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## SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 108

OCTOBER 2017



### Saigon Under Siege *Nghia M. Vo*

In the mid-1960's Saigon, the capital of the Republic of Vietnam appeared to be an oasis of stability, peace, and happiness with its neon lights, crowded bars, streets filled with cars and motorbikes, busy open markets, and the forests of TV antennas sticking out of roofs of houses within a country devastated by war. But that was just a misleading appearance that defied reality. With the war going on for more than a decade, the economy was deteriorating, the cost of living and inflation rate were rising, the number of war dead ballooning, and the flood of war refugees from the countryside rapidly swelling Saigon's undocumented population.

The country actually was on life support and no one was more acutely aware of it than the Saigonese themselves. They had no choice but to try to survive, ride the events and calmly continue to do their work as if nothing had happened. They hid their emotions under their sleeves to the point that people thought that Saigon was the rear area that had nothing to do with the war itself or never saw blood and bullets.

Young or old, rich or poor, the Saigonese had their own worries. Young wives worried about the safety of their husbands who fought against the enemy and about raising their children by themselves. Older people were concerned about their children who were serving in the army. Young males had to deal with the draft. They received deferment as long as they were in schools or colleges. Once they graduated or failed their exams, they were drafted. And once drafted, they would remain in the military service for the duration because the country was at war. Their lives were in limbo without an end in sight.

My brother's classmate was two years younger than I. Being in the eleventh grade, he had to pass the year-end baccalaureate I exam in order to get into the twelfth grade. But he failed the test and became so distraught that he enrolled into the army against his family's advice. After a short boot camp training, he was sent to his unit in the I Corps. Six months later, we were notified of his death in a local skirmish. The event shook us all to the core. He was there and suddenly was gone. For the first time, we were all shaken up realizing that we too could end up like him.

In college, I had a classmate who was kind, energetic, and well-liked by everyone. He wore the same pair of sandals and rode his bike every day from one end of the city to the other to attend classes. One day, as communist rockets whizzed by above our heads with their threatening whistles, no one was paying attention to them any longer because people were used to these incidents. The next morning when we returned to classes, everyone was devastated to hear the news that he had passed away. One of the rockets had struck his house killing the whole family, parents and siblings.

Saigon was, therefore, closely connected to the war. Any political upheaval or crisis, any governmental change in Saigon affected the morale of the soldiers. On the other hand, any battlefield victory would uplift Saigon's morale while casualties were returned to Saigon either for treatment or burial. Military cemeteries within the city rapidly filled up to capacity requiring the opening of the new Thu Duc National Military Cemetery in 1965. By the end of the war, Saigon claimed 300,000 war deaths for a population of 17 million or roughly 4.5 million deaths for a population the size of the U.S. The pain, horror, and suffering could be seen and felt in the calm resignation and the grave silence exhibited by the Saigonese.

Then came the terrorist attacks that the communists brought to the cities, Saigon in particular. Not happy with waging a war against the military, they killed and maimed Saigon's civilian population. They began by throwing grenades randomly at crowds in open markets, soccer fields, and movie theaters. There were three such cases in 1962 and three more in 1963. These tragic events caused fear among the civilian population, which for a time prevented them from going to markets or movie theaters.

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## Saigon Under Siege...

As U.S. troops began coming ashore, the communists became bolder and increased the breath and scope of their attacks. In February 1964, they set bombs under the bleachers of a stadium during a softball game and detonated them. Two U.S. servicemen were killed and 20 Americans were injured. They then bombed the Kinh Do movie theater causing many U.S. and Vietnamese casualties. On the eve of the 1964 Christmas, they detonated a car bomb underneath the Brink Hotel in Saigon, which then housed U.S. servicemen. On March 30, 1965, they exploded bomb in a car parked in front of the U.S. Embassy on Ham Nghi Boulevard virtually destroying the building and killing 19 Vietnamese, 2 Americans, and 1 Filipino; 183 others were injured. U.S. Congress quickly appropriated \$1 million to build a new embassy. Three months later, on June 25, 1965 terrorists targeted the civilians of the floating "My Canh Café" that was moored to the Saigon riverbank. The first bomb detonated at 8:15 p.m. (local time). As the frightened guests rushed out of the boat, a second bomb exploded killing 42 people (including 13 Americans) and injuring 80 others. The majority were Vietnamese civilians. On August 18, 1965 communists detonated bombs at the Police Directorate office. On October 4, they exploded bombs at the Cong Hoa National Sports killing 11 Vietnamese nationals. On December 4, 1965 they struck again, this time at the Metropole Hotel that served as a bachelor enlisted men's quarters for the U.S. military. Eight Vietnamese, one U.S. Marine and a soldier from New Zealand were killed in the early-morning blast that also injured more than 175 people. Four months later, on April 1, 1966, the Victoria hotel, which was USA Army BOQ (Bachelor Officers' quarters) was bombed with 200 pounds of explosives. Two vehicles were used, the first carrying VC gunmen and the second carrying the explosives was abandoned in front of the hotel.

