

confrontation, occurring in the same area where the PAVN had destroyed the French mobile units in June 1954. Thanh also sent the People's Liberation Armed Force's main forces into battle against the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, hoping to bring down the republic before the Americans could arrive in full force. In June 1965, a PLAF regiment attacked an enemy base in Dong Xoai. ARVN troops responded with a ferocious counter-attack, as artillery and bombs rained down on their enemy. One PLAF veteran recalled his superior officer shouting into the field phone as the ground shook around them: 'My God! It's brutal, brutal'.³⁰

A Savage War of Destruction

The determination of the leaders in Washington and Hanoi from 1965 onward to battle each other directly ensured that the war for Vietnam would become one of the most ferocious conflicts of the twentieth century. The most industrialized and technologically advanced country in the world threw everything it had at one of the least developed states on the same planet, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, all the while unleashing massive firepower over the very Vietnam it was trying to save, the Republic of Vietnam. From a string of bases in Thailand, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Guam, and a wall of aircraft carriers perched in the South China Sea, the Americans bombed relentlessly in order to force the communists to the negotiating table, destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail, level the DRV's small industry and infrastructure to the ground, and support allied ground forces in the south. Planes sprayed tens of thousands of liters of herbicides over the jungle canopy in search of the trucks and people who were pushing bikes carrying supplies down the trails. Thousands of hectares of jungle were 'transformed into the tropical equivalent of a winter forest'. The communists pushed their supply lines and many of their bases (including those of the Central Office of South Vietnam) into western Indochina. As they did so, the Americans bombed Laos and Cambodia relentlessly. Indeed, the bombing of Cambodia began in 1965, not 1969, as is commonly believed. Laos has the distinction of being the most heavily bombed country in world history, if calculated in per capita terms (i.e. it is a sparsely populated, small country). From 50,000 feet above the ground, out of sight, bomb-laden B-52s dropped mindboggling amounts of explosives. Closer to the ground, fighter jets (F4s) and low-flying bombers (Skyraiders) attacked targets supported by sophisticated radar and communications systems. Even closer to the ground, helicopters not only transported troops rapidly from one

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remote place to another, as at Ia Drang, but they also became 'gunships' (UH-1 'Hueys') capable of unleashing impressive firepower themselves. In all, over 1.4 million tons of bombs fell over all of Indochina, two times the total dropped during the Second World War. Half of all the bombs fell over the Republic of Vietnam. The rest fell on Laos, the DRV, and Cambodia, in that order. Operation Rolling Thunder bombed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on an almost daily basis until 1968, destroying bridges, roads, and any remaining industrial installations American intelligence services could locate. The air force executed 25,000 sorties in 1965, 79,000 in 1966, and 108,000 in 1967. What French bombers had dropped during the two-month Battle of Dien Bien Phu was the equivalent of what the Americans dropped in one day. This was hugely asymmetrical warfare.³¹

Despite the important quantities of modern weapons the DRV received from its communist brethren, the communists were never in a position to inflict anything remotely equal to the violence the Americans inflicted on Vietnamese soldiers, civilians, and the environment. While the People's Army of Vietnam and the People's Liberation Armed Force had artillery, carried AK-47s, lugged machine-guns, and later used tanks, they could never drop napalm on American troops or carpet-bomb American cities and industrial complexes with B-52s. Nor did the DRV have sufficient MiGs (Soviet jet fighters), pilots, or surface-to-air missiles capable of stopping American aerial bombing, much less the industries making them. This disproportionate deployment of firepower meant that Vietnamese soldiers and civilians from north to south, including non-Viet peoples, experienced levels of terror and death unknown to the American combat soldiers, let alone the American civilian population. As one senior member of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam later recalled, the massive American bombing campaign 'translated into an experience of undiluted psychological terror, into which we were plunged, day in, day out, for years on end':

From a kilometer away, the sonic roar of the B-52 explosions tore eardrums, leaving many of the jungle dwellers permanently deaf. From a kilometer, the shock waves knocked their victims senseless. Any hit within a half kilometer would collapse the walls of an un-reinforced bunker, burying alive the people cowering inside. [. . .] Often the warnings would give us time to grab some rice and escape by foot or bike down one of the emergency routes. Hours later we would return to find, as happened on several

occasions, that there was nothing left. It was as if an enormous scythe had swept through the jungle, felling the giant teak and go trees like grass in its way, shredding them into billions of scattered splinters. [. . .] The terror was complete. One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out.³²

One soldier later recalled that as the ground trembled around him under the weight of B-52 bombs, he could only think of one thing, 'of my mother giving me a checkered scarf the day I first joined the army. It was terrifying'. Young northern soldiers marching south never forgot their first sight of the war-disabled going the other way on stretchers. Each thought about what it portended for the future: 'We used to say to each other, "On arrival in the South, try to keep your faces intact"'. The VWP refused to let many of the maimed and disfigured return home for fear of undermining morale, while desperate parents, wives, and family did everything they could to find out why their loved ones had not returned home. Intense trauma, nonstop worry, and insomnia rode roughshod over all of Vietnam, deep into Laos and Cambodia, and across the highlands. And when such lethal weapons struck their human targets, the result was often complete vaporization, ruling out the chance of bringing home a body for a proper burial. One member of a cultural group in the south recalled how he had lost his close friend to a direct rocket hit: 'Afterward they found a little hair and some scraps of flesh. That was how one of the finest young composers in Vietnam died'. And as in the wake of the Tay Son wars of the late eighteenth century, the spirits of the dead were once again wandering all over Vietnam looking for a place to rest regardless of any political boundaries between north and south.³³

