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## The New Vietnam

The date was April 30, 1975. The gates of Saigon's presidential palace had been left ajar, but the first North Vietnamese tank to arrive smashed through the wrought-iron fence nonetheless, as if dealing a final crushing blow to an independent South Vietnam. Four other T54 tanks quickly followed. Armored personnel carriers and pith-helmeted troops in green uniforms swarmed over the grounds; one squad of them bundled South Vietnam's president of three days, General Duong Van Minh, into a jeep and sped away. Just after noon the flag of the Provisional Revolutionary Government arose over the palace, and the capital's radio station proclaimed, "Saigon has been totally liberated." The PRG announced that Saigon was henceforth to be called Ho Chi Minh City.

At their headquarters in Ben Cat, forty kilometers north of Saigon, senior Politburo members Le Duc Tho and Pham Hung and General Van Tien Dung, architect of the final offensive, jumped

about like schoolboys, embracing each other and their aides, cheering and carrying each other around piggy-back. They also wept. "Our generation had known many victorious mornings," Dung later wrote, "but there had been no morning so fresh and beautiful, so radiant, so clear and cool, so sweet-scented as this morning of total victory."

Victory brought with it responsibilities of occupation and administration, tasks for which the North Vietnamese had done little preparation. At the start of "Campaign 275," a planned two-year offensive, Hanoi had anticipated significant battlefield gains to be followed by a military stalemate in the rainy season and further negotiations. South Vietnam's collapse had come quickly and unexpectedly, and as soon as the jubilant victors caught their breath, they cast a look ahead. As Dung wrote:

Le Duc Tho, Pham Hung, and I leaned on our chairs looking at the map of Ho Chi Minh City spread out on the table. We thought of the welter of jobs ahead. Were the electricity and water in Saigon still working? Saigon's army of nearly 1 million had disbanded on the spot. How should we deal with them? What could we do to help the hungry and find ways for the millions of unemployed to make a living? Should we ask the center to send in supplies right away to keep the factories alive? How could we quickly build up a revolutionary administration at the grassroots level? What policy should we take toward the bourgeoisie? And how could we carry the South on to socialism along with the whole country? The conclusion of this struggle was the opening of another, no less complex and filled with hardship.

An equal degree of uncertainty reigned in the streets of Saigon, where, in the view of a French diplomat, a third of the people greeted the Communists with enthusiasm, a third with indifference, and a third with fear. Along with the rest of the world, the South Vietnamese had heard that upon taking Phnom Penh two weeks earlier, the Communist Khmer Rouge had proceeded with an unprecedented and brutal evacuation of the teeming Cambodian capital. Phnom Penh radio had later announced the beheadings of the leading "traitors." The frightening retributions in Cambodia, combined with dire warnings of a blood bath in the event of a Communist victory in Vietnam, raised frenzied fears among the Saigonese who had served the Americans or the South Vietnamese government.

More than 130,000 Vietnamese had fled in the chaotic final days of the Republic. Now, tens of thousands of people jammed the docks in Saigon Harbor, futilely trying to buy their way aboard the few remaining small craft that might take them out to the U.S. fleet standing offshore. A Communist tank crew, spotting one of the last boats to leave the harbor, lowered its cannon and fired a round across the ship's bow, turning the vessel back. South Vietnamese

soldiers seeking anonymity peeled off their uniforms and scurried away in their underwear looking for civilian clothes. One officer from a Saigon family hurried home and burned his uniform, then searched out photographs that showed him as a soldier and dropped them into the flames.

Thousands of people looted the vacated American embassy, carrying off everything from plumbing fixtures (even the kitchen sink) to a document shredder. (What the Americans had failed to destroy were computer tapes containing the names of most U.S. and Vietnamese government employees, intelligence agents, double agents, and Communist defectors. The Americans also left behind computers and trained Vietnamese technicians to extract the information, allowing the Communists to identify and isolate former opponents.) Communist cadres who had lived double lives in Saigon now began to surface. Ky Nhan, a free-lance photographer occasionally employed by the Associated Press, arrived at the agency's office with two North Vietnamese soldiers and told bureau chief George Esper, "I guarantee the safety of everybody here." Nhan admitted to being a "revolutionary" for ten years and explained, "My job in the Vietcong was liaison with the international press."

By midafternoon on April 30, perhaps 2,000 soldiers filled the shady square in front of the presidential palace, and long convoys of Russian-made Molotova trucks carrying North Vietnamese regulars poured into the city past buildings festooned with white flags. The soldiers chatted with people on the streets, while in some cases their officers toured nearby hotels asking for accommodations. Communist soldiers carrying loudspeakers circulated in the streets, calling "Do not worry. You will be well treated."

The state radio ordered every home owner to display on his house the flag of the National Liberation Front along with that of North Vietnam, and tailor shops started a brisk business stitching and selling those flags. The radio also ordered every home to display prominently a portrait of Ho Chi Minh. For the Communists, the victory over South Vietnam had come at an appropriate time, for the following day was May 1, marking the international celebration of labor and communism.

North Vietnam's capital of Hanoi rocked with jubilation at the news from the South. Everyone in the city, it seemed, poured into the streets, setting off firecrackers, singing, and cheering. Spring blossoms from Hanoi's abundant peach and cherry trees added color and fragrance to the impromptu celebration. "It was as if a springtime of peace had suddenly replaced all the hardship and sorrow" wrote Truong Nhu Tang, the PRG minister of justice then

present in Hanoi, who with his colleagues had followed the war's final days in a round-the-clock radio vigil. "We were celebrating the advent of a new world."