As security around the buildings improved, the VC terrorists turned to a deadlier way of killing people by launching mortars or rockets into Saigon. On November 1, 1966 they fired 30 shells into the city center killing at least eight people and wounding several others. This was followed two days later by the firing of 24 recoilless rifle shells that caused 8 deaths and 37 wounded. Between May 5 and June 22, 1968, hundreds of rockets were fired indiscriminately into Saigon, chiefly in the densely-populated Fourth District causing 115 dead, 528 wounded.

Terrorists then moved to targeted assassinations. In December 1965, Tu Chung the editor of the respected *Chinh Luan* newspaper was gunned down in front of his home. Dr. Phan Quan Dang, a National Constituent Assemblyman narrowly escaped death when a bomb exploded under his car in December 1966. On January 6, 1969, the Vietnamese Minister of Education, Dr. Le Minh Tri, was killed when two terrorists on a motorcycle hurled a hand grenade through the window of the car in which he was riding. On March 4, 1969, the Rector of the Saigon University Professor Tran Anh was gunned down when he walked home from the University. The following day, a satchel charge was hurled against the automobile in which Prime Minister Tran Van Huong was riding. The attempt failed and the terrorists were captured.

These were some of the terrors experienced by the Saigonese during the war. Although life in Saigon was not as traumatic as in war zones, it was still tense and stressful. These events were followed by communist attacks on Saigon at the

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US Embassy bombing, Ham Nghi Blvd, Saigon



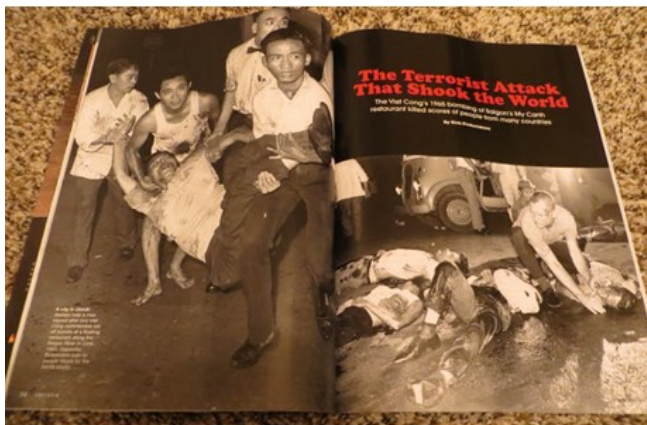
Brinks Hotel bombing



## Saigon Under Siege...



Metropole Hotel bombing



My Canh Restaurant bombing

regimental level during the 1968 Tet offensive and culminated with the siege of Saigon by 15 communist divisions in 1975 with direct shelling of the airport and other areas in the cities, the deportation of military personnel to reeducation camps, the deportation of civilians to new economic zones, the escape of boat people and so on.

Throughout the war, the Saigonese faithfully fought against communist invasion and attacks and as a result suffered through pain, deprivation, injuries and even death until the end. After the end of the war, three million people were lucky to escape from the communist regime and to look for freedom elsewhere in the world. Although people come and go, the old Saigon will endure.



Victoria Hotel bombing

## Whose War Was It? *Carie Uyen Nguyen*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/opinion/whose-war-was-it.html>

Perhaps no one came out of the Vietnam War with a reputation as tarnished as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Since well before the war ended, ARVN soldiers were made an easy and ready scapegoat for America's losses, a stereotype that found its way into academia and popular culture. We're told they were incompetent cowards who often shirked their duties, leaving the hard work to the Americans.