We know much less about how rural civilians survived this savagery. One year into the bombing campaign, the legendary French veteran of the Second World War and scholar of modern Vietnam, Bernard Fall, was appalled by the brutal effects of the air campaign on civilians. In late 1965, he wrote a damning account of the American assault on Vietnamese civilians, the result of his mind-bending trip with pilots on a bombing mission over the south. When a monsoon ruled out the primary enemy target, the squadron of Skyraiders he accompanied were diverted to a secondary one, a so-called 'communist rest center' where the planes were to dump their ordnance before returning. The rest center was in fact a Vietnamese fishing village on the Ca Mau peninsula. The planes dived and unleashed several

thousand tons of napalm and explosives. Peering out of the cockpit, Fall couldn't believe what he saw that day: 'We came down low, flying very fast, and I could see some of the villagers trying to head away from the burning shore in their sampans. The village was burning fiercely. I will never forget the sight of the fishing nets in flames, covered with burning, jellied gasoline'. No one knew how many civilians died that day or were dying in such raids, but Fall was convinced that this 'impersonalized' killing (his term) from the sky was resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of non-combatants. In all, according to statistics published recently in Hanoi, the war that started in 1965 and ended ten years later took the lives of 3.1 million of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's PAVN and its National Liberation Front's PLAF people, civilians and military personnel combined. Two hundred thousand ARVN troops perished. While every single life is precious, only 58,000 Americans died in the conflict, that's 1.7 percent of the 3.3 million total number of those who died. At 98.3 percent, death was a profoundly Vietnamese experience.³⁴ !!!!!

War militarized both Vietnams. The civil war starting in the south in 1959 had already led the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front/People's Liberation Armed Force to arm whole villages against each other and to create local militias and labor teams to fortify hamlets, dig trenches around them, and keep night watch. Snipers, assassins, and soldiers waged a low-level war of attrition that killed tens of thousands of administrators on all sides. Both sides adopted campaigns to rally the enemy soldiers, administrators, and civilians. The communists had long perfected the Maoist proselytizing propaganda campaigns toward the enemy ('*dich van*'), while the republic imported methods used in Malaya and the Philippines to set up the Open Arms ('*Chieu Hoi*') program to achieve the same goal. However, in doing so, each side provoked violent reactions from the other as it tried to stop people from going over to the 'other side'. The same was true of the US-backed Phoenix Program that sought to fight the administrative war in the south between 1965 and 1972 by neutralizing the enemy's civilian administration through persuasion, but also assassination. The Phoenix Program physically eliminated 26,000 people. The VWP/NFL/PLAF sapper, commando, and police teams may well have killed just as many civilian bureaucrats, men and women. Villagers did what they could to stay alive in this ocean of violence and the waves of hate, vengeance, and raw emotions surging all around them. Hundreds of thousands made a dash for the cities. In fact, the percentage of the population living

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in southern cities had increased from 20 percent in 1960 to 43 percent by 1971, in what Samuel Huntington called 'forced-draft urbanization'. War, not industrialization, explained this modern phenomenon. But not everyone could get out. Those poor souls who hunkered down in their villages, caring for family members or protecting their land, did their best to keep on good terms with both sides in this savage, seemingly never-ending war of sovereignties. As one assassin recalled, 'They were very frightened of us. They didn't dare to say a word'. Who could blame them?³⁵

War militarized northern Vietnam too. Sirens, drills, and bomb shelters became familiar sights and sounds. Whereas the bombing sent southern villagers into the cities, American air attacks on urban areas in the north led the government to evacuate much of the civilian population to the countryside. In the northern cities and countryside, the government recruited massive amounts of labor to help repair bombed-out roads, bridges, and dikes. Militia forces re-emerged in northern society, with some two million people participating in them—10 percent of the DRV's total population. The draft increasingly consumed the entire male population aged between eighteen and forty. This was particularly the case as the war of attrition decimated the People's Liberation Armed Force and caused the communists to accelerate the deployment of northern boys to fight in the south (140,000 People's Army of Vietnam troops from above the seventeenth parallel operated in the south in 1968). The draft hit the male peasant population hardest, though. High-ranking administrators and party officials as well as bribe-paying urbanites were always better at finding ways to keep their sons out of combat. Thousands of their children were sent to Moscow or Budapest to study, just like their republican counterparts heading for the US and France.³⁶

Women were deeply involved in war, too. Not only did they have to replace their drafted husbands or fathers planting rice, but they also filled many of the local militias and assumed administrative tasks. As during the Indochina conflict, they helped to repair roads and dikes, all the while taking care of children and elders. Unmarried women served in the army as nurses and medics. But many also saw combat. This was particularly the case in the south, where the line between the professional army, the PLAF, and the guerilla fighters was always blurred. It was also in the south where the need for combatants was always highest. Northern women went south too. Many did so by joining the DRV Youth Brigade. They found themselves transporting supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in extraordinarily

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difficult circumstances. War trauma on the trail was so intense that many women stopped menstruating. Many never married because of the war and later found themselves ostracized for being single. Children too found themselves in the line of fire, especially in the south. Some served as messengers, intelligence agents, and guides—for all sides.³⁷

In the north, the totalizing nature of this war not only broke down gender and age barriers, but it also extended state control over society. Communist surveillance in the cities and countryside increased, as the party organized massive mobilization, emulation, and propaganda campaigns. The police were omnipresent. Literature had to serve the war cause. Opposition to the war was crushed. News of massive numbers of battlefield deaths was censored or delayed so as not to sap civilian morale. The Republic of Vietnam never imposed such control over cultural and political expression, allowing for remarkable critiques of the war and government policy which would have been unthinkable in the north (see chapter 12).

*The Tet Offensive of 1968: The Limits of Conventional Warfare*³⁸

If Johnson was dismayed by his failure to force the communists to accept the existence of the Republic of Vietnam, Le Duan was just as frustrated by his inability to topple that state. Neither side, however, was serious about negotiations, despite attempts by just about everybody to bring Hanoi and Washington together. Advocates of war led by Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, and Nguyen Chi Thanh pushed instead for a major offensive that would trigger the general uprising they needed to bring down Nguyen Van Thieu, the president of the enemy Republic, expand the Central Office of South Vietnam's territorial control, and signal to the Americans that they could not win the war militarily and should leave. Such a grandiose offensive would also help turn public opinion against the White House. Le Duan's entourage apparently worried, too, that military officers associated with Vo Nguyen Giap might oppose such a bold strategy in favor of a policy of protracted guerilla warfare. Thus, in order to push through what became the Tet Offensive (a series of conventional military assaults on southern urban centers), Le Duan's allies renewed their 'anti-revisionist' attacks, placing dozens of Giap's allies under house arrest on trumped-up charges of being 'pro-Soviet', indeed 'traitors'.