## Deliverance into a debate

Rejoicing over the Communist victories in Indochina marked May Day celebrations throughout the world. Peking, Moscow, and Havana sent congratulations for what Fidel Castro called "one of humanity's greatest feats," and demonstrations also took place in capitalist countries such as West Germany, where 30,000 people gathered in West Berlin's John F. Kennedy Square, chanting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh" and "The first of May and Vietnam is free."

On a Sunday ten days later in New York, some 50,000 veterans of the antiwar movement flocked to Central Park for a daylong carnival of songs by Peter Yarrow, Paul Simon, and Phil Ochs and speeches by Representatives Elizabeth Holtzman and Bella Abzug. People hugged each other in the spring sunshine and reminisced about the years of protest. "There's lots of lumps in lots of throats," a participant named Pamela Chapman said to a reporter. "It's unbelievable . . . the war is over."

But for most Americans the events of April 30 were an anticlimax. They had made a separate, emotional peace with Vietnam more than two years earlier when the United States signed the Paris peace accords, withdrew the last U.S. soldiers, and repatriated prisoners of war. For all but a handful of Americans who remained, the war had ended in 1973; the reports of Hanoi's final offensive now came from distant, hazily remembered battlefields. President Gerald R. Ford set the tone for the American reaction when he said, as soon as the last Americans had left Saigon, that the fall of South Vietnam "closes a chapter on the American experience." Although Ford did not use the word "defeat," commentators introduced it as self-evident. In the *Washington Post*, William Greider posed "the monumental question which six American Presidents tried to duck: How would the American voters respond to defeat?"

The answer was, rather wearily. Perhaps this was because few targets remained against which to direct anger. The policymakers who had brought the United States into the war had already been turned out of office, and of their successors, the only prominent holdover was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. His superior, President Richard Nixon, had resigned only eight months prior to the fall of Saigon because of Watergate.

While Hanoi's victory put an end to the Republic of South Vietnam's twenty years of existence, the United States had only days before celebrated the 200th anniversary of the April 19, 1775, battles at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, that touched off the American Revolution. The years 1975 and 1976 were to see countless displays of American pride and nostalgia for an epoch

when Americans had doubtlessly been in the right in throwing off an oppressor. Some people affected revolutionary war themes in comments to the media. "What happened is what happened to us 200 years ago: a revolution for independence," said actress Jane Fonda, who was to remain a symbolic *bête noire* of conservatives and veterans for her pro-Communist, antiwar activism. "To say Saigon has 'fallen' is to say that the 13 colonies 'fell' two centuries ago." Daniel Ellsberg, the ex-marine and government official who had pilfered and made public the Pentagon Papers, reacted similarly. "It was the will of the American people, expressed to Congress, that ended this war now," he said, referring to the Congressional denial of President Ford's request for last-minute emergency aid to Saigon. "That's the best possible celebration of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution that I can imagine."

Others, however, interpreted that Congressional inaction as shameful abandonment of an ally. Speaking at Georgia Tech, former California Governor Ronald Reagan, seen as a rival to President Ford for the 1976 Republican nomination, won a standing ovation when he blamed "the most irresponsible Congress in our history" for the loss of South Vietnam, adding that members of Congress now had "blood on their hands." President Ford found an opportunity four days later to reassure America's allies. At a May 4 ceremony to commission the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Nimitz* at Norfolk, Virginia, Ford said, "This great ship is visible evidence of our commitment to friends and allies and our capability to maintain those commitments." The evacuation of Americans and South Vietnamese from Saigon, said Ford, demonstrated the "readiness and flexibility" of aircraft carriers "in the successful execution of national policy." Five U.S. aircraft carriers had participated in the evacuation of Saigon.

In the wake of those chaotic final days, the press seemed to be caught in unusually tongue-tied ambiguity, pleased by the end of the war yet incapable certainly of saluting the Communists on their victory. In its lead editorial the *Washington Post* forgave the country its trespasses: "The fundamental 'lesson' of Vietnam surely is not that we as a people are intrinsically bad but rather that we are capable of error—and on a gigantic scale. . . . The country will fare better if it regards what has finally happened in Vietnam as bearing, for Americans, the potential for deliverance as well as disaster." The *New York Times* recognized that an end to the war did not mean an end to the national debate over Vietnam. Its editorial predicted:

Untangling the meaning of the rapid events that have flashed past the American and South Vietnamese people these last few days will be an arduous task for the historians. Too many questions are unanswered in the heat of defeat; too many others will be deliberately obscured in the days—and years—to come, for the protection of reputations and ideals that will not easily be given up.

## Establishing order

In the days following the fall of South Vietnam, Saigon was like a body without a head. The Communists had brought with them no uniformed police or military police, and a mild form of anarchy reigned, as the normal functions of the city packed with 3.5 million people came to a halt. Garbage had not been collected for two weeks prior to the end and was piled up around the city. "Saigon used to be known as the Pearl of the Orient," said one official. "What we found was one great heap of garbage."

