responsible--can be seen in the shifting emphasis it now puts on the reasons for fighting on. No longer able to carry the banner for two revolutionary capitals which have chosen to make peace with the United States, Hanoi now finds only one rationale left, Ho Chi Minh's Testament. But how much longer can the Hanoi leadership expect the population of North Viet-Nam to be fired by the wishes of a dead man? Or will this wish fall on dead ears, just as the other wish expressed by Ho on his death-bed, that the Soviet Union and Red China get together for the sake of internationalist socialist solidarity?

3. Hanoi's independence. If there is anything close to a consensus opinion about the Viet-Nam Conflict, this surely must be that Hanoi shows an enviable independence in determining its own course of action. This contrasts rather sharply with the situation of many small countries in the world that are dependent on either the United States, Russia or Red China. Not only is Hanoi widely believed to be fiercely independent, it is also given credit in many quarters for a capacity to stay so indefinitely. Yet Hanoi's nervous reactions, amply demonstrated by roundabout commentaries published in its press, to the United States' overtures to its allies do not seem to confirm such a reading.

In fact, Hanoi's assumed independence is usually based on two stereotyped views of Viet-Nam, neither of which fits reality:

- One is that the war, as fought by the Communist side in Viet-Nam, is a guerilla war fought with sticks and rudimentary weaponry. While this may have been true in 1960, for a brief period, by 1967 the individual North Vietnamese soldier fighting in South Viet-Nam is only out-equipped by the Americans while he was as a rule better armed than his counterpart, the foot soldier in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Viet-Nam (ARVN). The Easter invasion saw the North Vietnamese regular divisions streaming in backed by tanks and artillery, missiles and rockets--in short, a whole array of modern weaponry that far outstrips the equipment avail-

able to ARVN. Thus, the view that prevails for a long time at the beginning of the war that the North Vietnamese can last forever because they need so little to carry on, certainly is no longer tenable. Hanoi's total dependence on Russian weaponry, ammunition, and fuel has now become a fact, just as several countries in the Middle East are totally dependent on Russian armaments. Thus, the Soviet Union could, if it so wishes, stop Hanoi's war of aggression on three neighboring countries tomorrow by simply denying its client the necessary war materials needed for carrying on. Hanoi is equally dependent on Mainland China for its food deficit, which over the years has grown to critical proportions.

- The other view is that Hanoi has only a very rudimentary economy to start with and therefore stands to lose but very little by having its industries reduced to ashes. Thus, it is under no compulsion to negotiate, having everything to lose by doing so. In actuality, the poorer the country is the more it is likely to feel any loss or damage incurred to its economy. It is untrue that Hanoi can look with equanimity at its economy's having to start from scratch once again at an indeterminate future date. It may be that the leaders in Hanoi--at least some--may take a kind of cocky pride at the vision of starting all over again, at little Hanoi daring the U.S. giant, but it is unlikely, most unlikely, that this opinion would be shared by the economists, by the engineers and technicians who get trained every year and subsequently find nothing to do, or by the population at large. True, in his Testament, Ho Chi Minh did forecast a Viet-Nam "ten times more beautiful" once the Americans are out of Viet-Nam, but he forgets to say who would help to make the country "ten times more beautiful." The Russians are not loath to remind the world at large that out of North Viet-Nam's 282 major enterprises, they have had a hand in building, redesigning, equipping, and financing some 220 of them. This, then, again augurs badly for Hanoi's economic independence.

A conclusion imposes itself at this stage: Neither in the running of the war or the running of the economy is Hanoi's independence in any way guaranteed.

4. The overstretched army. One of the key tenets of Hanoi's belief in its own invincibility has been that it possesses the formula of a "people's war" while its enemies are bound to flounder in such a war. A people's war, according to Hanoi, requires two elements:

- A willing populace, the "water" that would sustain the Communist "fishes."
- And a spearheading army (the "fishes").

