

# MORALITY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

## Nguyen Ngoc Bich

In a famous interview given to Dinh Quang Anh Thai of Little Saigon Radio in 1991, Duong Thu Huong, the famed author of *Novel without a Name* and *Paradise of the Blind*, had this to say about the morality of the war in Vietnam:

“Only after I got to South Vietnam did I realize that the Northern regime was a barbarian regime because it punches blind people's eyes, it plugs up people's ears. While in the South people could listen to any international radio they wanted whether it's French, British or American. Such is a civilized society. ***How bitter it was that a barbaric regime could triumph over a civilized society!*** That was how ironic and erroneous history could be. That was a most expensive lesson and mistake that the Vietnamese people have ever committed.”<sup>(1)</sup>

She was not alone in her assessment. Bui Tin, the colonel who was present at the surrender of General Duong Van "Big" Minh in Independence Palace on April 30, 1975, also defected to France in September 1990 and the following February, went on BBC to present his famous "Petition of a Citizen" asking for an entire overhaul of the regime.

Even Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, before his death in 2008, had this to say about the war: “Whenever we reminisce about [the outcome of] the war, if there were millions who were happy there were also millions who were sad.”<sup>(2)</sup>

Belated as his judgment was, Vo Van Kiet was only reflecting a reassessment that millions and millions of Vietnamese have made about the validity of the war effort engaged by Hanoi in launching the second Indochina War, known as the Vietnam War in the United States, in 1959.

### Reassessments by Party stalwarts on the hijacked revolution

Reflecting on the disastrous decades after the end of the war in 1975, which saw the country plummet to rock bottom poverty and near astronomical inflation as the country had to face two wars against its former allies, Pol Pot in Cambodia and Deng Xiaoping in China, Nguyen Ho, one of the heroes of the southern revolution since the 1930's, advocated in *Viewpoints and Life* (1994)<sup>(3)</sup> that the Communist Party of Vietnam made a clean breast of its mistakes, rejected socialism and frankly adopted capitalism as the path to the future.

Nguyen Van Tran, another hero of the southern revolution, the man dubbed "the Evil Deity of Cho Dem" ("Hung Thần Chợ Đệm") during the anti-French resistance, wrote in his memoir entitled *Letter to Mother and the National Assembly* (1995), that Ho Chi Minh himself declared at the Second CPV Congress in 1951 that he "had no thought of his own" because "from the point of view of theory, the Vietnam Workers Party takes Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao as its compass.”<sup>(4)</sup> This was the final blow to the legitimacy of the Communist regime of Vietnam since, after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (1989-1991) and the overthrow of Mao thought in China, the regime had no ideological anchor left to rely upon except to refer to a mystical "Ho Chi Minh Thought." But Nguyen Van Tran in Vietnam and

Nguyen Minh Can in Moscow, both of whom were present at the 1951 Congress, confirm Ho Chi Minh's declaration there.

Unable to prove the legitimacy of the regime based on the inexistence of "Ho Chi Minh Thought" and unwilling to acknowledge Ho's tutelage in the Vietnamese (Communist) revolution, the communist leaders of Vietnam went so far as to reject any debt to Ho and only recently, on January 19, 2014, when a mausoleum was erected to the memory of Le Duan (1907-1986), they had his most important quote displayed on a panel in large letters saying: "The reason we fought the South was on behalf of the Soviet Union and China,"<sup>(5)</sup> the epitome of treason as far as a Vietnamese patriot is concerned.

The immorality of the Communist cause in Vietnam is thus now an open secret. That immorality is not only due to the fact that a revolution which in the eyes of the Vietnamese population was originally a justifiable cause, i.e. the cause of national independence, had been hijacked to become a mercenary cause in the name of international communism as ordered from Moscow and Beijing. And the enormity of that immorality can be seen in the fact that at least some two million Vietnamese lives<sup>(6)</sup> had been sacrificed to a struggle that was not theirs, that was not their choice. In other words, they were hoodwinked into it.