As a Vietnamese student at an American university with an extensive archive of Vietnam-era oral histories, both written and tape-recorded, I've had a unique opportunity to dig deeper, to find all the ways that this story is flimsy and unfair. Unique because it's not about showing that American soldiers were wrong — rather, I've come across account after account from American veterans talking about the courage and effectiveness of their allied brothers, the South Vietnamese soldiers.

Of course, I've come across many Americans with negative attitudes about ARVN. But a lot of them were rear-area personnel, people who never fought alongside ARVN and, I imagine, drew inaccurate conclusions from secondhand accounts they'd hear on base. Other negative accounts focused more on cultural differences than anything else. More than one talked about ARVN soldiers' penchant for walking hand in hand as they headed out to battle. An American radio specialist who served in Binh Duong in 1967 could not understand it, even many

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## Whose War Was It..

years later: "That was kind of strange to us. I don't think it was any more than they were just good friends, and that's what they did over there, but it just seemed kind of strange."

Other American veterans found it strange that the families of ARVN soldiers would often follow them to camp. As one G.I. contemplated: "So these troops were largely draftees. They went into the field with their wives and kids along with them in trail. When they set up the night defensive position, it was like the extended family was there. They did not want to go out and fight in many cases. They just wanted to survive and take care of their families." But in my research, the Americans' critical assessments are easily matched, and then some, by sympathetic, positive accounts of ARVN. For example, many veterans actually liked having ARVN families nearby and praised the willingness of some wives to risk their lives to get fresh produce from nearby villages to cook hearty meals for their husbands and American soldiers. Others recognized that having family members nearby could be a solid source of moral support for ARVN soldiers, a reminder of what they were fighting for.

Generally speaking, I have found that positive attitudes and a deeper understanding by Americans for their ARVN allies often emerge after a sustained period of living, working and fighting together, such as the "era of big battles" in 1967, when American and South Vietnamese units fought beside each other. After a hard day's fighting, many G.I.s remembered sitting down with their Vietnamese counterparts to talk about their families, pulling pictures of loved ones from their breast pockets. It dawned on many G.I.s that, unlike their limited year-long or 18-month tour of duty, most South Vietnamese soldiers served an indefinite length. These local men had to fight until the end of the war, not knowing that the day the war ended was also the day they had to be separated from their families again.

The two sides also bonded in the small-unit combat that typified much of the war. For every story about South Vietnamese scouts retreating at the first shot, leaving the Americans alone in the jungle, there's a positive story — say, about an ARVN soldier carrying a wounded American adviser on his scrawny body to the safety of the landing zone. And there are stories on the other side, like one of how an American adviser decided to break all regulations to call in American helicopters to evacuate a seriously wounded ARVN soldier. (Had he waited for a South Vietnamese chopper, as he was supposed to, it would have been too late.) Or another story of an American Marine sergeant who recalled almost getting court-martialed just for eating with the South Vietnamese. With his voice trembling with emotion, the veteran recalled challenging his superiors, "If we do not break bread with them, how could we fight alongside them?"

If such camaraderie existed in combat, where do the negative stereotypes come from? Setting aside racial prejudice, we can find one source in the operational relationship between American and ARVN forces. The Americans lifted ARVN morale but also created an overreliance on their military support. American advisers who were assigned to ARVN units had the sole authority to call in tactical air support under a heavy firefight. It makes sense that, over time, some ARVN officers might have become too dependent on the technological superiority of their American counterparts, and that some Americans might have concluded the ARVN officers lacked endurance and resiliency.

And of course, many American combat troops never encountered ARVN in the field, since the two usually performed very different strategic roles: The Americans handled combat operations while ARVN took pacification and territorial security. Even though American leaders in Saigon set up mobile training teams to work with ARVN units in 1967, the time they had to spend with each unit was rather limited.

Perhaps the biggest source of division and misunderstanding was the war itself. Soldiers from both sides fought amid immense social turmoil, political uncertainty and military pressure. Soldiers on both sides asked, Whose war is this? What are we fighting for? And it was often hard for Americans, confused and often demoralized, to differentiate between the communist guys supporting North Vietnam's cause and the local guys who were supposed to be their allies.

For some Americans, the answers came readily and sympathetically. They believed the ARVN soldiers were good soldiers, fighting as hard as they could to defend their country. They were allies fighting global

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## Whose War Was It...

communism. "I would do the same thing for my countrymen on American soil," one American veteran said. But others resented what they saw as an unequal burden. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, who fought in Vietnam and later led America and its allies in Operation Desert Storm, said: "It was their country, their battles. Eventually they would have to sustain it. I thought we should give them the skills, the confidence and the equipment they needed and encourage them to fight. Yet while our official position was that we were sending forces to help South Vietnamese fight, the truth was that more and more battles were being fought exclusively by Americans, rather than by United States and South Vietnamese units together."