The people's war is bound to win because the population, won over by arguments or by force, will bog down a large enemy force needed to keep it in control and therefore stretched wide over large territories. This in turn will facilitate the Communists' job as all they have to do is to put maximum pressure on one, two, or three weak links, tear up enough of the enemy's protection skein to sow terror in the enemy soldiers' minds and thereby win resounding psychological victories. These psychological victories, sometimes paid in extremely heavy exactions of human lives and war material are considered acceptable by the Communist leaders because they can eventually be translated, at the conference table, into political concessions by the enemy--as long as the threat of a repeat action remains credible.

Following the above scenario to the tiniest detail, the North Vietnamese went to Paris in anticipation of the Tet attacks of 1968, just as they went to Geneva in 1954 in anticipation of their action at Dien Bien Phu. Tet 1968, therefore, was meant by the Hanoi leadership to generate such a wave of defeatism that it would become politically impossible (not necessarily militarily) to reverse the trend

precipitated by more and more outspoken demands for a negotiated settlement. The demands that became loud and clear following the Tet actions were amplified by a very sensitive world press and the media: This was what forced a U.S. president to renounce seeking a second term. But if the Communists were successful in their political objective abroad, their actions turned into a total disaster at home in Viet-Nam. The population failed to respond and the Communist "fishes," finding no water, were exposed to annihilation. A great many North Vietnamese died in the process but worse still, the southern Communists--the elements native to the South--were entirely eliminated.

In launching this last offensive, the North Vietnamese have violated every rule in their book. For this time, they even do away with the myth of popular uprising, to which at least they pretended to have responded in 1968. In the present offensive, the population of provinces that lie in the path of the invaders drains itself out in the face of the enemy--an incontrovertible proof of where the people's minds and hearts lie, a fact that not even a hostile French newspaper like Le Monde could deny. Thus, the "people's war" has simply become inimical to the Communist "fishes" which this time happen to be the last North Vietnamese regulars. In other words, if the North Vietnamese are defeated this time they will have to call in foreign friends or put women and children into the war. The irony of history will have come full circle, with the South Vietnamese carrying out a true "people's war" and the North Vietnamese caught into an overextended battlefield, mired in a hopeless three-front struggle in Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and South Viet-Nam).



Soldiers of the 20th Regiment, ARVN, on operations near Kontum City.

Next page:
Enemy dead and captured weaponry
in the Kontum area (Military
Region II).



THE PUTTERING OFFENSIVE

The attacks came in the wee hours of March 30, 1972, when three fresh divisions of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) crossed the Demilitarized Zone in strength, backed by three artillery regiments and anti-aircraft units, one tank regiment involving up to 90 Russian-made medium T-54's, and several surface-to-air missile ranges. The thrust of this first attacking force was the province of Quang Tri, the northernmost province of South Viet-Nam.

Two weeks later, the Communists opened another front, this time in the Third Military Region of South Viet-Nam, as they came from across the Cambodian border to attack Loc Ninh in Binh Long province. The enemy divisions involved in this action include the 9th Division, the 7th Division and the 5th Division. These were also supported by 70 Russian-made tanks in their initial attacks.

Soon after, a third front was opened by the aggressor army in Kontum province in Military Region II. Here too, they were supported by an incredible amount of Russian-made tanks and military trucks which in their attacks on Tan Canh had their lights blazing in the night. "For a moment," an American who witnessed the attack commented, "it looked like the Los Angeles Freeway."

Background to an offensive

It soon became obvious that the North Vietnamese were trying to throw everything they had into this final battle--twelve or thirteen divisions out of a grand total of 14 divisions in their army, i.e. about 130,000 troops, backed by about twice that number of logistic support troops, adding to a grand total of some 350,000 people, and a sizable tank force estimated at 575-600 tanks--in order to obtain significant military objectives.

In this respect, we do not have to guess as to what these objectives are, for the simple reason that they were spelled out for our purpose in a December 1971 directive (Directive 42) of COSVN, the blueprint of the Easter Offensive. COSVN stands for Central Office for South Viet-Nam, the directing body of the North Vietnamese Communist Party in charge of the war theater in South Viet-Nam. Directive 42 reads: "The main theaters of war during this campaign will be the Government's Military Region III and the Mekong Delta, particularly the provinces of Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Binh Duong in Military Region III and My Tho and Ben Tre [corresponding to the Government of Viet-Nam's Dinh Tuong and Kien Hoa provinces respectively] in the Delta."