### **The systematic nature of Communist terrorism**

The standard interpretation of the war in Vietnam, at least the American phase of that war, is given as something like this: From 1946 to 1954, the Vietminh under Ho Chi Minh fought a heroic war of resistance against the French who were intent on reestablishing their colonial rule in Vietnam. In 1954, the country was "temporarily" divided into two parts at the seventeenth parallel with the promise of a reunification election two years later. However, Ngo Dinh Diem with the help of the U.S. reneged on that promise and ran a rule of terror which forced the southern population into an insurgency that North Vietnam, i.e. Hanoi, reluctantly was drawn into supporting.<sup>(7)</sup> It is the legitimacy of that struggle from the communist point of view which eventually got the better of the United States and the "puppet regime" in South Vietnam, leading to the "glorious" reunification of 1975.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Born in the years of harsh colonial repression, the communist movement in Vietnam, as well as many other nationalist parties, had to resort to forceful means to resist that repression and win adherents to the cause of independence. But if the nationalist parties only resorted sparingly to acts of terror such as individual assassinations, the communists did everything in a systematic, massive way. For instance, in the so-called "Nghe Tinh Soviet" uprising of late 1930 the communists did not go after individuals, they came up with the slogan "Tri, Phu, Dia, Hao, dao tan goc, troc tan re," which means, "As far as intellectuals, rich people, landlords, and local strong men are concerned, we must radically dig them up and uproot them completely."<sup>(8)</sup> With that, they went after these four classes in society en masse, which called for even harsher retaliation by the colonial authorities. More than half a century later, one could still find intellectuals in Hanoi who recalled those days and admitted that "just thinking back about that slogan gave them shudders." But the Communist Party of Vietnam merely brushes off those considerations claiming that it

was due to "leftist infantilism"--a passing phase that would disappear with the maturity of the movement.

In 1945, by their own admission, the Indochinese Communist Party only had five thousand members in the entire country. Thus, they were clearly in the minority in the face of nationalist parties such as the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Vietnam Nationalist Party)<sup>(9)</sup> or Dai Viet Party<sup>(10)</sup> that counted tens of thousands of adherents throughout the land. Yet when Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong left for France to go to the Fontainebleau conference in the summer of 1946, Vo Nguyen Giap carried out a reign of red terror that in a few months killed at least 10,000 members of the nationalist parties, according to French historian Philippe Devillers in his book, *Histoire du Viet-Nam de 1940 à 1952*.<sup>(11)</sup>

In 1953, in the midst of an intense war against the French, Ho Chi Minh was forced by Stalin and the Chinese to launch the land reform in North Vietnam, described by Ho Chi Minh himself as a social revolution of "sky-shuddering days and earth-shattering nights."<sup>(12)</sup> This land reform went through several phases and did not stop until 1956, three years later, even after peace was restored in July 1954. The systematic nature of Communist policies can be seen in the fact in those three years, two of which were spent in peace, the amount of casualties is higher than the total amount of soldiers fallen in nine years of the Resistance War against the French (the French forces, for instance, lost 75,581 dead), and they were unarmed Vietnamese killed by their own compatriots. According to Dang Phong, an economic historian, the number of casualties of the land reform in those three years and in only half of the country (North Vietnam) came to 172,008 persons (out of which 123,266, or 71.66%, in other words three out of four, were later found to be wrongly classified)<sup>(13)</sup>.

Only such figures could explain why, during the course of the entire war, the civilians always, even in the desperate final years, ran towards the government side and almost never towards the communist ranks. Only such figures could explain something that apparently never could penetrate the thick heads of antiwar elements, professors and all, including their allies in the liberal media. I am alluding to two huge mass movements that are indisputably the largest in Vietnamese history: the flight of nearly one million refugees from the North after the division of Vietnam in 1954 and the movement known as the "boat people" running away from the triumphant Communists after 1975.

It was these two exoduses which finally turned world public opinion toward a more realistic assessment of what Communism meant to the Vietnamese people, to the common people on the ground who had to live with it. As early as 1979, Joan Baez and some 73 major intellectuals in the world took a full-page ad in the New York Times to complain that the realities of Vietnam were not what they had thought they fought for in their previous antiwar fervor. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre, the initiator with Bertrand Russell in England of the so-called Stockholm War Crimes tribunal (1966), also came to the realization that he was wrong all along. He shook hands with Raymond Aron, a conservative fellow "Normalien," and agreed to call on France to come to the rescue of the "boat people." This was the beginning of the Médecins sans Frontières movement with Alain Kouchner to go and rescue "boat people" in the South China Sea. Also, some 700 Vietnamese intellectuals, mostly in Europe, signed a petition started by Loi Tam in Belgium asking for fundamental changes in policy from Hanoi.

