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5/75

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BLOODBATH?

5/75

Most Americans are relieved that the war in Vietnam is finally over. But our celebration is marred by the troubling last scenes of war refugees struggling to climb aboard American evacuation craft, and getting their fingers mashed by U.S. marine rifle butts. What will become of these people now? Will they face a bloodbath?

Since the beginning of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, succeeding Administrations have warned that an American failure would lead to countless Communist massacres. 55,000 Americans and over a million Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians have died in a war aimed at preventing such a "communist reign of terror." And now that the reign is here, Americans brace themselves for the coming bloodbath. One can expect to see a rash of atrocity stories "leaked" by Administration sources to justify their long-standing claims.

In the last weeks before the war ended, such administration warnings, initiated by Ambassador Martin in Saigon, reached a crescendo. High administration officials, including Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, painted a terrifying picture of bloodletting and executions which they claimed was already under way.

Commenting on the numerous scare stories, Quaker workers cabled from Saigon April 23: "We have heard them all too and haven't had one eyewitness substantiation. Almost invariably the person spreading the story left before the alleged incident took place. For example, one woman said the PRG were shooting all police in Quang Ngai. When questioned she admitted she had left early on Monday, before the PRG came in. But she and her neighbors who were policemen believed this would happen. The U.S. Embassy has launched a comprehensive campaign of 'atrocity' stories to feed to the press. People directing the campaign seem to be Rockland and Pike, of atrocity fame."

Christian Science Monitor correspondent Dan Southerland reported from Saigon that he had been unable to verify reports of executions in PRG occupied areas. Noting that the U.S. Embassy had cabled to Washington reports of alleged executions, Southerland said that one monk supposed to be an eyewitness was nowhere to be found, while another alleged witness in Da Nang declared that he had seen no such thing. "The

Embassy's cables have the apparent aim of persuading Congress to vote more aid," Southerland reported. (CSM, 4/21/75)

On the spot reporters from Newsweek magazine drew similar conclusions after questioning a number of Catholic anti-communist refugees who had spent up to 12 days behind PRG lines. According to Newsweek (4/28/75), the reporters were "unable to substantiate any of the reports and rumors of mass executions. Every one of the Vietnamese who claimed to have been an eyewitness to an atrocity ultimately admitted he had not actually seen the incident -- but that he had merely heard of it second- or third-hand." An American diplomat confided to Newsweek reporters that the U.S. Embassy had culled only the most "extreme" atrocity stories to send back to Washington. But "the embassy did not pass on to Kissinger refugee interviews that tended to cast doubt on the bloodbath theory," the official added.

Though unfounded, these gruesome tales have a powerful influence on many Vietnamese. Writing from Saigon, a Washington Post reporter observed: "There is a growing mood of fear, even panic, among large numbers of Vietnamese in this threatened city. Many Vietnamese, especially those who have worked with foreigners, fear for their safety if the Communists capture Saigon, an event many now consider to be only days away." (WP, 4/7/75)

These fears may drive some people literally to their deaths. A New York Times (4/24/75) article revealed that many who were unable to flee their country "rushed to drug stores to buy quantities of sleeping pills and tranquilizers with which they could commit suicide if the worst came to pass." One Vietnamese began contemplating suicide after hearing the story of a friend who was a doctor in Danang. When PRG soldiers entered the city, "the doctor locked himself, his wife and their children in the family car. Then he set it on fire." (NYT, 4/21/75)

Throughout this turbulent period, the Catholic and Buddhist churches have remained remarkably calm. Despite U.S. claims that Catholic refugees from the North would be marked for reprisal, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh, urged all Catholics not to flee

the areas abandoned by Saigon government forces. "In the current turmoil, not a single Catholic bishop in areas overrun by the Communists is known to have left his post," Time magazine (4/14/75) reported. Among those choosing to remain is the Bishop of Danang, Pham Ngoc Chi, who was one of the principal organizers of the 1954 exodus of Catholics to the South. Buddhists have also adopted the position that there is nothing to fear from the revolutionaries. Shortly before Saigon government troops abandoned Danang, the local chapter of the Buddhist-supported National Reconciliation Force announced that they would not leave, and encouraged others to follow their example. Instead they pledged to assist refugees in returning to their ancestral homes (reported in AFSC cable from South Vietnam, 4/1/75). Today the National Reconciliation Force is part of a coalition administration now governing Danang, and AFSC doctor Tom Hoskins, who chose to remain in the city, reports that life is returning to normal.