By the count of the new government, Saigon contained 130,000 drug addicts, perhaps 200,000 prostitutes and bar girls, and an equal number of thieves, pickpockets, and orphans. During the last years of the war, thousands of peasants had flocked to the cities to flee the ravages of war, and as many as 8 million Vietnamese—one-third the population of essentially rural South Vietnam—were living in cities. In addition, as many as 1 million members of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF)—comprising the armed services, Regional Forces, and national police—as well as the entire civil government of South Vietnam were now unemployed.

Thieves came out in force. Prison guards had walked off the job, and as many as 7,000 Saigon convicts broke out of jail and helped themselves to weapons abandoned by ARVN soldiers. The thieves often worked in pairs on motor scooters, snatching money or goods and then weaving their way through thick traffic. According to one official, the troops developed a technique when a theft occurred of firing a warning shot in the air to stop traffic. Pedestrians had to lie down on the sidewalks. The thieves escaping on their motor scooters were thus isolated and arrested. The crime wave was so bad that in order to discourage other thieves the Communists publicly executed several criminals after hasty "People's Court" sessions.

Despite such draconian incidents, the Party leadership imposed no martial law and, in fact, moved somewhat slowly to restore order without alarming a public that had been primed to expect a wholesale slaughter of anti-Communists. Within a week, a daily newspaper appeared in two languages—Vietnamese and Chinese—to alert Saigonese to developments. One of the earliest announcements was that the regime would make no physical retaliation against people who had served the Saigon administration. Another came when the North Vietnamese dong began to be traded on the black market, in expectation that the dong would soon become the currency of the South. The authorities quickly announced that South Vietnamese piasters remained the only legal tender in the South. Still, the people realized that the piaster would soon be worthless.

Banks were closed in May and remained so until June, and then a withdrawal limit of the equivalent of \$50 per family member was imposed so that only families that had

mistrusted banks and hoarded piasters or, even better, gold, had much money to buy food. (A currency conversion in September established a new South Vietnamese dong—distinguished from the northern dong—convertible at a rate of 500 piasters for one new dong. The conversion and the relative scarcity of the new dong had the practical effect of hiking—some said by three times—the cost of living.) The government called on merchants to open their shops and even guaranteed their profits. But the greatest activity was taking place at the expanding free markets.

Southerners short of cash, or those wishing to look less prosperous to the Communist victors, took their possessions, which they called "dry food," to the sidewalk flea markets. The markets offered everything from gasoline to refrigerators to ball-point pens. After the revolution, one Saigonese later wrote, "such worthless bric-a-brac as a ream of paper used only on one side, an old magazine, or a few rusty bolts would be sold for the equivalent of a worker's salary for one day." Women discarded their Western-style clothes and cosmetics, and men dug out their old clothes. People also threw away books and music of the bourgeois culture, which the new regime condemned as "false music" and "false culture" of the "false authorities." The regime substituted "revolutionary music," martial tunes played over and over on radio and television networks, in restaurants, and at public functions.

## PRG edged aside

As the revelry and celebration receded in the streets of Hanoi after the surrender of South Vietnam, PRG Justice Minister Truong Nhu Tang and his colleagues prepared for an immediate, and triumphant, return to the South after fourteen years of revolution. But their enthusiasm turned to impatience when their departure was blocked by Politburo members. The situation in the South remained unclear, they said, and the PRG leaders should not return until security had been assured. Yet Hanoi dispatched its own cadres to the South to aid in restoring order and establishing government. As he sent them off, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong sounded a warning that was to resonate for years, urging them to "strictly maintain the morality of revolutionaries and of the working class" and to beware in the dissolute South of material temptations that he characterized as "poison pills encased in sugar."

The Provisional Revolutionary Government, founded in the South in June 1969 as the political arm of the National Liberation Front, and made up of South Vietnamese Communists and some non-Communists who had cast their lot with the North, appeared to step into the vacuum after the fall of Saigon. On Liberation Day, Dinh Ba Thi, its spokesman in Paris, where the PRG had participated as one of four parties to the peace talks, saluted the People's Liber-

ation Armed Forces (the Vietcong) who, "supported and staunchly helped by their brothers in the North, [had] brought the uprising and attacks" against South Vietnam to a successful end. Thi emphasized that the PRG's policy of "union and national concord" was aimed at reconciling "hatred and divisions and offering a place and a role to all inhabitants irrespective of their past."

Indeed the PRG's all-encompassing twelve-point "Action Program," promulgated at the birth of the PRG in 1969, promised pardons and "equal treatment" to Saigon's soldiers and civil servants who "are now repentant and sincerely return to the people." The program also guaranteed elections "to build a truly democratic and free republican regime," freedom of thought, speech, and the press, and a neutralist foreign policy. As for North Vietnam, the PRG, once in power, intended first to reestablish normal relations and then move toward peaceful reunification. The program stated: "The unification of the country will be achieved step by step through peaceful methods and on the basis of discussions and agreement between both zones, without coercion by either side." From inception the PRG had spoken for the South and was, as Hanoi termed it, "the sole genuine representative of the Southern people."