## Who Is the “Winning Side”?

After the end of the war (as far as the United States is concerned) there was an intense if subterranean debate inside Vietnam as to “who won over whom?” Of course, the debate could not be carried out in the open considering the nature of the regime in power. But the evidence for such debate can be seen in ridiculous claims like the one made at one point by Mrs. Nguyen Thi Doan, Vice President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, that “Vietnam is a million times more democratic than the so-called democracies of the Western world.”

That debate, however, is mostly carried out in popular ditties that for the most part are anonymous. Such as this one, reputedly coined by Vu Hoang Chuong, a very famous poet:

Nam Ky Khoi Nghia tieu Cong Ly,  
Dong Khoi len roi mat Tu Do.<sup>(14)</sup>

(Came the Cochinchina Insurrection and Justice is gone!  
So did Freedom when appeared the General Uprising!)

This refers to the fact that Justice and Freedom were the names of major streets in Saigon before the Communist takeover, and they were renamed Cochinchina Insurrection and General Uprising after 1975.

Even international relations are described in these ditties. For instance, there is a Lenin Park in Hanoi, which led some bards to comment:

Lenin, your home is in Russia.

How come you now stand in one of our parks?

Your face turned up, you point out:

“Freedom and Happiness? You’re still a long way!

“Look at the example of Russia:

“Even after 70 years, we’re still no fucking where near them!”<sup>(15)</sup>

Or with the United States after the resumption of normal relations:

You used to cuss the U.S. better than anyone

Now, you sing their praise ten times more than you ever did.

You used to fight them like no one else

Now you send all your children there, for an education.

You used to say, “U.S. bad, Party number one!”

Now, the Party opens wide its arms begging it for alms.<sup>(16)</sup>

Internally, the situation is succinctly described as follows:

Da dao Thieu-Ky!

Cai gi cung co!

Hoan ho Ho Chi Minh!

Cay dinh cung phai dang ky!<sup>(17)</sup>

(Down with Thieu and Ky!

One could find anything then!

Long Live Ho Chi Minh!

Even for a nail one must register [and stay in line].”

It’s getting to a point that there is the widespread feeling in Vietnam now that the defeat of South Vietnam was a blessing in disguise for the North Vietnamese who,

without their victory in 1975, would be kept in the dark forever about what it means to be a civilized society. Again, one may quote Duong Thu Huong:

**Duong Thu Huong** (sighing): “O I have had moments of craziness in my life, in different guises. But crying? Then I have had two occasions to do so.

“The first time when we as the victorious troops entered Saigon in 1975. While everybody in our ranks was happy and laughing, I cried. Because I realized that my young years, the springtime of my life, had been wasted. I was not impressed by the tall buildings of the South, I was flabbergasted by the fact that all the works of south Vietnamese authors were freely published. Tons of authors that I have never heard of have works displayed in the bookstores and even on street curbs; and the people had all sorts of access to information such as the television, radio and cassettes galore. Such apparatuses to the North Vietnamese could only be in dream. In the North, all the media and publications are under government control. The people could listen only to one radio, Radio Hanoi; and only very trustworthy cadres are allowed to listen to the Chinese radio. As for the rest of the population, they had only one source of information, the PA system that broadcast in the street, in other words they are allowed to hear only one source. Only after I got to the South did I realize that the Northern regime was a barbarian regime because it punches blind people's eyes, it plugs up people's ears.”<sup>(18)</sup>

No wonder that when the journalist Huy Duc published his two-volume work entitled *Ben Thang Cuoc* (“The Winning Side”)<sup>(19)</sup> two years ago, it read more like an account of how the South won over the North, in everything except in the military sense. The South won not only because of its economic wealth but also because of the superiority of its culture, music, literature, theater, art and fashion, cuisine, let alone education and even politeness—which the Northerners were the first to notice as they came into contact with the South Vietnamese people.

### **An Example: The South China Sea Conflict**

The recent introduction of the Chinese giant oil rig HY 981 into Vietnamese waters (on May 1, 2014) once again demonstrates the superiority of the South over the North, even in dealings with China. Since at least 2011, because of Hanoi’s inability to effectively counter the Chinese moves in the South China Sea—called Eastern Sea by the Vietnamese—more and more the people are resorting to the Republic of Vietnam’s arguments to support Vietnamese claims to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands in opposition to Beijing’s flimsy arguments.