Although reports in the Western press acknowledge that no concrete evidence exists of widespread reprisals in territory recently taken over by the PRG, bloodbath prophets continue to assert that mass killings will soon begin. "First, the Communists will require foreigners to depart, and then, behind closed frontiers, they will eliminate every person, group and institution which they believe to pose a threat to their regime," P.J. Honey, a long-time advocate of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, declared in a London Daily Telegraph (4/6/75) article. "All who argue that the Vietnamese Communists will exact no retribution are ignoring the abundant and irrefutable evidence."

A similar theme has been sounded in the past, notably by then President Richard Nixon. He said in an April 16, 1971 press interview: "I think of a half a million, by conservative estimates, in North Vietnam who were murdered or otherwise exterminated by the North Vietnamese after they took over ... On balance, I will say this, that if the United States were to fail in Vietnam, if the Communists were to take over, the bloodbath that would follow would be a blot on this Nation's history from which we would find it very difficult to return ..."

In documenting the President's charge, the National Security Council released a list of seven sources. A study of these sources by Gareth Porter, then a research associate at Cornell University's East Asia project, revealed that all the sources either gave no proof for the allegation, or referred back to the President's sole primary source -- a book by Hoang Van Chi entitled From Colonialism to Communism. According to Chi's book, five percent of the population of North Vietnam were massacred. The National Security Council calculated that this would amount to 700,000 people, making Pre-

sident Nixon's 500,000 a conservative figure. A year later, Chi admitted that the percentage figure he came up with "was just a guess, an estimate that nobody could figure." In an interview with the Washington Post (9/13/72), Chi said that he arrived at the five percent figure "by projecting countrywide the experience in his own North Vietnamese village of about 200 persons. He said about 10 people died there from Communist persecution, one from execution and the rest by such 'other means' as imposed starvation." Chi's "guess" later became the basis for authoritative and "conservative" estimates by some serious students of the Indochina war, including Bernard Fall and Frances Fitzgerald.

Chi, a State Department employee, told the Washington Post that he did not know at the time that the group financing his book, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, was a CIA front. (WP, 9/13/72)

So on the basis of one man seeing one person executed and nine others die by "other means," President Nixon was able to tell the American people that half a million were murdered!

Let us examine the "irrefutable evidence" of other famous bloodbath stories:

The 1954-56 "Atrocities in North Vietnam"

"A million refugees came from North Vietnam to South Vietnam," President Nixon said during the same press interview. "And they came there because of the terrible atrocities that were visited upon them by the Government of North Vietnam."

But historian Bernard Fall gave a different explanation: "the mass flight was admittedly the result of an extremely intensive, well conducted, and, in terms of objective, very successful American psychological warfare operation. Propaganda slogans and leaflets appealed to the devout Catholics with such themes as 'Christ has gone to the South' and the 'Virgin Mary has departed from the North.'" (The Two Viet-Nams, pp. 153-4)

Details about this psychological warfare operation emerged in a report filed by CIA officer Edward Lansdale (now a Lieutenant General) which was published in the Pentagon Papers (Beacon Press, Vol. I, pp. 573-583). In the report, Lansdale described how he trained Vietnamese army units and the Saigon Ministry of Information to spread scare stories. "The first rumor campaign was to be a carefully planted story of a Chinese Communist regiment in Tonkin / North Vietnam / taking reprisals against a Vietminh village whose girls the Chinese had raped," Lansdale wrote. "Weeks later, Tonkinese told an excited story of the misbehavior of the Chinese Divisions in Vietminh territory."

Investigated, it turned out to be the old rumor campaign, with Vietnamese embellishments." Lansdale also recounted how his Vietnamese teams had engineered a number of "black psy-war strikes" (his own words) in Hanoi, including the forging of leaflets signed by the Vietminh outlining how society would be run when they took over. "The day following the distribution of these leaflets, refugee registration tripled," Lansdale crowed.