Timing-wise, "the campaign will have three phases," the Directive continues. "The preparatory phase is to be completed by the end of January. The action phase

will commence in early February, although the specific date is not yet firm, and may continue for one or two months. The final phase will consist of a review of our accomplishments during the action phase and a continuation of counterpacification efforts."

Thus, it is clear from Directive 42 that the offensive planned by Hanoi was meant to embarrass Washington and Peking, just before President Nixon's visit to Mainland China, and not--as it turned out to be--an attempt to put Moscow on the spot during the U.S. President's visit to this capital. Several commentators have emitted the opinion that Hanoi may have planned it that way, but this conclusion is certainly not supported by any document captured from the other side. Hanoi, it appears, is slightly less a master of its decisions than it is usually granted to it. Hanoi's failure to act in February may have been due to Chinese pressure or simply to logistic and communications difficulties in the South. In any case, it is unthinkable that the decision has been purposely delayed in order to put the Russians on the spot, using Russian weaponry to that end--for Moscow would never pardon Hanoi for such a foul play.

Evidence seems to accumulate pointing to a failure on the part of Hanoi to appreciate the weakness of its apparatus in the South. When the call for military action failed to materialize, not only in February but also by late March, Hanoi obviously became convinced that unless something was done before the cape of the Moscow Summit was past, the U.S. President will have convincingly demonstrated to the whole world the essentially and hopelessly isolated position of Hanoi--the only capital holding out for war against a background of worldwide detente. Hence, the decision to throw away all pretenses and the open invasion across the Demilitarized Zone--an action not envisioned in Directive 42.

Directive 42 calls for military action in five provinces in Military Region III and Military Region IV of South Viet-Nam, yet in only one such province--Binh Long where An Loc is located--did significant military action come to pass. The North Vietnamese divisions which were meant to deliver the final blow once military action around Saigon had strangled this city--much like the Indian army's role in the Bangla Desh affair--turned into the main, or only, forces battling with the Government forces. This total incapacity of Hanoi's southern elements has been stingingly attacked in the May 1972 COSVN Directive, a supplement to COSVN Directive 43 and a review of the situation: "Our [i.e. Vietcong] cadres have not fully grasped the decisiveness of the Offensive and Uprising. They have not been made to realize that this is the final and decisive stage... As a result of doubt and lack of confidence, certain echelons fear this offensive may fail as the 1968 Tet Offensive did."

Putting aside the indirect admission of failure at Tet 1968, which among other things costed Hanoi its infrastructure in the South, the mid-May directive tells us quite a bit about the extent of Hanoi's military disappointment:

- Pressed by the inability of its southern apparatus to act in time (i.e. in "early February") to prevent, or at least embarrass, the rapprochement between its "enemy" (the United States) and its main supporters (Peking and Moscow), Hanoi was forced to throw every caution to the wind by attacking South Viet-Nam frontally --a very costly political decision since it makes a farce of all previous attempts by Hanoi to project abroad the image of a struggling South Vietnamese population rebelling against the Government's "oppressive machinery."

- Once the decision had been reached to throw every caution to the wind, the Hanoi leadership must count on a lightning operation somewhat in the manner of the Bangla Desh action by India. To this end it committed everything it had in terms of tanks and trucks and surface-to-air missiles and antiaircraft batteries. Having started late, after the Peking summit, Hanoi had only one chance left to embarrass the United States and one of its two major allies: The pressure to win militarily and in a significant way, therefore, became irresistible.

- This commitment to victory on the part of Hanoi was so well communicated to its political tool in the South, the PRG, that the latter's representative in Paris, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, committed the biggest blunder of her life when she announced in the French capital that the PRG seat of government would be proclaimed in late April in An Loc. That this was no slip of the tongue is further confirmed by PRG leaflets distributed in mid-April in Binh Long province (where An Loc was located), promising that An Loc would be captured by April 20. Thus, the word was out obviously that the North Vietnamese would make at least that much stick. In other words, to take An Loc at all costs was the minimum objective of the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

The heroic battle of An Loc

This was not to be. For a simple reason: The North Vietnamese analysts may have been correct about any number of things, but they certainly made a gigantic mistake when they discounted South Vietnamese determination in resisting the NVA's onslaught.