We know very little about our veterans, much less about the South Vietnamese veterans who fought alongside them.

We don't know what their daily experiences were like, to be underarmed and often on the outer edge of the defenses, sometimes deployed as little more than cannon fodder. Some 254,250 South Vietnamese died in combat between 1960 and 1975, nearly five times the number of Americans, in a country of just 15 million people. We did not hear what they heard, we did not feel what they felt, we did not see what they saw on the forlorn battlefields. Who are we to judge the American veterans of the Vietnam War and their local allies whom they came to consider friends or brothers, either to romanticize or victimize, valorize or demonize them? And when they speak about their experiences, did we really listen?

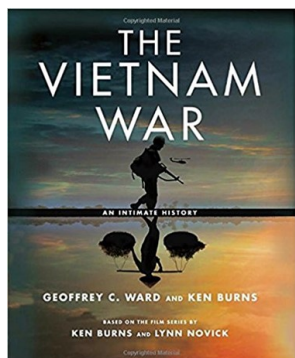
Today the courage and sacrifice of the ARVN soldiers is all but forgotten — in Vietnam, it was erased by the victorious side; in America, by historical neglect. One of the few places they are commemorated is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial State Park in Angel Fire, N.M., which I visited over Memorial Day. Alongside bricks inscribed with the names of several veterans from Australia and South Korea, there are a few names of South Vietnamese veterans, not all of whom were able to arrive safely and adopt American soil as their second home.

One of those names belongs to my father. He was an ARVN soldier who died when I was 14. Even long after the war, I never heard him speak ill of the Americans, or the Communists. Standing beside his brick, I teared up, appreciating this sole place on earth that recognizes my father's service — not in humiliation and hate, but in honor and love. This sacred place not only remembers and honors the sacrifice of those who served their countries from all sides, but it also calls for genuine reconciliation and lasting peace.

Studying the American soldiers' perspective toward the ARVN, one of whom was my own father, and listening to the American veterans' stories have been humbling and elevating parts of my academic journey. The American-ARVN relationship was highly complex, and a moving example of human experiences in an extreme situation. Their tale has been silenced, misunderstood, simplified and politicized for too long. We might think we get it, but we know very little about our veterans. We should and need to learn more. If veterans speak, we must listen.

## The Vietnam War Debate

### A. THE VIETNAM WAR: KEN BURNS, LYNN NOVICK



To watch the series:

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-vietnam-war/watch/>

### B. VIETNAM VETERANS FOR FACTUAL HISTORY

This file contains a 30-second teaser pointing the viewer to two active URL's containing short (about ten minute) commentaries and a URL where we will post commentary as we view the series. While we could not hyperlink the video directly to our websites, the URL's in the video are posted on the screen as

[www.vvfh.org/Burns1.htm](http://www.vvfh.org/Burns1.htm)  
[www.vvfh.org/Burns3.htm](http://www.vvfh.org/Burns3.htm)

[www.vvfh.org/Burns2.htm](http://www.vvfh.org/Burns2.htm)  
[www.vvfh.org/Burns4.htm](http://www.vvfh.org/Burns4.htm)

Public comments might best be tweeted using [#VietnamWarPBS](https://twitter.com/VietnamWarPBS)

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## The VN War Debate...

### C. CSIS: VIETNAM WAR DISCUSSION

Friday, September 29, 2017 3:00 pm - 5:00 pm

CSIS Headquarters: 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Registration: <https://www.csis.org/events/ken-burns-vietnam-war-%E2%80%94-panel-discussion>

Speakers:

- Thomas Vallely, Harvard University
- Lewis Sorley, independent scholar
- Marc Selverstone, University of Virginia
- Gregory Daddis, Chapman University
- Nu Anh Tran, University of Connecticut
- Jay Veith, independent scholar
- Mark Moyar, CSIS
- Erik Villard, US Army Center of Military History

## The Conquest of Saigon: A Few Words From a Northerner to Southerners...

The biggest mistake of the North was to decide to liberate the South. Because after April 30, [1975] many changes occurred in the North beyond our anticipations.