In December 1967, the Vietnamese politburo approved the final plans for the Tet Offensive. The new commanding officers for this surprise attack were generals Van Tien Dung and Hoang Van Thai (Nguyen Chi Thanh

had died of a heart attack that July). The politburo launched its offensive in early 1968 as people celebrated Tet (the new lunar New Year) across the country. Starting in mid-January, 20,000 People's Army of Vietnam troops attacked the American base of Khe Sanh (located just below the seventeenth parallel), in a violent battle designed to drive the Americans out of this strategic area through which supplies flowed to the National Liberation Front. The People's Army of Vietnam finally took the city from the Americans in July 1968, one of the longest and most intense conventional battles since Dien Bien Phu.

But for the Vietnamese Workers Party in Hanoi this offensive on Khe Sanh also sought to pin down the Americans, as the communists unleashed PLAF conventional and commando attacks on cities across the south, including Saigon, Da Nang, and Hue. People's Army of Vietnam soldiers participated mainly in the assault and occupation of Hue. The combined American-Army of the Republic of Vietnam response was rapid as troops participated in street fighting for the first time since the outbreak of the war against the French in 1946-7. The Battle of Hue was particularly violent. Not only did PAVN/PLAF troops go up against American/ARVN ones in the imperial city, but the four week PAVN/PLAF occupation of the imperial city led to the assassination of hundreds of Republic of Vietnam administrators and the massacre of hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of innocent civilians caught in the cross-fire and hate that engulfed the city. The war of sovereignties struck the cities with a vengeance.

In the end, the urbanites did not rise up as Le Duan had predicted and the mainly People's Liberation Armed Force troops were in no position to hold the cities for long against the combined American-Army of the Republic of Vietnam onslaught. Militarily, the various offensives at Tet were massive failures although the People's Army of Vietnam scored a major victory at Khe Sanh. An estimated 40,000 (some PAVN, but mainly PLAF) troops died in the Tet assaults of 1968. The People's Liberation Armed Force never truly recovered from these defeats. And from this point onward, the north had to send its own troops to fight and die in the south. The Vietnamese politburo did, however, score a major public relations victory with 'Tet'. Photographs of American soldiers pinned down in rubble-strewn Hue streets and evening television images of People's Liberation Armed Force commandos penetrating the American embassy in Saigon led many Americans to wonder why victory was not at hand as promised. Journalists became more critical in their reporting, following in Bernard Fall's

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footsteps. Congressional support declined as the antiwar movement began to gather steam in the US, Western Europe, and Japan. By late 1968, 45 percent of Americans thought intervention was a mistake. Johnson's war had received such bad press that he agreed to halt the bombing and open negotiations with the communists in Hanoi in Paris. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam agreed to talks on 4 April 1968, but not before the American president had made the stunning decision not to run for a second term. A year later, in September 1969, Ho Chi Minh passed away in Hanoi without seeing the Vietnam he had declared independent in 1945 reunited.³⁹

THE PARIS ACCORDS AND THE DIFFICULTY OF ENDING WARS⁴⁰

Nixon and the Return to Indirect Containment?

When the Republican Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, arrived in the White House in January 1969, they were confident that they could end this unpopular war, bring American troops home, refocus American foreign policy on more important matters, and do so honorably without losing international credibility. They also recognized that direct intervention had been very expensive. However, Nixon's negotiating position in Paris followed the same objectives as his predecessor—the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had to recognize the Republic of Vietnam's right to exist as an independent sovereign state, end its support of the southern insurgency, and withdraw its troops from republican territory.

The politburo dispatched its special representative, Le Duc Tho, to lead its negotiations in Paris. Tho demanded the withdrawal of US troops from the south, no more bombing, and refused to negotiate with the Nguyen Van Thieu 'regime' now in charge of the republic. To strengthen its negotiating hand, in June 1969 the communist party in Hanoi also created a counter-Republic of Vietnam for the south, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, or the PRG. The politburo had first approved of and handed the creation of this new southern republic to COSVN on 21 January 1968, on the eve of the Tet Offensive (as they had been convinced there would be a successful uprising). The party simultaneously ordered the creation of a second national front, the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces. The communists used these two new political entities as well as the already existing NLF to divide their

CHAPTER 13

THE TRAGEDY AND THE RISE
OF MODERN VIETNAM

ANYTHING SEEMED POSSIBLE to the communist leadership in mid-1975. The Vietnam Ho Chi Minh had declared independent and unified in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi thirty years earlier was finally a reality. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam had prevailed against all odds, first against the French in one of the most violent wars of decolonization of the twentieth century and then against the Americans in arguably the most brutal conflagration of the Cold War. The victors had reason to celebrate when they gathered in downtown Saigon on 15 May as the PAVN marched by. But all did not cheer, for 1975 also marked the end of a bloody thirty-year civil war among the Vietnamese. There were winners and there were losers. And as in post-Civil War America, France, Russia, or China, the divisions did not disappear overnight.

The question now was, having won, what type of Vietnam would Ho Chi Minh's disciples create? How would the leadership heal the wounds of war that had taken the lives of as many as 3.6 million souls since 1945? Would they unite the country immediately or wait for five to ten years before proceeding, as Le Duc Tho had promised? Would Hanoi transform the Republic of Vietnam's market-oriented economy along communist lines or allow two systems to co-exist for a decent interval? Visitors to Vietnam today might marvel at the rapid economic development of this latest 'Asian tiger', but the road leading toward modern Vietnam after 1975 was not a straight line. In fact, for over a decade, it remained a very tragic one.