But the reality unfolding was starkly different from the idealism of the Action Program. On May 3, Saigon radio, citing the authority of the PRG, announced formation of a Military Management Committee to take charge of the Saigon region. Its head was Colonel General Tran Van Tra, PRG defense minister and a member of the North's ruling Lao Dong party Central Committee who had served as military commander of COSVN, Hanoi's political and military headquarters in the South. None of the other ten members of the Military Management Committee were figures in the PRG. Tra's deputy, Vo Van Kiet, was a southerner but a Lao Dong Central Committee member who was to become a Politburo member. (His wife and children had been killed by a U.S. B-52 raid as they traveled to visit him in his jungle headquarters.) The absence of PRG members, like Hanoi's stalling the return of PRG officials, signaled North Vietnam's intention to control events in the South.

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### **"Throw away the peel"**

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That intention became clear to Truong Nhu Tang on May 15. Two days earlier, Tang and his colleagues had finally won permission to return to the South, and they flew home

to a jubilant welcome, replete with cheering crowds and banners. The celebrations culminated in a May 15 "Victory Day" ceremony, which drew half a million people to Independence Palace Square. Dignitaries from Hanoi, such as Le Duc Tho and Van Tien Dung, and PRG leaders, including President Huynh Tan Phat and Nguyen Huu Tho, presided over the parades from the reviewing stand.

The civilians came first. Groups such as students, laborers, and Catholics who had worked for the revolution paraded past, carrying banners and portraits of Ho Chi Minh and two flags—those of North Vietnam and the South's Provisional Revolutionary Government. Then came the People's Army of Vietnam, victors over South Vietnam's army in the fifty-five-day final offensive. The soldiers wore crisp uniforms and new pith helmets, and, in the din created by marching bands and air force planes that passed overhead, PAVN presented an impressive array of conventional military might—infantry units, tanks, artillery and antiaircraft batteries, Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles. Tang and his PRG colleagues waited impatiently for the Vietcong, which during the war had expanded from peasant guerrilla groups to Main Force divisions. As the war progressed, Vietcong units, ground down in battle, had been increasingly filled out by northern soldiers, yet they had maintained their identities as NLF units.

At last the Vietcong appeared, several ragged companies trailing the northerners, and for their standard they carried North Vietnam's flag—a yellow star on a red background. The PRG flag—red and blue with a yellow star—was nowhere in evidence. A shocked Tang turned to General Van Tien Dung, standing next to him on the dais. "Where are the famous First, Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Divisions?" Tang asked the chief of staff and Politburo member. "The army has already been unified," Dung coldly answered, his lip, Tang reported, curling in a slight smile. A bitter Tang later reflected:

At that moment I began to understand my fate and that of the NLF. In Vietnam we often said "Take the juice of the lemon and throw away the peel." On that day the years of Communist promises and assurances revealed themselves for the propaganda they were. Victory day celebrated no victory for the NLF, or for the South. . . .

The North Vietnamese Communists had engaged in a deliberate deception to achieve what had been their true goal from the start, the destruction of South Vietnam as a political or social entity in any way separate from the North.

But rather than seizing power outright as conquerors, the northerners insinuated themselves into the structure of the new government, taking over gradually. Cadres from the North continued to arrive in the South to assume political and administrative tasks. In many cases they joined ministries of the PRG, took more and more responsibility, and opened direct pipelines to their northern counterparts. Tang remarked on "the emerging arrogance and disdain

of our Party staff cadres—almost as if they believed they were the conquerors and we the vanquished." Top PRG leaders were even assigned northerners to serve as "bodyguards"; in effect, they were security guards. Disputes between the northern cadres and PRG ministers were often settled by northern officials acting as arbiters; they naturally overruled the PRG.

Some ministers slowly relinquished their functions, simply failing to show up for work that became increasingly frustrating and, ultimately, meaningless. Health Minister Dr. Duong Quynh Hoa, a jungle resident since 1968 who had given premature birth while fleeing a 1970 ARVN attack on PRG headquarters, walked out of her ministry in disgust. "Let the Northern cadres make the wind and the weather," she said. The voice of the "sole genuine representative of the Southern people" was effectively being stifled.

Throughout 1975 and into 1976 the PRG remained in name the government of South Vietnam, but the accent was on "provisional." Key members conducted themselves as leaders of an emerging nation and seemed intent on putting the PRG Action Program into practice. PRG President Huynh Tan Phat was known as the president of South Vietnam. Foreign Minister Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, prominent from her visible role in the Paris peace talks, courted foreign countries on behalf of the PRG. South Vietnam even sought individual membership in the United Nations, an application soon to be denied. Yet privately some of these leaders faithfully hewed to the Party line. According to Tang, Phat and NLF President Tho began to expound the North's program of forced reunification of North and South and rapid socialization of South Vietnam.

The question of formal reunification posed political problems. Hanoi had to make it seem as if reunification was the choice of the Vietnamese people, freely arrived at after negotiations and elections, the approach advocated and long fought for by the PRG. To do otherwise risked isolating Hanoi from whatever non-Communist international support it had tenuously won. The PRG had to be maintained as at least the façade of a legitimate government.

In a real sense, the PRG had never been more than that. In a 1978 interview, North Vietnam historian and publicist Nguyen Khac Vien provided an epitaph for the PRG that addressed the naiveté of its members as well as Hanoi's original intentions, so perfectly concealed during the war and so effectively implemented afterward. "The PRG was always simply a team emanating from the government of [North] Vietnam," Vien said. "If for a long time we pretended otherwise, that's because in war one doesn't have to show all his cards."