To understand the battle of An Loc, it is necessary to compare it to another siege battle 18 years ago when the French troops battling the Viet Minh fought 55 savage days to lose the battle at Dien Bien Phu and eventually the war.

A comparison of forces and terrain would reveal the following differences and similarities between the earlier battle and An Loc:

- The French had 15,000 men defending Dien Bien Phu whereas at the peak of the battle, the ARVN had 8,000 troops defending An Loc.

- The attacking forces came to two divisions, plus a number of independent regiments, adding to about 30,000 troops in the case of Dien Bien Phu. In the case of An Loc, the attacking forces came to three divisions (9th, 5th, and 7th) as we have seen earlier--this also amounts to some 30,000 troops, not counting the civilian labor force and other blocking forces which in the case of both sieges probably numbers 10,000-15,000 men.

- At Dien Bien Phu, the French had a perimeter of defense 16 km by 9 km (Bernard Fall, Street Without Joy, Harrisburg, Pa: The Stackpole Co., 1967, page 317), but An Loc had a defense perimeter only one-tenth as large. In other words, if in the early stages of the siege there were points within Dien Bien Phu well beyond enemy artillery range, such has never been the case of An Loc.

- Dien Bien Phu had the disadvantage of being in a valley floor, subject to deadly artillery from the enemy bunkered in the surrounding hills. Though the terrain in An Loc is somewhat different, the city of An Loc itself is no less vulnerable as it is the only open terrain in the midst of a forest of impenetrable bamboo and rubber plants.

- The French had tanks at Dien Bien Phu whereas the Viet Minh had none. In the case of An Loc, exactly the reverse was true.

The above considerations would seem to dictate the tactics to be used against

An Loc: On the one hand, once the siege was closed all necessary measures should be taken to cut off the mini-city from its airstrip--just as in the case of Dien Bien Phu--and make it impossible for the embattled garrison to receive food or ammunition through any other way than the uncertain airdrops. Concurrently with this, everything possible should be engineered to block reinforcements on the ground--a job made easier for the besieging Communist troops by the thick forests through which ground reinforcements must necessarily make their way on Route 13. Once the city has been effectively cut off from all possible support from the outside, it would only be a matter of time before it would be reduced to rubble and starvation. This was such a sure-fire that it never occurred to the Communist commanders that determination on the part of ARVN could make a difference.

This contempt of the enemy affected by the Communist forces was their first tactical mistake. The first column of tanks entering An Loc rumbled in in broad daylight, some even had their turret hoods open as if they were coming into a ghost town. Absolutely flabbergasted at the audacity (or stupidity) of the enemy tank crews, the ARVN gunners did not react until they were well within range a few hundred yards away. Only then did the ARVN antitank rockets open up, resulting in a massacre. Seven of the 11-tank lead column went dead on the spot while four managed to escape only a few blocks away. They were soon caught up with by the ARVN troops and destroyed.

The second tactical mistake committed by the enemy was its erroneous belief that they alone possessed the secret of entrenched warfare. Convinced that once the city has been softened up enough by dint of artillery fire, the resultant unnerving effect and lack of food and sleep on the ARVN troops garrisoning in An Loc would turn them into an easily disbanded army, the Communists tried to overrun the ARVN positions on several occasions, but each time they were turned back with heavy losses. After a few such encounters, the ARVN troops in town had become expert city fighters. By then, the Communists have lost their chance to take over the city.

Another little known fact, but nonetheless true, was that those among the population that stayed in An Loc, either because they were unwilling to leave their ancestral grounds or because they were unable to make away before the siege was closed around the city, never for a moment wavered in their faith in the ARVN. Not only did they share their homemade shelters with the troops--that was the only reason why the rain of enemy artillery never succeeded in wiping out the troops garrisoned within the city--not a single time did they betray the Government forces and join the enemy. The troops reciprocated by whatever little they had with them, sharing their dried rice, salt and water with the population.