ONE VIETNAM?

*Uniting the South with the North*¹

While the victors in 1975 were understandably determined to unify the country into one nation-state, they had few historical precedents to guide them.

Except for a few weeks in mid-1945, it had been 113 years since a unitary Vietnam running from north to south had existed. A myriad of states, contesting sovereignties, and identities had proliferated. Southern, central, and northern Vietnam had developed in very different ways under the French. Some nationalists, including the communists, had even thought of going pan-Indochinese. The two Vietnams led by Bao Dai and Ho Chi Minh during the Indochina conflict had never controlled all of Vietnam, functioning instead as competing, fragmented war states. The Geneva Conference agreements of 1954 only solidified the existence of two very different postcolonial states, economies, and societies. Nationalists in both areas certainly believed in a unified Vietnamese nation and located each in a faraway heroic past; but in reality such a state had only existed under the Nguyen dynasty during the first half of the nineteenth century. Le Duan's conquest of the south in 1975 and Gia Long's victory over the north in 1802 stand out as the two points in time at which leaders achieved the territorial state we now call 'modern Vietnam'.

Like their Nguyen predecessors, the Vietnamese communists relied on their conquering army to hold this new Vietnam together. In 1975, the People's Army of Vietnam disarmed the enemy, occupied the major cities, roads, and bridges, and administered the south. A military management committee ruled through a hastily convened coalition government known as the 'Republic of South Vietnam'. This was not the 'Republic of Vietnam' the PAVN had just toppled, but rather a manifestation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam created by the Vietnamese Workers' Party in the late 1960s. That said, military authorities maintained many of the lower- and mid-level civil servants of the *ancien régime* until enough communist officials could arrive to take over. And in contrast to earlier periods in Vietnamese history, that did not take long. As former republican personnel quit, were fired, or had to leave in order to undergo re-education, the new authorities introduced thousands of northern cadres to staff upper- and mid-level positions in southern provincial, district, and urban offices. They operated the new police and security services and took over the administration of schools, universities, hospitals, industries, and businesses which they had seized. Secondly, the wartime destruction of the VWP's National Liberation Front in the south only reinforced this 'northernization' of the southern civil service. Thirdly, given the intensity of the long Vietnamese civil war and the communists' distrust of the 'corrupted' and 'debauched' south it had finally conquered, the victors wanted their people in command. They wanted direct rule.²

Having demobilized the Republic of Vietnam's army, the new authorities sent tens of thousands of enemy officers to re-education camps, at the same time as confiscating massive amounts of American-supplied war materiel. Over a million-strong by 1975, the People's Army of Vietnam stood unchallenged in postcolonial Indochina and was the fifth largest standing army in the world. It certainly dwarfed its wartime ally, the southern-grown People's Liberation Armed Forces. The war had decimated the latter's ranks, leading Hanoi to increase dramatically the PAVN's presence in the south. In all, between 1965 and 1975, the north had sent 980,000 People's Army of Vietnam troops and personnel to the south. And with the guns now silent, the communists were in no mood to allow this southern army to assert its independence from the very communist party that had created it or risk the chance that it could support a rival southern regional polity. This reality finally dawned on the NLF's non-communist Minister of Justice, Truong Nhu Tang, as he stood proudly next to the PAVN's General Van Tien Dung during the 15 May 1975 victory celebrations in Saigon. These men and their people had suffered together in the jungles and under the bombs. Together they had driven out the Americans and toppled their common Vietnamese enemies. It was supposed to be a day of great joy. For Tang it was, until the People's Army of Vietnam troops had passed by to be followed by People's Liberation Armed Force soldiers now marching under the national flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. When he asked Dung what was going on, meaning why were there not two flags for two different armies, the general curtly replied: 'The army has already been unified'. 'Since when?' Tang shot back. Dung did not answer as he quietly returned his gaze to the parade. The communists had neutralized two armies in the spring of 1975, not one.³

They did away with two governments as well, not only the enemy Republic of Vietnam one created by Ngo Dinh Diem, but also the coalition government the communists had themselves created in the form of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam. Now the PRG had become one of three main components of the counter-republic in the south along with the National Liberation Front, and the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces. As stipulated in the Paris Accords of January 1973 (see chapter 11), this coalition government was supposed to continue to exist as a separate and sovereign state until an agreement could be reached with the DRV to unite the two Vietnams via

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republic was a communist creation, many Third Force non-communists like Truong Nhu Tang sincerely believed that they could use this entity to promote a less than wholly communist 'South Vietnam', allied with, but which would be independent of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's institutional control for at least a decade. Since the founding of the national front in 1960, Vietnamese communists had repeatedly promised this to their partners and assured them that they were in no rush to communize the south.

In many ways, Third Force nationalists like Truong Nhu Tang had made the same dangerous gamble as their non-communist predecessors who had tried to use French military power to thwart the Vietnamese communists during the initial Indochina War. The difference of course was that this second 'Third Force' had wanted to drive out the Americans and their Vietnamese allies by entering into an alliance with the Vietnamese Workers' Party since 1960. But the political risk was the same: would the militarily stronger partner honor its promises to the junior one once the guns fell silent? By joining the communists, Tang and his non-communist allies ran the risk that the politburo in Hanoi in control of the NLF/PRG would one day discard them just as the French had disposed of Nguyen Van Thinh when he had threatened their Cochinchinese republic in 1946 and the Americans had supported the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem when he imperiled their hold on the south.

While the politburo never doubted the loyalty of the communists they had put in charge of the Republic of South Vietnam, Nguyen Thi Binh and Huynh Tan Phat, and rewarded them accordingly after 1975, Ho Chi Minh's disciples were not about to let non-communist, democratic-minded southern nationalists turn the coalition government and the 1973 accords on them in order to plot some sort of 'Third Way' out for South Vietnam or to slip political pluralism into the north. There would be no elections, no coalition, and no autonomous 'South Vietnam', inside or outside of the state of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. For the communists, the 1973 accords were null and void. Power was finally theirs. And those who challenged it, even former allies, would suffer the consequences. This, too, is why the leadership in Hanoi preferred direct control. The communists did not trust their non-communist allies.