Whereas the Chinese could adduce Premier Pham Van Dong’s official letter of September 14, 1958, acknowledging the Chinese claim to the Paracel and Spratly archipelagoes (among other), the Republic of Vietnam, i.e. South Vietnam, fought a valiant naval battle in January 1974 to repel the Chinese aggression in the Paracels (Hoang Sa to the Vietnamese, Xisha to the Chinese) and therefore the Chinese could not claim that Vietnam acquiesced to the Chinese action, which is not condoned by international law.<sup>(20)</sup> The 74 navy personnel who were sacrificed in that battle, together with the commanding officer Nguy Van Tha, thus became national heroes and their portraits and names were paraded through the streets of Hanoi in several demonstrations against the Chinese incursions.

In other words, the legitimacy of the southern government, i.e. of the Republic of Vietnam, is now widely recognized, not just by Vietnamese in the Diaspora but even by a large majority of Vietnamese inside Vietnam both in the North and in the South and even by much of the official press inside the country.

Thus, one can put to rest the question of whether the Vietnam War was justified or not. The high moral ground held by the Republic of Vietnam is now demonstrated, and it has become an irrefutable argument in favor of our side—the side of the Republic of Vietnam and its allies, even if that alliance in the end was undone by internal American politics.

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## Notes

(1) “Vào Nam tôi mới hiểu rằng, chế độ ngoài Bắc là chế độ man rợ vì nó chọc mù mắt con người, bịt lỗ tai con người. Trong khi đó ở miền Nam người ta có thể nghe bất cứ thứ đài nào, Pháp, Anh, Mỹ... nếu người ta muốn. Đó mới là chế độ của nền văn minh. **Và thật chua chát khi nền văn minh đã thua một chế độ man rợ.** Đó là sự hàm hồ và lằng lằng của lịch sử. Đó là bài học đắt giá và nhằm lẫn lớn nhất mà dân tộc Việt Nam phạm phải...” - **Dương Thu Hương.**

(2) “Một sự kiện liên quan đến chiến tranh khi nhắc lại, có hàng triệu người vui, mà cũng có hàng triệu người buồn.”

(3) Nguyễn Hộ, *Quan điểm và cuộc sống* (“Viewpoints and Life”). Self-published: 1994.

(4) Nguyễn Văn Trán, *Viết cho Mẹ và Quốc hội* (“Letter to Mother and the National Assembly”). California: Văn Nghệ Publishing House, 1995.

(5) Original Vietnamese: “Ta đánh miền Nam là đánh cho Liên Xô, cho Trung Quốc.” This is the quotation that is engraved banner-like on the entrance to Le Duan’s Mausoleum in Ha Tinh Province. But according to Vu Thu Hien in his memoir *Đêm giữa ban ngày* (“Night in the middle of day,” California: Văn Nghệ Publishing House, 1997), the full quotation is even wider: “Ta đánh Mỹ là đánh cả cho Liên Xô, đánh cho Trung Quốc, cho các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa và cho cả nhân loại, đánh cho cả bọn xét lại đang đâm vào lưng ta.” (“We fought the Americans also for the Soviet Union and China, for the whole socialist camp and for mankind, even for the revisionists who are stabbing us in the back.”)

(6) According to the book *Death by Government*, authored by Rudolph J. Rummel, a Yale professor (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994), the following governments have been guilty of massive killings of their own and other peoples:

(1) *Mao’s Regime was responsible for 76,702,000 deaths (35,236,000 during the period 1958-1962 and for 76,702,000 for the entire period from 1928 to 1987).*

(2) *Lenin and Stalin were responsible for 61,911,000 deaths in the Soviet Union.*

(3) *The Nazis under Hitler were responsible for 20,946,000 deaths (including the Holocaust).*

(4) *The Japanese militarist regime was responsible for 5,964,000 deaths.*

(5) *The Khmers Rouge were responsible for 2,035,000 deaths under Pol Pot.*

(6) *The Turks were responsible for 1,883,000 deaths.*

(7) **Ho Chi Minh** and his Communist comrades were responsible for 1,670,000 deaths.

(8) *The Polish Communists were responsible for 1,585,000 deaths.*

(9) *The Yugoslav Communists were responsible for 1,072,000 deaths.*

(7) This, in summary, is the thesis of George McT. Kahin in his book, *The United States in Vietnam* (co-authored with John W. Lewis) (New York, Dial Press, 1967), for many years the Bible of the Antiwar Movement in the U.S.