And so, it turned out that 70,000 rounds of enemy artillery--over three times the amount that poured into Dien Bien Phu, on an area of about one-tenth the size of the earlier battle--were unable to humble the garrison of An Loc, which towards the end of May had only 5,000 troops left. These five thousand heroes and their dead comrades made their name in history, not--as some malicious commentators seem to imply--because they had nowhere else to go (if this makes sense, all great defensive battles in the history of the world, Stalingrad included, could equally be dismissed as banalities), but simply because they refused to let brute force triumph over humanity. In making themselves the keepers of Vietnamese morality and independence, the defenders of An Loc have frustrated the main enemy scheme in the current

offensive and thereby earned the eternal gratitude of the Vietnamese people.

General Vanuxem, former Commander of the French Mobile Units in Indochina, may have waxed a tiny bit too lyrical when he wrote in Carrefour recently (excerpts reprinted in Le Monde): "An Loc should have fallen at the first impact. Two months later, An Loc still stands. Everything being equal, with the exception of Stalingrad only, there is simply no equivalent feat in the military history of the contemporary world. An Loc has become a symbol. Under the firestorms, An Loc still stands by the simple heroism of the Vietnamese... An Loc stands as a symbol of our world, of our liberty, of our honor, and of our future." But at least his informed opinion should weigh more heavily than most of the attempts by a hostile press to gainsay the achievements of ARVN at An Loc. For all the arguments proffered to explain away the Communist failure to take An Loc, such as air power making the difference, the presence of advisors, the Communists making mistakes or their retreating "of their own will" (sic), etc. will never change an iota to this basic truth of war, that is, the foot soldiers are the ones to hold and occupy a territory. To them, therefore, belong the honor and the glory of a successful defense, and the more grueling the stand the greater the glory.

The why's of Communist failure

Over two months after the start of their offensive, what do the North Vietnamese have to show for their maximum effort in the war? Besides an uncertain hold over Quang Tri and three districts in Binh Dinh province, they are stalled on every battlefield, whether it is Hue, Kontum, or An Loc. This certainly is very little to show for an expenditure of some 20,000 dead and maybe twice that amount of wounded, for the destruction of some 400 tanks and the systematic crippling of North Vietnam's war-making capabilities.

Even the enemy command seems to agree with this gloomy assessment of the Communist forces' situation in Viet-Nam. The May directive of COSVN, for instance, lists the following shortcomings on the Communist side:

- Because they fail to "realize that this is the final and decisive stage" and thus entertain "doubts and lack confidence" the various VC echelons "stood at a standstill, listening and procrastinating."
- "They feared counterattacks by ARVN."
- "They doubted their ability to administer liberated areas."
- "They overestimated GVN capabilities and underestimated those of the Revolution."
- "Military planning, reconnaissance and preparations for attacks against primary and secondary target areas have been inadequate. Thus, when the offensive began, certain echelons were totally unprepared, and floundered in their timing and selection of target priorities."
- "Timeliness and inaccuracy of reporting have also contributed to our [VC/NVA] shortcomings."

With the enemy being so candid in their high-level internal communications, need we add anything more to this reading?

Prospects for the future

If that was all that the North Vietnamese could have achieved with their max-

imum effort, then the prospects necessarily look bleak. It is true that the significance of the Easter Offensive was not to be measured by military achievements or failures alone. COSVN Directive 42, drawn up in early December 1971, for instance, specified five provinces in Military Region III and the Mekong Delta that were supposed to bear the brunt of enemy attacks. "By drawing the bulk of Government forces to these provinces, the other provinces will be left vulnerable to counterpacification attacks": Thus, it might even be said that the main thrust of the offensive was the pacification program of the Government and not necessarily permanent military gains. Yet, it is no less obvious that the "counterpacification attacks" of the enemy in "the other provinces" depend to a large measure upon at least temporary military gains in the five provinces specified--Tay Ninh, Binh Long, Binh Duong, My Tho [Dinh Tuong] and Ben Tre [Kien Hoa]. Only maximum military pressure upon these five provinces could, realistically speaking, "draw the bulk of Government forces" to the extent of rendering all other provinces vulnerable to "counterpacification" actions. As it turned out, maximum military pressure was successfully applied in only one province, Binh Long, drawing a certain amount of Government troops but not to the extent of leaving all other provinces vulnerable.