The victors also realized that the south was so different from the north economically and ideologically that it was a threat that had to be subdued immediately. Young PAVN soldiers and communist cadres expecting to

save their southern brethren from capitalist exploitation and underdevelopment discovered instead an urban population which was not particularly keen on being liberated ideologically. They also encountered a consumerist society in the cities which they had never dreamed possible. In 1981, a very privileged northern party member sent to Saigon to run a medical laboratory described the impact of the south on her mindset in subversive terms: 'It was a dream city for someone coming from the mists of Hanoi, so austere and poor. The contrast was brutal. I saw a plethora of products about which I knew nothing. An electric rice cooker! Who could have imagined an electric rice cooker in Hanoi, under the bombs? We were still in the age of coal and wood. There was such abundance and choice [...]'⁴

Meanwhile, as Saigon teenagers shed their bell-bottomed jeans and clipped their long hair to conform to the austere northern 'look', northern cadres and the rank and file in the People's Army of Vietnam in Saigon were trying them on and 'sucking up every loose camera, television, stereo, and motorcycle' they could find. 'They came to purify us', one Saigon citizen remarked with irony, 'but we are corrupting them'. Indeed, the party feared this and struggled to control the psychological fallout from this meeting of two very different Vietnams. And adding to their sense of urgency was the rapid deterioration of relations with Cambodian and Chinese communists which I will discuss below.⁵

By early 1976, the Vietnamese politburo had concluded that if it did not unify and transform the south then, in five to ten years, it might be too late. In April 1976, having disbanded the military management committee which had ruled there, the party organized elections to create a new National Assembly, the first step to creating a new state. Representatives from all over the country then gathered in Hanoi between 24 June and 3 July 1976 to discuss the future nature and workings of such a unitary state. What would be its economic tack, its political constitution, and roadmap for unification? Would the south continue to exist autonomously? In the end, little if any real debate occurred before the party's delegate to the convention announced that the country would now be unified as part of a new state to be known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, or SRV.

A number of liberal-minded delegates who had opposed American intervention, Ngo Dinh Diem, and his military successors could not believe their ears. They had expected a debate, discussions, at the least a bit of time. The 'socialization' of the south was supposed to be gradual. That's what the Central Office of South Vietnam leadership had always promised. One

of the rare assemblymen to have transitioned from the republic's parliament to the communist one, Nguyen Cong Hoan earnestly told the communist party's representative in the National Assembly that 'most southerners were not used to the idea of socialism' and 'didn't trust it'. But the communist representative, Hoan later recalled, told him that now: 'There's only one road to building the nation, and that's our road'. Even southern attempts to negotiate a new national flag rather than simply adopting the DRV's yellow star on a red banner went nowhere. On 2 July 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam officially came to life. At the end of the year, during their fourth party congress, the communists renamed their party the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and set the entire country on a communist tack under the leadership of a single-party state. For the first time since 1862, one Vietnamese state existed, not a Confucian, Christian, republican, Personalist, or Buddhist-minded one, but a communist dictatorship.⁶

Communist State-making in the South

Official Vietnamese historians in the SRV like to compare their struggle and social revolution in the twentieth century to that of the Tay Son brothers two hundred years earlier. Like the communists, the Tay Son brothers had fought for the poor, driven out foreign invaders, and unified the country against all odds. However, when it comes to state-building, there are equally compelling reasons to compare the communists' methods of the late twentieth century to those used by their neo-Confucian-minded predecessor in the 1820s and 1830s, the Nguyen Emperor Minh Mang. Both groups came to power after some thirty years of civil and interstate wars. Postwar loyalties were divided. Both were determined to create highly centralized, unitary states by tailoring foreign ideologies and techniques to local needs. Both confronted a heterogeneous southern society and economy very different from their northern-centered ones in Hue and Hanoi.

Worried by the fragile nature of their unitary states, the communists and their Confucian predecessor were also remarkably determined to impose unflinching loyalty right down to the lowest levels of state and society. Just as Minh Mang had imposed the dual, interlocking Confucian policies of 'Cultivation' and 'Sino-Vietnamization' to establish loyalty to his court in Hue and homogenize the civil service and his subjects, so too did the communists turn to Sino-Soviet communist techniques such as rectification, emulation campaigns, hero worship, and self-edifying propaganda to take control of the bureaucracy and society from top to bottom, homogenize

both ideologically, and subordinate them to the political center, now in Hanoi. Instead of administering a Confucian-based examination system, the Vietnamese Communist Party trained its bureaucrats in Marxist-Leninist thought via carefully controlled coursework given out by a network of academies. Whereas Minh Mang promoted state-sponsored ancestor worship to people at every level of society, often grafting this type of worship on to local cults, and their deities, the communists did much the same thing by establishing an elaborate cult of Ho Chi Minh in an effort to tie people to the party's ideology. Like the Nguyen emperor, the VCP closed competing churches and schools which belonged to the Catholics, the Buddhists, and the religious sects, or placed them under its own careful control. They also required Catholics and Buddhists to place portraits of Ho Chi Minh on their altars. These were not simple decorations.