As its first action in remaking southern society, the Military Management Committee moved to isolate any potential resistance to the new regime. The committee's Order Number One promulgated early in May required all who

had served in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to register throughout the month and to turn in any weapons. The soldiers were destined for reeducation, a process of "productive labor" and "political study" that the Communist leaders viewed as a form of rehabilitation. While confined, people forfeited their rights as citizens until deemed ready to return to society. The magnitude of the program was staggering: By Hanoi's count, 1.3 million people who had served military or political functions in the South Vietnamese government required reeducation. Overall the regime believed some 6.5 million South Vietnamese—the typical family had five members—had been compromised by their service or relationship to someone who had served.

Reeducation camps had existed in North Vietnam since 1961 as a means of dealing with "counter-revolutionary elements" and "professional scoundrels." A writer named Nguyen Ngoc Giao explained in the army newspaper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, "Reeducation is a meticulous and long-range process. Management must be tight, continuous, comprehensive, and specific. We must manage each person. We must manage their thoughts and actions, words and deeds, philosophy of life and ways of livelihood and travel. . . . We must closely combine management and education with interrogation." As to the management of thought, the newspaper *Saigon Giai Phong* published this definition on June 13: "Thought reform is a process enabling the mind to part with what is bad and to assimilate what is good."

Noncommissioned officers and privates—with the significant exception of those who had served in intelligence or in the Marine, Airborne, or Ranger corps—along with rank-and-file workers of the South Vietnamese govern-

ment, underwent a three-day period of "reform study" from June 11 to 13, going home each night. The leniency accorded these minor participants in the military or political prosecution of the war created a positive impression for those higher officials whose turn was to come.

Later in June, the committee instructed lieutenants, captains, and warrant officers to report for reeducation and to "bring enough paper, pens, clothes, mosquito nets, food or money for use in 10 days beginning from the day of gathering." Higher-ranking officers and senior government officials, civil servants, and legislators received similar instructions to bring enough personal articles and food for a thirty-day period.

On the appointed days, tens of thousands of men carrying their allotted provisions voluntarily reported to the designated centers. To curry favor, many of them dressed shabbily. "The people I saw gathered outside the school more resembled beggars than the recent ARVN officers I knew most of them were," wrote former ARVN Lieutenant Nguyen Ngoc Ngan. "Knowing the Communists' bias in favor of the poor, many were deliberately affecting the role." The cadres displayed no favoritism, however. Surrounded by armed guards, those in Ngan's group filled out questionnaires of personal data and service and then were locked up in the school for the night. "With a vague

sense of unease," Ngan later wrote, "it occurred to me that we were now prisoners." The following night the men were packed into enclosed Russian-built Molotova trucks. As the trucks pulled out of Saigon, one guard shouted, "Anyone who attempts to escape or to look out will be shot!" Perhaps 250,000 men, the large majority of them ARVN officers, left Saigon in this first deportation. More than 1 million people from throughout the country were to undergo such forced reeducation over the next decade.

The trucks brought the men to any of more than 150 reeducation camps, subcamps, and prisons throughout Vietnam in military bases or abandoned firebases; other prisoners were set down in remote areas and had to construct their own camps. Their sole "productive labor" often consisted of building up the camps, repairing existing structures, and planting rice for their own food. In some cases prisoners without experience, using sticks or bare hands, had to clear away mines, booby traps, dud mortar rounds, and grenades from fields around the base. Inevitably some of the explosives were accidentally detonated, killing and wounding the prisoners. The Geneva Convention expressly forbade such activity.

The political phase of reeducation meant intensive indoctrination on such topics as the evils of American imperialism, the inevitability of the Communist victory, the glory of labor, and the benevolence of the new government toward the "rebels" (the current prisoners who had fought against them). Each course began with lectures over one or two days from a political cadre, followed by closely supervised discussion groups that might last a week. Inmates had to write essays summarizing and evaluating the lectures. The success of their reeducation was based on their professed "understanding" of the political lesson, hence the prisoners tended to exaggerate the benefits of communism. In concert with political indoctrination, inmates had to write "confessions" of alleged past transgressions against the Communists or their countrymen. Naturally the former South Vietnamese officers minimized their own roles in the war effort, since the consequence of admitting to "crimes against the people" was a longer term of reeducation.

When ten days and then thirty days and another thirty passed and none of the men returned home, their families agitated for information. But Military Management Committee member Mai Chi Tho said, "The government's communique said they were asked to bring food for only a month. The communique did not say that the reeducation period is one month." President Phat told an angered Truong Nhu Tang, two of whose brothers were interned, "You've got to distinguish between the criminals and the ones who were just cannon fodder. Those who were in on decisions, they need a lot more [reeducation]." In response to public pressure the government announced in Saigon Giai Phong that detainees who fit several categories would be released: for example, draftees who did

not commit crimes against the people, close relatives of revolutionary cadres, and people whose families had "a good political attitude toward the Revolution."

The regime released a great many detainees after three months. In one estimate, as many as 500,000 prisoners returned to their families in 1975, but 200,000 were destined to serve an average of three years and an additional 240,000 five years in the "Bamboo Gulag." By 1983, as many as 60,000 were estimated to remain incarcerated.