And the failure of the Communist troops to take An Loc (in the one province in Military Regions III and IV that saw significant large-scale military action) cannot but serve to dampen enthusiasm among the Vietcong troops in the South. Their conservatism and deadly fear of failure can only be further strengthened by the disappointing Communist action facing An Loc. For they realize full well that whatever gains their side had in the northernmost part of the country is entirely dependent upon the NVA, an element that will not necessarily be there in case the Government forces show up. They have no interest in repeating 1968 by surfacing now.

The mid-May directive supplement to COSVN 43 dealt with every kind of "shortcomings":

1) Military shortcomings: Scattered forces unable to mass and make significant gains, with the exception of only one province (Binh Dinh). VC/NVA attacks have been well coordinated, but resulted only "in killing a small number of enemy troops and capturing a few targets."

2) Political shortcomings: "The speed of the development of the political offensive has been excessively slow. The city struggle movement... has been paralyzed." "VC cadres responsible for the administration of 'liberated' areas did not know what to do. Instead of consolidating the areas against possible Government counterattacks, these unprepared cadres wasted valuable time in fumbling attempts to ascertain the aspirations of the people. For this reason, these cadres not only failed to expand the liberated areas, but also... allowed the Government to retake the areas afterwards."

3) Troop proselyting shortcomings: "Little has been achieved in successfully proselyting [disbanded Government] troops, and conscription of youths and upgrading of troops by the Government continues."

In such a situation, it is not only apparent that the military requirement of a "broader and larger" May 1972 phase, as stipulated in the directive, is not a feasible project. The other counterpacification requirement, that "two-thirds of the countryside be liberated prior to the end of June 1972," is clearly and distinctly an empty exercise in day-dreaming that should not overly retain our attention.



General Le Van Hung, commander of the defense force in An Loc, the undisputed hero of the siege