According to the former head of psychological warfare for the Saigon army, Colonel Nguyen Van Chau, the alleged "Communist bloodbath" in North Vietnam was "100 percent fabricated" by intelligence services in Saigon. Chau told a newspaper reporter that the Diem government in 1956 waged "total psychological warfare" to persuade Vietnamese and world opinion that there was a terrorist bloodbath in the North. "British and American intelligence services helped collect authentic documents on which the forged documents were based. The forgeries were so well done that President Diem himself was fooled by them, Chau said." The purpose of the campaign was to justify Diem's refusal to carry out the elections and reunification of the country as called for in the 1954 Geneva Accords, the reporter noted. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 9/24/72)

Lansdale's rumor campaigns in North Vietnam and the forging of documents were no mere exercises to test the psywar abilities of the CIA and Saigon's political warfare units. The refugee exodus served a vital political function in providing a power base for Diem in the South when he had none. "Not only did it provide hundreds of thousands of people upon whom Diem could rely, when he had few, but it added greatly to the strength of those forces that were moving America more and more into Vietnam," an Australian scholar, J.F. Cairns, observed (The Eagle and the Lotus, p.68). Communist atrocity stories, as was earlier noted, also helped to justify the Diem government's disregard of the 1954 Geneva Accords.

The 1968 "Hue Massacre"

Almost every American familiar with the history of the Indochina war has heard of the "communist atrocities" at Hue. The official U.S. and Saigon government version is that North Vietnamese and NLF troops, during their occupation of Hue in 1968, systematically executed thousands of innocent civilians, many of whom were buried alive, and that burial sites later uncovered yielded some 3,000 bodies. To this day the Western press has accepted uncritically this version of what happened in Hue.

The story originates from the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion of the Saigon army (whose

past feats in the forging of documents was confirmed by its former head, Colonel Chau), and then U.S. Information Agency official Douglas Pike. Initial estimates of people killed by the NLF were placed at 200 by the Hue chief of police, and at 300 by the mayor. But in 1969 captured documents mysteriously surfaced in which the NLF reportedly "gloated" -- in presidential advisor Sir Robert Thompson's words -- over having eliminated 2,748 persons in Hue. Pike himself claimed that 4,756 had been murdered by the NLF. To back up his story, he produced two "high-ranking Communist defectors." The first one, Le Xuan Chuyen, told a Washington Daily News reporter that the Communists had a "blood debt" list of some five million Vietnamese, half a million of whom would be killed (WDN, 11/25/69). The second, Tran Van Dac, claimed a "blood debt" list of three million. A check into the background of these two "high-ranking defectors" revealed that the former was nominated director of the Chieu Hoi (Defection) Center in Saigon, while the latter was actually Planning Advisor to the Saigon army's political warfare department (see "U.S. Political Warfare in Vietnam," Indochina Chronicle, 6/24/74, p.7). Both Pike and Thompson used Dac's testimony to substantiate their claims of communist atrocities in Hue.

The other evidence that U.S. and Saigon officials cite is the mass graves uncovered in the Hue vicinity. The circumstances surrounding the exposure of the burial sites are suspicious. During March and April 1968, when the graves were being dug up, Saigon authorities did not allow journalists to come watch. The French photographer Marc Riboud was repeatedly denied permission (Le Monde, 4/13/68). Even at the first official openings, a U.S. marine who was on the scene claimed that the only reporters in attendance were "carefully hand-picked reliables" who were not allowed to inspect the bodies. The marine also told professor Edward Herman that he observed old scour marks and tracks indicative of the use of bulldozers (which the NLF did not possess) at the original burial. ("The Myth of the Hue Massacre," Ramparts, May'75) 5)

Perhaps the only Westerner to examine the grave sites first-hand, Canadian doctor Alje Vennema, disclosed that the total number of bodies he saw at the four major sites then uncovered was 68, and not 477 as officially claimed. According to Dr. Vennema, the evidence indicated that many were victims of fighting, and not political murder. Most of the bodies he examined were clothed in military uniforms. In contrast to Saigon government claims that the victims had been buried alive, Dr. Vennema noted that all the bodies showed wounds. Later he learned from local residents that the U.S. had bombed heavily in that area.