But such parallels can only go so far before they lose their analytical value. Neither state, even the communist one, was as 'totalitarian' in its social control as so many would like to think. As always, the gulf between theory and practice was real. Moreover, what the communists proposed ideologically in the late twentieth century would have been unimaginable for the Tay Son brothers or even a remarkably modern emperor at the turn of the nineteenth century like Minh Mang. Vietnamese society had also changed dramatically under a century of French colonialism and thirty years of war, while the social revolution the communists proposed in the late twentieth century was radically different from that of the Tay Son brothers in the 1790s. As the constitution of 1980 now proudly announced it, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was a Marxist-Leninist state led by the dictatorship of the proletariat, the peasants and the workers.⁷

Upon taking the south, Vietnamese communists extended the Sino-Soviet state-building project they had first begun in the north in 1950 to the south. They pushed party cells down to village level, interlocking with and controlling the state in parallel administrative hierarchies. Again, given the destruction southern communist organizations had suffered during the war, northerners tended to dominate the party's civil service. A wide range of VCP-controlled mass associations emerged to organize and mobilize youth groups, peasants, workers, women and children. Tens of thousands of southern young people joined the party's new associations, with the most promising going on to attend the prestigious Nguyen Ai Quoc Academy in Hanoi while others joined provincial chapters of the party. Membership in the Vietnamese Communist Party was the surest way to social

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ascension in these years, though all sorts of compromises and negotiations occurred in peoples' daily lives.⁸

While Vietnamese communists never tried to murder the 'bad classes' as their Cambodian counterparts were on their genocidal way to doing from 1975 onward, the VCP applied discriminatory social measures in order to take control of the cities, the means of production, and capital resources. In Saigon/Cholon, the party's initial assault on the 'capitalist' and 'comprador' classes translated into an attack on the ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese citizens of Chinese origin living there (who had played a vital role in developing the southern economy since at least the seventeenth century). Of the urban capitalists targeted by the VCP in late 1975, 70 percent were of ethnic Chinese descent. Socialist Republic of Vietnam authorities closed or seized an estimated 50,000 Chinese businesses in the south. Most were medium- and small-sized businesses employing tens of thousands of workers, including many ethnic Viet. Others were among the most important banks and industries in the country. Communist authorities nationalized, for example, the vibrant business empire of Ly Long Than (whose very close ties to Nguyen Van Thieu did not help him avoid this measure). His family had run such important industries as Vienatexco and Vinafilco (textiles), Vicasa steel, and the Nam Do and Trung Nam banks. In all, Chinese in the south lost an estimated two billion dollars in the late 1970s due to the nationalization of their property, businesses, and industries.⁹

While this may have made good ideological sense, putting the party in charge of powerful banks, it also meant that some 650 state-owned enterprises closed, and 130,000 workers (thousands of them highly trained, experienced, and globally connected Chinese and Vietnamese businessmen and women) withdrew, disappeared into re-education camps, or fled the country. In all, 200,000 Chinese (not all of them from the commercial class) fled to southern China, while over 600,000 repatriated to non-communist countries in Asia and elsewhere. Paradoxically, in the very period that communist China's Deng Xiaoping would begin inviting overseas Chinese to invest their capital and know-how into developing the mainland's market economy, Vietnamese communists were driving the Chinese out in order to destroy southern capitalism and the *ancien régime's* economic hold. The Vietnamese managed this social-racial 'reordering' through changes in law and the use of repression.¹⁰

However, this assault on the Chinese in Vietnam occurred as diplomatic relations between the communist Chinese and Vietnamese nation-states

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 melted down. The Chinese communist authorities were furious, for example, when they learned that their counterparts in Vietnam had reversed a 1955 agreement protecting Chinese nationals from having to adopt Vietnamese nationality, which they interpreted as an attack on Chinese national sovereignty. Vietnamese communists, however, saw citizenship as a powerful instrument for controlling and nationalizing the Chinese under their control in the north since 1945 and this even larger Chinese population they had just inherited in the south, whose political loyalty and economic power posed problems. As diplomatic relations with Beijing worsened, officials (although not necessarily ordinary people) began to see the 'Chinese', including those living in the north, as a potentially dangerous fifth column. Despite the fact that many Chinese had joined the Vietnamese in order to fight the French and Americans, Hanoi now required all Chinese living in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to become 'Vietnamese nationals' or leave. 'At the end of 1977 the arrests began', recalled Trinh Duc, as did state-sponsored anti-Chinese discrimination:

The first sign was when my direct bosses in the Hoa Van [Overseas Chinese Mobilizing] Committee were ordered to leave the country. (They are living in China now). They had been working closely for years with the Chinese Communist Party, overseeing the supplies and aid that were coming from China [for Vietnamese communists]. Then Chinese cadres were arrested as 'Chinese spies'. No one had ever heard that charge before. My uncle was arrested at that time. He had been working for the revolution since before I came to Vietnam, at least forty years [ago]. He had been awarded the First Rank Revolution Medal [by the Vietnamese communists themselves].¹¹

As Asian communists slid toward war once again (the Third Indochina War), class-based discrimination rapidly morphed into crude, official racism as scores of Cambodian, Chinese, and Vietnamese newspaper editorials, posters, cartoons, and a legion of 'white' and 'black' 'truth' books poured off the state presses, in which each government accused the other of provoking the other into war. An anti-Chinese clause even found its way into the SRV's 1980 constitution. Like the Khmers Rouges who were concurrently transforming the Vietnamese in Cambodia (the pejorative word they used for them was '*yuon*'), the authorities in Hanoi also began constructing a historical enemy (which they felt they needed) from the 'Chinese'.