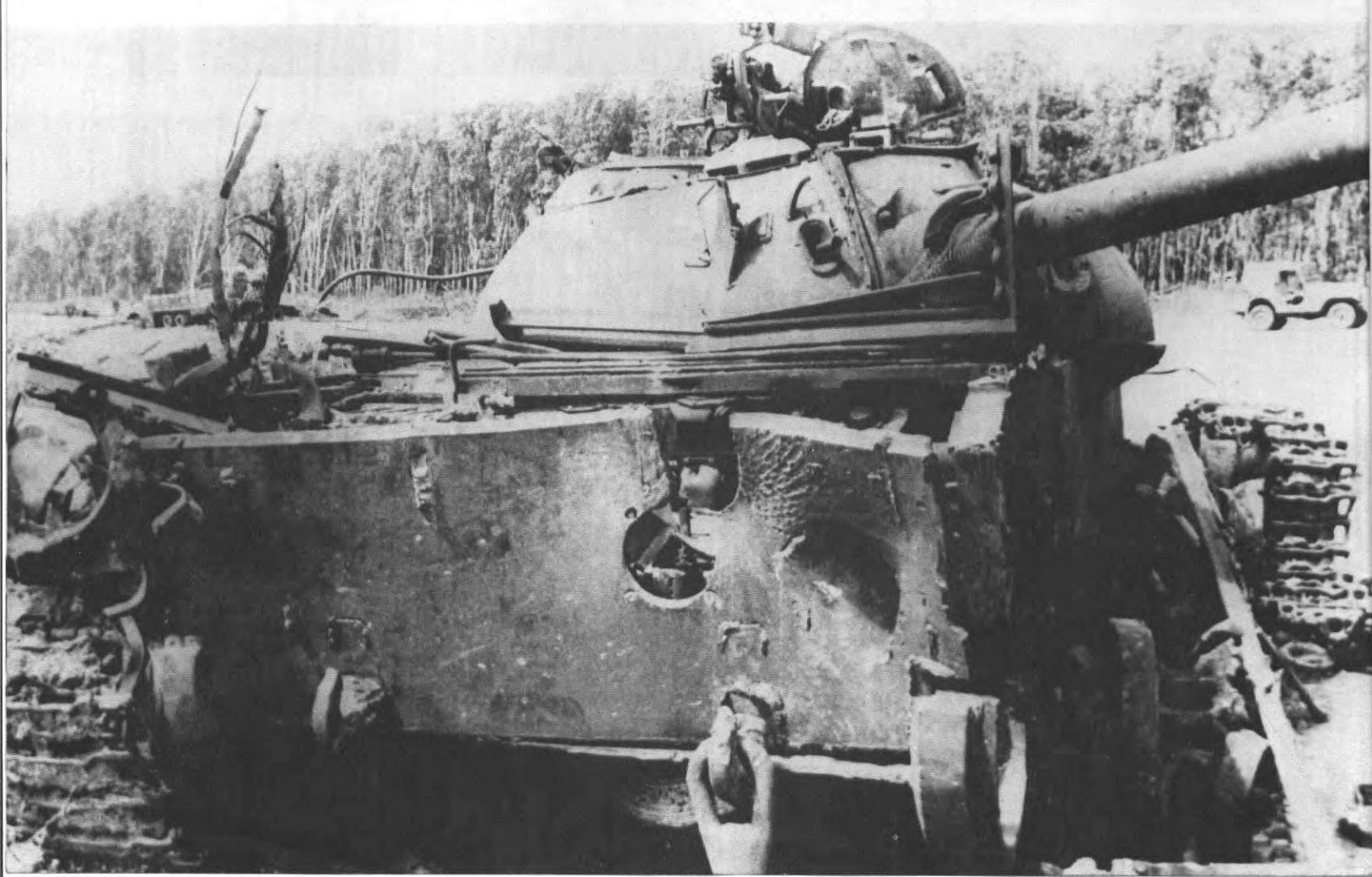
Preparing a nasty surprise for the enemy: Shown are South Vietnamese being given quick firing practice lessons in the use of antitank rockets. The soldiers were so happy with this that "tank hunting" became the most popular game in town
(See the next three pages)

Opposite:

"Digging in" is the name of the game. It was such digging in that eventually saved the garrison from total annihilation by the enemy's incoming shells. This also helped repel the enemy attempts to overrun the town.