For eight hours a day, six days a week, prisoners labored for the revolution at tasks that included cutting trees and clearing jungle, digging wells, constructing camps, and erecting fences. Prisoners had to fulfill a quota for a day's work or be deemed lazy and ordered to do "compensation work" on Sunday. Uncooperative prisoners or those attempting escape were shackled in crippling positions, sent into solitary confinement, or subjected to severe torture. One prisoner who berated a guard for using the South Vietnamese flag as a dust cloth was sentenced to be tied upright to a wooden stake outdoors for three months. Lashed to the pole with telephone wire, the prisoner wilted under the brutal sun during the day and endured clouds of mosquitoes at night. By the second week, he had contracted malaria and slumped, seriously ill, but the punishment continued. At the end of a month he was given an opportunity to repent, but the man remained defiant. The guards removed him from camp and he was never seen again.

The food supply was barely above survival level, and some inmates believed that the government intended deliberately to weaken them and their resistance to camp policies. The normal diet provided no protein, only about 300 grams a day of rice, corn, and manioc, a starchy root crop. Said a letter smuggled out of one camp:

In our conversation we only talk about eating and how to find things to eat. When we do not talk about eating, we silently *think* about eating. As soon as we finish lunch, we begin to imagine the supper awaiting us when we return from the field. The food put into the mouth is like one breath of air blown into a vast empty house. What little food is given is chewed very slowly. Still, it makes no difference—we feel even more hungry after eating. Even in our sleep, our dreams are haunted by food. There are those who chew noisily in their dreams. . . . Such food as mice, rats, birds, snakes, grasshoppers, must be caught and eaten secretly. It is forbidden, and if the camp guards learn about it, the prisoners will be punished.

Because of malnutrition many contracted malaria, dysentery, and beriberi. Death became a commonplace.

## Social reconstruction

While the reeducation camp system dealt with RVNAF officers and civil servants, the Party faced a monumental task in remaking the individualistic and intensely capitalist southern society according to the Marxist principles of

socialism and class struggle. By emphasizing class conflict and class consciousness—those who do not support the ruling class of "the people" are therefore its enemies—the regime intended to ostracize the middle and upper classes. Such a system immediately isolated any non-conformist, branding him and his family "class enemies," and hence pariahs. Such a person might be hounded out of a job, his children expelled from school, and his family denied food and the benefits of society.

The Communists engendered this class struggle by dividing workers from managers, teachers from students, employees from employers, and requiring the upper classes to "confess" to their crimes in having exploited their subordinates and in having supported the "false authorities" of the former government of South Vietnam. Subordinates meanwhile were encouraged to denounce superiors. To maintain the benefits of society, many who did not actively embrace the socialist principles at least tried to present the appearance of doing so.

The regime established tight control over the people by means of overlapping district, ward, and cluster committees (a ward comprising about 1,000 people and a cluster being about one city block). The ward people's committee, closely attended by political and military cadres, attended to every societal function, from administration to entertainment to food distribution. Each ward also had a security office whose cadres provided police protection and also conducted surveillance and registered anyone wishing to spend the night away from his home.

Economically and militarily, North Vietnam reaped a bonanza in its conquest of the South, capturing a huge arsenal of American-made weapons and a complex of U.S.-built military installations, ports, airfields, and highways. When the U.S. withdrew its troops in 1973, the Pentagon had valued the military supplies left behind at \$5 billion. Some of that had obviously been consumed by South Vietnamese forces, and many of the larger weapons such as planes and tanks would not prove serviceable for long without spare parts. Still, the military spoils of war catapulted the 615,000-man People's Army of Vietnam into a major regional force. Hanoi stationed sixteen PAVN divisions in the South to aid in reconstruction and to quell any potential dissent. Some of those troops moved to the Cambodian border, where flare-ups with Cambodian soldiers had arisen within days after the end of the war.

In conquering the South, North Vietnam, whose small industrial capacity had been heavily damaged by American bombers, acquired some 500 factories capable of employing perhaps 300,000 workers. Among the modern facilities were textile mills, including a polyester fiber plant, a pork-processing plant, fish-processing plants with enormous refrigeration storage, and chemical and paper plants. Although most of the trained workers remained in Vietnam, the factory owners and top managers had fled. The Americans "scared them into running away," said

eyes of many southerners the cadres displayed little of those qualities. At one meeting a citizen bravely asked a cadre, "Why are all the best foods, clothes, medicines and supplies reserved for the cadres and Party members?" The presiding cadre 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?" The people clearly expected a more equitable distribution of goods, and their disillusionment found expression in cynical black humor. At one time Ho Chi Minh had called on the people of the North to double and triple their efforts to liberate the South. Not long after liberation, people in the South had altered Ho's words to say, "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." PRG Justice Minister Tang remarked, "It was as if the city [of Saigon] had been invaded by a swarm of locusts."

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## **Vietnam is one country**

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Early in the summer of 1975, the Lao Dong party Central Committee convened for its Twenty-fourth Plenum in the mountain resort town of Da Lat, home of the ARVN military academy and the locale of many abandoned summer residences including that of former President Nguyen Van Thieu. The Central Committee decided to proceed with formal reunification of the country and to legitimate the process with negotiations and elections. Some Hanoi leaders preferred to hesitate, believing that the possibility of double representation in the United Nations—both North and South Vietnam had applied for membership—was an advantage meriting postponement of formal reunification. On August 11, 1975, however, the question of the two Vietnams arose in the United Nations Security Council, which voted thirteen to one to admit each. But the one negative vote came from U.S. Ambassador Daniel P. Moynihan, and it carried the weight of a veto, the first time the United States used its veto to block admission of a new member. The objections to reunification harbored by some Hanoi leaders were thus swept away.