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In the countryside, the class assault on 'cruel landowners' was less severe than it had been in the north in the 1950s, because southern landowners had already lost most of their property. Why? Firstly, the communists had begun redistributing land during the First Indochina War and the National Liberation Front had kept it up as part of the war on the Republic of Vietnam. Secondly, the republican government of Nguyen Van Thieu had in fact implemented successful land redistribution in the Land to the Tiller program. Lastly, by 1975, most of the remaining landowners had already left the country or were on their way to re-education camps as the party confiscated their land equipment (and redistributed it). The Buddhist and Catholic churches were arguably the biggest losers when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam nationalized landholdings (Diem had already nationalized vast Cao Dai and Hoa Hao territories). In any case, by 1978 the party agreed that most of the land below the seventeenth parallel had now been redistributed.¹²

The communist state redefined society in other ways than through class. Much like Ngo Dinh Diem's discriminatory policies toward those in the south who had collaborated with the communists before 1954, it was now the SRV's turn to discriminate against those who had collaborated with the now defeated puppet regimes ('*ngụy*') which reached back to the 1940s. From 1975 onward (even before that time in NLF/PLAF zones), the Socialist Republic of Vietnam police and security services began establishing lists of suspect people, issuing identity cards, and requiring people to fill out personal biographies ('*ly lịch*'). Like their Chinese counterparts, Vietnamese communists used these dossiers to classify and categorize their subjects in terms of their positions in the *ancien régime* and the National Liberation Force /People's Liberation Armed Force. The *ly lịch* requirement insisted citizens state their current occupation, family relations, ethnicity, and religious faith. Although people quickly learned how to protect themselves when filling out these forms, the party-state used these categorizing powers to promote 'good' elements and discriminate against 'bad' ones, as they saw them.¹³ —

Those who came from families loyal to the party or who had sacrificed labor and loved ones to the armed forces during the thirty-year war now found it easier to access jobs in the bureaucracy, the army, and higher education institutions. The party practiced such discrimination also knowing that millions of people expected something in return for the massive sacrifices they had made during the war. Children of parents and grandparents who had 'collaborated' with the French, the Americans, and their

Vietnamese allies found their careers and study abroad opportunities diminished, even if they scored higher on qualifying examinations. The SRV estimated that in 1975, 6.5 million people (of a total southern population of around twenty million) were 'compromised' either directly or by their families' collaboration. Of course class counted too, as the party assigned a privileged place for the workers and the peasants at the top of the social hierarchy which was constitutionally enshrined.¹⁴

To assist in this transformation of the south, communist authorities took control of schools and universities there. At the top levels, they removed most teachers and professors and replaced them with ideologically reliable and loyal ones. In all, the communists in charge dispatched some two thousand professors to the south. In May 1975, in an extraordinary attempt to destroy the past, communist authorities seized 100,000 books and burned many publicly, whereas in the new textbooks, official historians presented Ho Chi Minh and his victorious Vietnam as the manifestation of a timeless patriotic culture of heroic resistance to foreign aggression against the French, the Americans and, increasingly, the Chinese. The party-state also introduced and propagated Marxism-Leninism throughout southern Vietnam, making it required reading in schools, military academies, and civil service training programs. Each student, Pham Van Dong insisted in 1984, had to come from the right social milieu, 'filled with hatred for capitalism and imperialism and his heart and mind should be bound to socialism and proletarian internationalism'.¹⁵

With a few, short-lived exceptions, the SRV closed republican newspapers, television stations, and radio shows in order to install communist-run ones. The victors also changed street names yet again, destroyed enemy monuments and symbols, and erected new ones in their places. In September 1977, Ho Chi Minh City officially became the new name for Saigon. Meanwhile, in the north, authorities followed the Soviets' lead by erecting a massive granite mausoleum in which they placed the embalmed body of President Ho Chi Minh. (It had been in storage there since his death in 1969.) They did so against the written wishes of their venerated leader. Tourists can still view the president's body in this sacred state shrine as Vietnamese schoolchildren and citizens file by. This architectural testament to communist power and its pedagogical cult stands in vivid contrast to the modest living quarters of 'Uncle' Ho, preserved just down the road.¹⁶

Like their French and Vietnamese adversaries, the communists jailed many of their enemies upon taking power. However, Vietnamese communists

were not content to simply lock them up; they also wanted to reform them ('*cai tao*'), to purge them of their erroneous thinking, and, theoretically, re-insert them in the new socialist society. In all, more than a million Vietnamese associated with the former southern republic and its antecedents experienced re-education. For the majority of the lower-level bureaucrats and soldiers, this was not much more than an in-house (re)training course. A communist cadre carefully explained to his listeners their errors; provided them with the fundamentals of the new communist society, peppering his lecture with liberal citations from the internationalist Marxist canon and Ho Chi Minh. He then repeated the importance of following the correct path before letting everyone go. Such courses could last a few days, a couple of months, even a year or two. However, for higher-ranking cadres in the former government, army, intelligence, and security services, re-education could last much longer and it often occurred in camps. This form of *cai tao* not only entailed countless sessions of brainwashing, rectification, new hero emulation, and propaganda, but it also meant performing forced labor in harsh, disease-ridden parts of the country. Hundreds of Vietnamese still remained in these camps in the late 1980s. An unknown number never returned. Such officially sanctioned retribution did little to heal Vietnam's deep divisions. One of Vietnam's best modern poets, Thanh Tam Tuyen, spent seven years in a communist camp before emigrating to the United States. In his poem 'Resurrection', he described how 'a shout is a prayer for the waiting centuries, / I want to live like I want to die, / Among the intersecting breaths of a flaming chest'.¹⁷

While Vietnamese communists avoided the ferocity of their Cambodian counterparts, who emptied Phnom Penh of almost all of its inhabitants within weeks of taking power in April 1975, the authorities also feared the massive urbanization the war had generated in the south. Forty-three percent of the population lived in urban areas in 1975. Saigon counted four million people in its population in 1975, making it one of the most urbanized places on earth (alongside Phnom Penh!). One million unemployed roamed the urban centers of southern Vietnam in 1975. Many were the 'bad elements', who had lost their jobs with the Republic of Vietnam's fall. Added to this number were 300,000 prostitutes and some 800,000 orphans the enemy armies had left behind. Feeding, housing, employing, indeed controlling all of these people posed immediate and daunting challenges for which the new authorities were badly prepared. As a result, the communist regime encouraged millions of wartime refugees to return to their native villages and many did so of their own volition.¹⁸