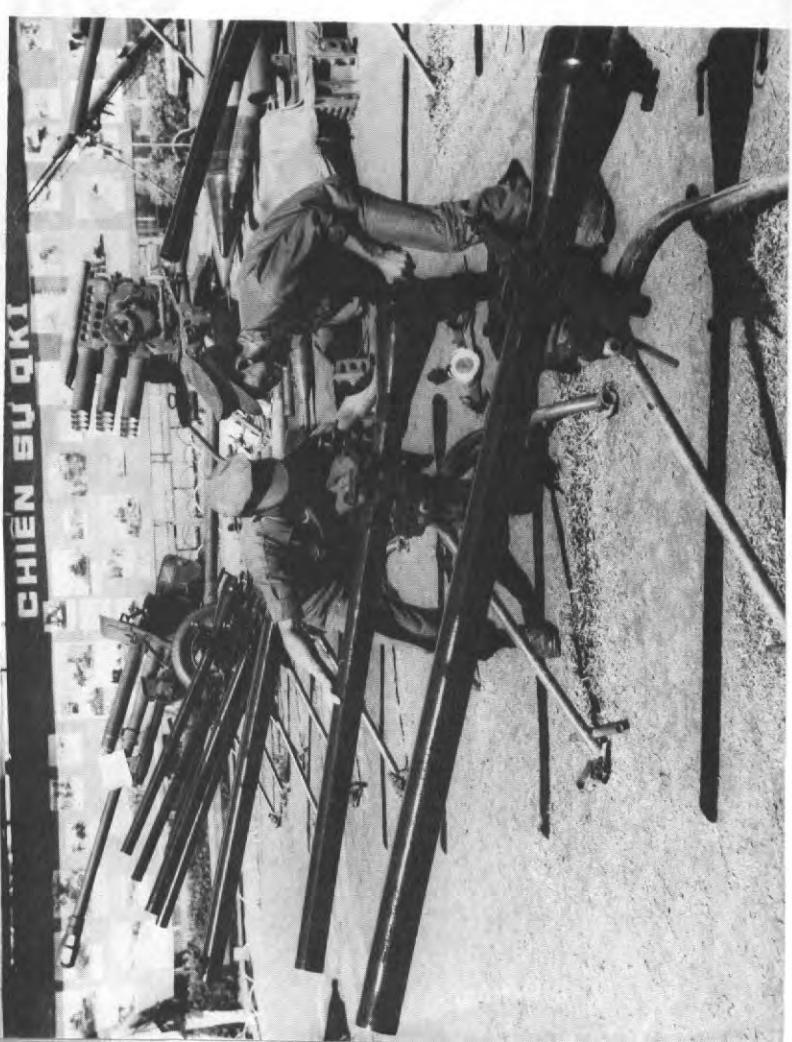
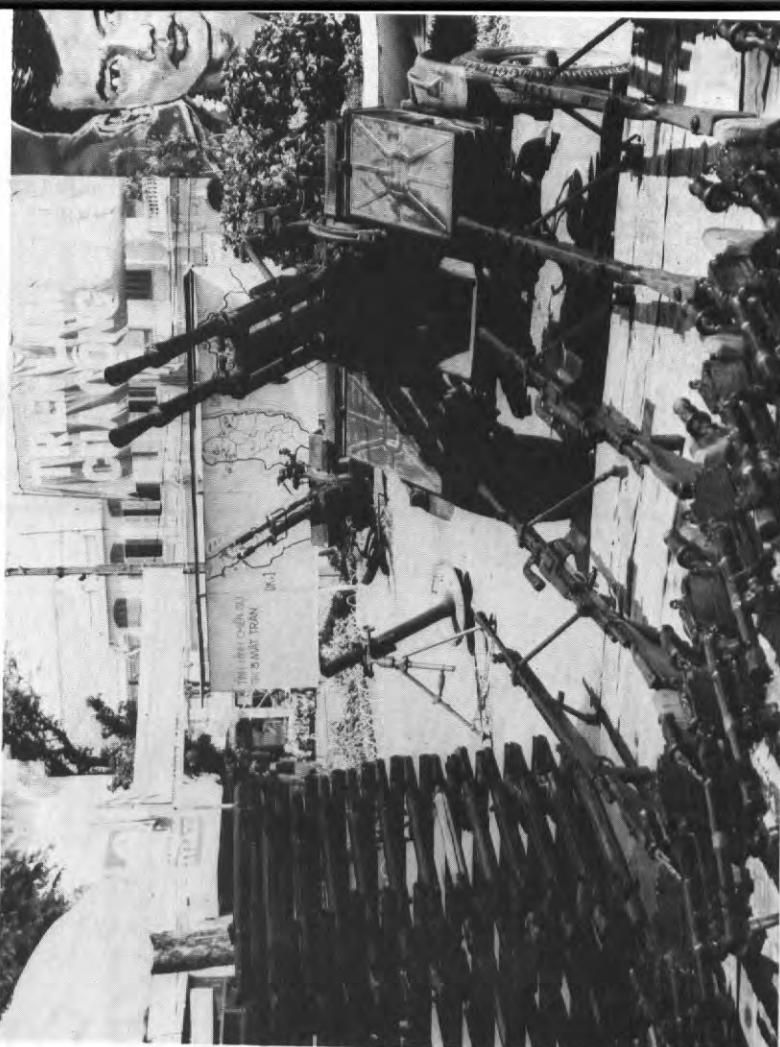
Refugees generated by the An Loc fighting.





Enemy dead and captured in the An Loc fighting. Opposite: Captured Communist weaponry





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