(8) According to Nguyen Minh Can, there never was an actual movement known as the “Nghe Tinh Soviets.” There was an insurrection of peasants in the area as they were crushed by the 1929 depression, which was subsequently savagely repressed by the French colonial authorities. In reporting on the insurrection to Moscow and the Komintern, Nguyen Ai Quoc came up with this description to make it appear as a Communist-inspired mass movement. See Nguyen Minh Can, *The Vietnamese Communist Party through [the] Vicissitudes of the Communist Internationals*, California: Tuổi Xanh Publishers, 2004, pages 71-72.

(9) For a standard history of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang, see Hoàng Văn Đào, *Việt Nam Quốc-Dân-Đảng: Lịch-sử đấu-tranh cận-đại 1927-1954* (“The National Party of Vietnam: A history of contemporary struggle, 1927-1954”), Saigon: Giang Đông, Nguyễn Hòa Hiệp xb, 1964.

(10) For a comprehensive history of the Dai Viet, see François Guillemot, *Dai Việt: indépendance et révolution au Việt-Nam, L'échec de la troisième voie (1939-1955)*, Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2012.

(11) Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam de 1940 à 1952*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952.

(12) For a truly dramatic description of the land reform in North Vietnam, see the bestseller by Trần Thế Nhân, *Ngày Long Trời, Đêm Lở Đất* (“Sky-shuddering Days, Earth-shattering Nights”), Arlington, VA: Tổ Hợp Xuất Bản Miền Đông Hoa Kỳ, 2001.

(13) Đặng Phong, *Kinh tế Việt Nam, 1955-1975*, Tập 2 (“The Vietnamese Economy, 1955-1975,” Volume 2), Hanoi: Viện Khoa học xã hội, 2002.

(14) Nguyễn Ngọc Phách, *Việt-sử đương-đại qua 200 câu về bất-hủ* (“Contemporary Vietnamese History as seen through 200 indestructible popular ditties”), Melbourne, Australia, 2008, page 123.

(15) *Ibid*, page 232.

(16) *Ibid*, page 221.

(17) A variation of this ditty is found in *Ibid*, page 138.

(18) In the same interview mentioned in footnote number 1 there was this passage:

**Dương Thu Hương** (thờ dài): *Điên rồi thì tôi có nhiều thứ điên rồi. Khóc thì tôi có hai lần khóc. Lần thứ nhất khi đội quân chiến thắng vào Sài Gòn năm 1975, trong khi tất cả mọi người trong đội quân chúng tôi đều hờ hởi cười thì tôi lại khóc. Vì tôi thấy tuổi xuân của tôi đã hy sinh một cách uổng phí. Tôi không choáng ngợp lắm vì nhà cao cửa rộng của miền Nam, mà vì tác phẩm của tất cả các nhà văn miền Nam đều được xuất bản trong một chế độ tự do; tất cả các tác giả mà tôi chưa bao giờ biết đều có tác phẩm bày trong các hiệu sách, ngay trên vỉa hè; và đầy đầy*

*các phương tiện thông tin như TV, radio, cassette. Những phương tiện đó đối với người miền Bắc là những giấc mơ. Ở miền Bắc, tất cả mọi báo đài, sách vở đều do nhà nước quản lý. Dân chúng chỉ được nghe đài Hà Nội mà thôi; và chỉ có những cán bộ được tin tưởng lắm mới được nghe đài Sơn Mao, tức là đài phát thanh Trung Quốc. Còn toàn bộ dân chúng chỉ được nghe loa phóng thanh tập thể; có nghĩa là chỉ được nghe một tiếng nói. Vào Nam tôi mới hiểu rằng, chế độ ngoài Bắc là chế độ man rợ vì nó chọc mù mắt con người, bịt lỗ tai con người. (Source: Người Việt Newspaper)*

(19) Huy Đức, *Bên thắng cuộc* (Tập I. Giải phóng, Tập II. Quyền bính) (“The Winning Side,” Vol I: Liberation, Vol II: In Power), Saigon-Boston-Los Angeles-New York: Oshin Book, 2012).

(20) See Republic of Vietnam Pro-temp Leadership Committee, “A Rebuttal of China’s Position Paper on the Presence of the HYSY 981 Drilling Rig in Vietnamese Waters” (June 18, 2014).