But like Ngo Dinh Diem before them, the communists also engineered new economic zones in order to relocate hundreds of thousands of unemployed people and bad elements to the highlands, sometimes forcibly so. The government provided them with a plot of land, seeds, and wished them well. Many left; others, exhausted, returned to the cities. Confronted with chronic demographic pressures in the north, the party-state also sent tens of thousands of northern peasants to these same settlement areas in the south. However, as we know, the highlands were not 'empty' lands just waiting for the Vietnamese to colonize them. Hundreds of thousands of non-Viet people had inhabited these lands for centuries. Now ethnic Viet poured in. In 1977, the new economic zones were home to 120,000 Vietnamese migrants. In 1978, that number rose to almost half a million and by 1985 it reached a million. Some estimates push the total as high as two million by 1988. This internal colonization certainly helped lower the high rates of wartime urbanization from 43 percent in 1975 to 25 percent in 1979, but it also ensured that the indigenous people of the highlands for the first time truly became 'ethnic minorities' in this new Vietnam.¹⁹

With its second five-year plan (1976-80), the government imposed Stalinist-minded central planning and collectivization on the south. Even though it was distancing itself from just such a policy in the north, the Vietnamese Communist Party applied the model in the south in order to transform the southern capitalist economy into a communist one, neutralize any economic threats, in short, to establish a centrally planned economy and assert control. This is why the confiscation of Chinese capital and centuries-old commercial networks was so important. The state simultaneously organized peasants into cooperatives, terminated private property, trade, and banking, and set prices instead of letting the market do it. Inside the party, ideologues were determined to collectivize and control agriculture so as to create the surplus needed to feed the cities and finance rapid industrialization according to the Stalinist model.²⁰

If the leadership in Hanoi asserted its control, it did so at the price of a massive contraction of the economy. By collectivizing agriculture and setting uncompetitive prices, it erased incentives for production in the countryside. Rather than producing more, Vietnamese peasants—like their Chinese and Soviet counterparts before them—simply cultivated enough land upon which to live rather than have to turn over any surplus to the state at fixed prices (i.e. a loss). The fact that individuals no longer possessed their land, equipment, tools, or animals only further discouraged them.

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In 1980, farmers cultivated 100,000 hectares of land less than they had in 1978. Food production for 1980 fell short of its target by seven million tons. Gross domestic product only reached 0.4 percent instead of the predicted double-digit estimate. Living standards tanked, famine broke out in several provinces in 1978 and would continue in those and others, including some in the north, well into the 1980s. Tens of thousands of peasants asked to withdraw from the cooperatives. Many resisted collectivization outright.²¹

Vietnam's international isolation hardly helped. Relations with the Khmers Rouges were already going sour by late 1975 and there were tensions with the Chinese, one of communist Vietnam's biggest trading partners and aid donors since 1950. In May 1975, Washington imposed a trade embargo and soon prohibited Americans from even sending humanitarian aid to the country. As Vietnam moved closer to the Soviet Union and the Chinese improved their relations with the Americans, non-communist Asian states, most notably Japan and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), distanced themselves from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. By rebuffing ASEAN's 1973 invitation to join the group as an observer, the Vietnamese communists left the field open to China to improve relations with the rest of Southeast Asia. By 1980, as the two communist states went to war, life for millions in Vietnam became unbearable.²²

*Fleeing Communist Vietnam*²³

Things became so bad that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese began to risk their lives to get out. Rich and poor, young and old, men and women, peasants and urbanites left the country. Most—but not all—were southerners associated with the *anciens régimes*. In the weeks leading up to the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, nearly 150,000 Vietnamese linked to the crumbling Republic of Vietnam evacuated to the US. Around 10,000 who didn't make it out found their way by boat or overland to Hong Kong and mainland Southeast Asian states by late 1975 and later relocated, mainly to the United States. By 1978, in all of Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese of Chinese descent were already on their way out.²⁴

The flight from Indochina was a perilous one. For a price, an ever-increasing one, people paid bribes to local police and border patrol agents to let them go, but not before selling their possessions in order to pay the smugglers, even elaborate smuggling syndicates, to get them out. Most went by boat to southern China, Hong Kong, and above all to the shores of the

Southeast Asian states stretching from the Philippines to Singapore by way of Indonesia and Malaysia. In November 1978, the 1,500-ton freighter *Hai Hong* reached its final destination in Malaysia to unload a human cargo of 2,500 Vietnamese 'boat people', as they were now so unfortunately labeled. Tens of thousands more floated across the South China Sea on woefully unsafe vessels. When littoral states began to turn refugees back, often to their deaths, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees intervened. Faced with obstacles at every turn, its representatives negotiated the rules, legal categories, and Western support needed to organize the orderly departure of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. From 1979, a series of UN-run camps and processing centers appeared in Southeast Asia. In all, the United States, Australia, France, and Canada resettled 623,800 Indochinese refugees between July 1979 and July 1982. In 1980, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam agreed to establish an Orderly Departure Program or ODP with the UNHCR, which was to be based in Bangkok, and to allow those Vietnamese wishing to leave the country for family reunion and other humanitarian reasons to do so. Most went to the United States, the state of California in particular. In all, between 1975 and 1995, when the ODP program ended, 796,310 boat people and 42,918 so-called 'land people' (those who exited via overland routes) had left their native country: in all, 839,228 Vietnamese. This internal hemorrhaging of modern Vietnam was proof that national reconciliation had been a failure. This was true, too, for communist Laos and especially so in Cambodia, where the Khmers Rouges were responsible for the deaths of at least 1.5 million Cambodians by late 1978. In all, 1,436,556 Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and minority peoples departed communist Indochina. Two hundred thousand Vietnamese individuals are estimated to have died trying.²⁵

MISALLIANCES: THE INDOCHINESE MELTDOWN OF EURASIAN COMMUNISM

This human tragedy occurred against the backdrop of yet another, the renewal of war in Indochina. No sooner had the United States withdrawn from Saigon in 1975 than Vietnamese communists found themselves sliding into another conflagration, not with the French 'colonialists' or the American 'imperialists', but with their former communist brethren in Cambodia and China. No one could have imagined in the early 1950s that the communist

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