On November 15 two negotiating teams, one from the North and the other representing the South, met at the former Independence Palace to discuss reunification. Pham Hung, fourth-ranking member of the Politburo, and head of COSVN, led the southern delegation. Some members of the PRG and NLF accompanied Hung as deputies. Truong Chinh, a leading advocate of rapid reunification, headed the delegation from Hanoi. Former first secretary of the Lao Dong party, Chinh was the Party's leading ideologue 21

Huynh Van Tam, head of the NLF trade union organization. "Ford with his prediction of 'blood baths,' Schlesinger with 'a million to be massacred,' Kissinger on the same line. . . . We ought to send a vote of thanks to Ford, Schlesinger, and Kissinger for their services to the Revolution!"

Hanoi also inherited an agricultural system worth an estimated \$12 billion in South Vietnam, with a potential for helping to feed the North where nonarable mountainous land and lagging productivity resulted in a perennial shortfall of rice. Years of attempts at land reform by the South Vietnamese government, culminating in President Nguyen Van Thieu's "Land to the Tiller" program, had brought belated results, easing peasants' grievances. American-provided mechanization, irrigation water pumps, and chemical fertilizers, not to mention the so-called miracle rice seed, had boosted productivity. It required five times more man-hours to produce a pound of rice in North Vietnam than in the South. Even so, South Vietnam itself experienced shortages of rice.

To bring more land into production, and to alleviate the crowding in the cities, the regime instituted "New Economic Zones," by which it meant to recover acreage abandoned during the war and to clear and farm jungle lands. The regime strongly encouraged—and in some cases forced—the unemployed and underemployed, refugees, or any "socially undesirable" people to move to the NEZs. In many instances groups were deposited in a remote area with only the bare necessities of tools, food, and supplies and were forced to build shelters and scratch out an existence. "The NEZ is an opportunity of struggle, by all to transform nature, by each to reform himself," said Vo Van Kiet, a member of the Military Management Committee who was to become head of State Planning. In the first five years of the regime, some 5 million people were to move to about 500 NEZ locations, although many of them gravitated back to the cities.

## A clash of cultures

Hanoi had ample social and cultural reasons to hasten reunification. At the cessation of hostilities, communication opened between people in North and South as northern soldiers made acquaintances, families sought out surviving relatives from the other side of the seventeenth parallel, and northern cadres flowed into the South. After years of warfare, sacrifice, and deprivation, many northerners were quite easily seduced by the standard of living and personal freedom they found in the South. One newsman characterized the phenomenon as Sparta meeting Byzantium. Despite an official drive against prostitution, for example, which the government referred to as "decadent American slave culture," some troops from the North discretely visited cafés in the Khanh Hoi waterfront sector and along Truong Minh Giang Street near Tan Son Nhut Airport. The prostitutes called the long-deprived liberation

troops "my luong," or yellow Americans. Northern soldiers and cadres crowded the expanding sidewalk markets, buying, as one observer wryly noted, "the same kind of watches that fall apart and the same self-destructing radios purchased in previous years by their foreign counterparts." The northerners spent freely for consumer goods they could not find or afford in the North—bicycles, clocks, new and used clothing, fabric, tape recorders, sunglasses, neon light bulbs. They also made more sentimental purchases. The North's centrally planned economy had produced few nonessential items since 1954, and the northerners bought plastic children's toys—which they themselves had never had—to bring home to their children and relatives. Anyone fortunate enough to travel to the South could bring back consumer items and sell them at a substantial profit.

Those returning from the South also smuggled the southern pop culture back into the North: music and books that contrasted starkly with the droning, ideological Party songs and poetry were passed from hand to hand. This insinuation of southern values threatened authoritarianism in North Vietnam, and the Party vigorously condemned the decadent culture that had "poisoned" the South. Hanoi seemed to realize that the longer reunification was put off, the more difficult it would become to control the increasingly "contaminated" people in the North, as well as to subdue the resistant South.

Southerners were learning about the northern system they were about to inherit from the cadres and the *bo doi*, or northern soldiers, whose peasant simplicity made them the butt of jokes among more sophisticated Saigonese. Sample: A *bo doi* who has never experienced the conveniences of modern life washes his rice in the hotel toilet bowl, then complains that his dinner disappeared down the drain of the "rice washing machine." Another: A *bo doi* boasts that the weather and food are better, the stores bigger, and the cars more numerous in the North. He is asked if there are big refrigerators in Hanoi. "Sure," he replies, "you can see them driving all over the streets!"

While the southerners were amused by the peasant soldiers, they built up immediate resentments at the cadres who began arriving from the North. The fast-talking, condescending northerners imparted an air of superiority, feeling that their culture and patterns of speech represented pure Vietnamese, unadulterated by corrupting foreign influence. Yet they competed with each other to commandeer the most comfortable homes and offices and to land the most lucrative positions—those with a potential for bribes, or what the Vietnamese called "speed money." One Saigonese bitterly remarked, "At least under Diem and Thieu there was honor among thieves. But these Party people are wolfing down everything in sight."

The Party officials cultivated virtues of self-sacrifice and hard work and posted signs bearing such slogans as "Be diligent, parsimonious, honest and upright." But to the

and second-ranking member of the Politburo. Hence the "negotiations" over reunification consisted of the Party's second- and fourth-ranking members talking to each other.