In 1969, while revelations of the My Lai massacre sent shock waves around the world, Saigon authorities were busy exhuming other graves. Again newsmen were denied access while the digging was going on, but later they were told by the "Committee for Search and Burial of Communist Victims" that hundreds of bodies were discovered in villages near Hue. They were not told that these villages had been the scene of bitter fighting in 1968. Even the Saigon Minister of Health, Tran Luu Y, was not convinced by his government's allegations that the bodies were Communist murder victims. After visiting the burial sites in April 1969, he told a deputy province chief that the bodies could well be those of NLF soldiers killed in battle. The Political Warfare Department's news organ immediately denounced the minister for his skepticism (Tien Tuyen, 5/3/69).

There is much to be learned about what actually happened in Hue. Large numbers of civilians were killed during the U.S.-Saigon effort to recapture the city. Dr. Vennema, who was working in Hue at the time, took pictures of U.S. Phantom jets swooping down on the city and releasing bombs over its most crowded sections. The New York Times published photographs of U.S. marine jets scattering napalm over the old imperial capital. 90 percent of Hue was flattened, according to Reuters. "Bodies lay rotting in the streets for days and sanitary facilities broke down," Le Monde wrote. The first official estimate of casualties, made by the provincial Social Services Office of the Saigon government, was 3,776 civilians killed in battle. The NLF claimed to have buried many victims in mass graves along with their own casualties, for to leave these bodies exposed would risk the spread of epidemics. Many of the dead were later bull-dozed into mass graves by U.S. and Saigon troops following the recapture of Hue.

Two independent observers, Len Ackland and Don Oberdorfer, have documented cases of individuals killed by NLF soldiers. According to Hue residents interviewed by Ackland, the number of people executed -- many of whom were secret police, interrogators, and other traditional

foes of the NLF -- was small, and appeared to be a fraction of Saigon's propaganda claims.

Conclusion

Whatever their factual basis, Communist atrocity stories fill an important need for our and Saigon's leaders. As our government's conduct of the war became more controversial, and GI's returned with hair-raising anecdotes of massive killings, rape, looting and village-burnings, our leaders sought to justify their actions by arguing that whatever we did was nothing compared with the bloodthirsty practices of the other side.

Accounts of "Vietcong terror" appeared regularly in the American press. In most instances, the only source for these stories, which were reported as fact in our newspapers, were Saigon or American officials whose jobs were to give their foes a bad image. The reports were frequently unchallenged, for many newsmen did not think to question the veracity of their government's statements. As noted by Professor Edward Herman and Gareth Porter, "this receptivity to official anti-Communist propaganda must be attributed to an unwritten but clear intellectual and moral code among correspondents in Vietnam, which insisted on a 'balancing' of their disillusionment with the U.S.-Saigon side with a reaffirmation of the even greater evil of the 'enemy.' This 'balance' has required the suspension of critical processes in considering allegations of evil by the Communists ..."

Although the Vietnam war has ended, many of our leaders, whose reputations were tarnished because of their role in the war effort, may wish to vindicate their past decisions. We may find in our newspapers reports of bloodbaths taking place in Vietnam and Cambodia, and should not be surprised if the source turns out to be U.S. intelligence officers or past proponents of war, men like Douglas Pike, Edward Lansdale, P. J. Honey or Sir Robert Thompson. Our knowledge of how past bloodbath myths have been managed and the "black propaganda" skills of our CIA should alert us against drawing quick conclusions until these charges are fully investigated.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Chomsky, Noam, and Herman, Edward S., Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda, Andover, Mass.: Warner Modular Publications, Inc., Module 57 (1973)
- Herman, Edward S., Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities, Philadelphia, Pilgrim Press (1970)
- Herman, Edward S., and Porter, D. Gareth, "The Myth of the Hue Massacre," Ramparts, May 1975
- Indochina Chronicle, no. 19, "Bloodbath: Myth or Reality," 9/15/72
- Indochina Chronicle, no. 33, "U.S. Political Warfare in Vietnam," 6/24/74

All of the above are available from the Indochina Program, American Friends Service Committee, 112 South 16 Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19102. Copies of this report, 10¢ each, 60¢ for 10, \$4 for 100 plus shipping.

May 1975