North Vietnam, Truong Chinh said, echoing a statement made during the Third Lao Dong party Congress held in 1960, was actively building socialism, whereas the South had not yet completed the stage of national democratic revolution. But, Chinh asked rhetorically, should reunification wait until the South had caught up to the North? "I think that is not necessary," he concluded, making rare use of the first person singular in discussing a major policy decision. After a week-long charade of discussions, the conference announced that elections would be held in April 1976 for a general assembly that would adopt a "Constitution for a united Vietnam." The capital of the country would be Hanoi. According to Truong Chinh, "The composition of the National Assembly must reflect the spirit of broad unity of the whole people within a national front on the basis of the worker-peasant alliance, directed by the working class." Those opposed to socialism or reunification were thereby disenfranchised.

The campaign for the elections bore little resemblance to Western-style electoral campaigns. Although balloting was to be secret, candidates were selected by various Party committees on the basis of their behavior during the war. Campaigning was prohibited, on the grounds, said one official, that "if candidates are not permitted to wage electoral campaigns, they have to be known for their merits or their revolutionary activities." In evaluating the election process, Wilfred Burchett, a pro-Hanoi Australian journalist, frankly explained, "There was no pretense that there was to be any risk of losing the fruits of 30 years of armed struggle on some sort of electoral gambling table." Voting was compulsory; the penalty for not voting was loss of one's ration card.

On April 25, 1976, a few days short of the one-year anniversary of North Vietnam's conquest of the South, elections took place, and voters ratified the choices of 492 out of 605 candidates to the National Assembly. The highest

vote getter was Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, the PRG foreign minister, who was marked on 97 percent of the ballots. Nguyen Huu Tho was also named to the assembly.

When the National Assembly convened in June, it adopted a constitution—the 1959 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam—and appointed a government. With the arrival of the new government, the PRG simply ceased to exist. The assembly named North Vietnam Premier Pham Van Dong, third-ranking member of the Politburo after Le Duan and Truong Chinh, premier of all Vietnam. Huynh Tan Phat, former PRG premier, was appointed one of several vice premiers, and Nguyen Huu Tho became a vice president. Madame Binh assumed the post of education minister. PRG Justice Minister Tang was asked to serve as vice minister of nutrition, but he declined. "I had no intention of taking part in a regime that was imposing itself on the South after the betrayal of so many promises," he later wrote.

The meeting of the National Assembly formalized the reunification of the two Vietnams into one. Ho Chi Minh's often-quoted aphorism, a rallying cry during the long war, had come to pass: "Vietnam is one; the Vietnamese people are one people; rivers go dry, mountains wear away, but this truth cannot be changed." To mark the event, and to emphasize the goals of the revolution, the assembly voted to change the name of the reunified country from the *Democratic Republic* to the *Socialist Republic of Vietnam*.

The Lao Dong, or Vietnam Workers, party scheduled a congress for December 1976, its first in sixteen years. The 1960 Third Party Congress, meeting in Hanoi in September that year, had endorsed a Central Committee decision to create the National Liberation Front as a means of liberating "the South from the atrocious rule of the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen." Party statutes called for a congress every four years but allowed postponements in "special circumstances," and the one and one-half decades of war required to achieve those goals had indeed amounted to special circumstances.

The new congress, held December 14 to 20, 1976, celebrated reunification, and, like the National Assembly, initiated a name change. To honor Ho Chi Minh, the Party "reassumed" the name Vietnam Communist party, as Ho had designated it in 1930. The Party's title, like the coun-

try's new name, gave expression to the nation's political and economic goals.

The Party injected new blood into the Central Committee by expanding its membership from 77 full members and alternates to a total of 133, among them several who specialized in economics. The Central Committee's ruling Politburo also added 4 new full members and 3 new alternates, all but 1 of whom were younger than the average sixty-six years of age for the 10 veteran members. Under wartime conditions, the Party itself had swelled to 1.6 million members, out of a unified population of some 50 million. According to Le Duc Tho, the Party over the years

had "recruited people with low political awareness, thus in reality lowering the standards of party members and adversely affecting the class and vanguard nature of the party," so the congress resolved to purge cadres deemed to be inadequate or marginal in talent or energy. New members had to be recruited as replacements, especially in the underrepresented South, which had only 130,000 Party members, but a Central Committee report warned, "Particular caution must be exercised against the reactionaries and spies who try to infiltrate the party."

The most important act of the congress was to approve a five-year plan for 1976-80 that called for industry and agriculture to be developed simultaneously but with agriculture given priority. One goal of the agricultural plan was to reclaim 1 million hectares and restore 3 million to agricultural production (amounting to a total

cultivated area in Vietnam of 10 million hectares by 1980, up from 6 million in 1976). To achieve this, the Party was counting on its rustication plan for moving some 4 million people from urban areas and overpopulated northern provinces to New Economic Zones.

The Party leaders noted that the population of reunified Vietnam ranked the country third largest among Communist nations and sixteenth largest in the world. The Fourth Party Congress laid out its blueprint for transforming this developing nation into a modern, socialist state. As Politburo member General Van Tien Dung had presciently commented on the day of victory, that transformation was to be "filled with hardship." The Vietnam Communist party leaders were to prove more adept at waging war than at accommodating to peace.