Because when PAVN soldiers returned north, the diverse products they brought back with them caught us northerners by surprise. The Seiko wristwatches from industrial Japan looked so beautiful and esthetic compared to the archaic Soviet Poljot watches. Japanese and American electric fans standing close to North Vietnamese and Soviet Tutustu fans looked like peacock close to owls. American cassette players that we only saw in our dreams easily replaced the old fashioned Soviet VEC206 cassette players. And there were hundred more items that cannot be re-counted.

From that time onward we used to ask ourselves: were southerners actually using these products? Being that fancy, these products suggested that their society must be more progressive than ours and that the manufacturers must respect their clients more than Soviet or North Vietnamese manufacturers did.

Then came a source of books and novels, very rich and secretive so that it could be smuggled to the North because we were promoting the burning of books and journals in the South. South Vietnamese culture was indeed rich and multifaceted. Very cultural and popular, it suggested to us that it would be difficult to reform the mind of southerners.

The purpose of our reeducation camps, which was to brainwash southerners, failed miserably because all prisoners fell asleep in classes. We finally realized that using a chimp's knowledge, we could not expect to reeducate men. If we let southern culture spread into the northern society, it would cause a lot of trouble to our regime. One genial method was to keep jailing southern prisoners for a long period so that they could not go home and therefore lessening our worries about the populace.

We increased our indoctrination of northerners by telling them that southern culture was decadent, inhumane but continued to gather money to buy southern merchandise although only high level cadres had enough money to buy them.

And our northern people soon realized that the norther policy was to imbecilize its people and to deify the Party and its leaders.

Before 30 April on the death of Uncle Ho, we stayed under the rain close to communal loudspeakers to cry over our father's death. Uncle Le Duan was very emotional when he read the eulogy to Ho, but

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## Conquest of Saigon...

it was only later clear that Le Duan pretended to cry because he had toppled Uncle Ho since 1960. But that day, Le Duan was really crying. Maybe he learned from Uncle Ho how to act about the land reform.

But when northerners who came back from the South secretly spread the news about the southern culture, northern people followed the footsteps of southerners hooking themselves to boat propellers to migrate abroad and share the deadly lives of southern expatriates. It was so sad.

When our policy to imbecilize the people failed, our people looked at their leaders like criminals. Ninety nine per cent of people polled in eateries claimed that the regime was abysmal. Had there not be any attempt to liberate the South, our leaders would still be the idols of the populace. Everywhere they went, the people would touch and congratulate them, which would make them very happy, although they knew that was only the expression of brainless people who had been addicted to indoctrination. But at least we would be happy although our people would be still eating bo bo. Therefore, it was a grave mistake to liberate the South.

<https://www.facebook.com/SuThatVietNam/photos/a.317848781630858.69149.236171449798592/885695151512882/?type=3&theater>



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## Conquest of Saigon...



Bo doi bringing trophies back home to North Vietnam

## Ho Chi Minh's Land Reform: Mistake or Crime? *Lam Thanh Liem*

The following is an analysis of the [bloodbath](#) resulting from Ho Chi Minh's land reform in North Vietnam. For decades, [totalitarian apologists](#) such as [Gareth Porter](#) and [Edwin Moise](#) have denied that the bloodbath took place. They have claimed that the death toll was in the low thousands and that the killings were a "mistake." They rely on official North Vietnamese publications, which they take at face value. This is what passes for scholarship on the ["anti-imperialist" left](#). The bloodbath deniers simply ignore or dismiss the evidence from [dissident publications](#), [communist defectors](#) and [foreign witnesses](#). Below, Lam Thanh Liem, a major authority on land issues in Vietnam, concludes that the communists perpetrated a huge bloodbath and that the death toll was in the hundreds of thousands. Translated from [Vietnamese](#).

[From Lam Thanh Liem, "Chinh sach cai cach ruong dat cua Ho Chi Minh: sai lam hay toi ac?" in Jean-Francois Revel et al., *Ho Chi Minh: Su that ve Than the & Su nghiep* (Paris: Nam A, 1990), pp. 179-214. This excerpt is from pp. 200-5.]

### Ho Chi Minh's Land Reform: Mistake or Crime?

*By Lam Thanh Liem*

... The Result of the Land Reform

The 5-phase land reform resulted in a bloodbath all over North Vietnam. Unfortunately, because of the techniques of falsification and censorship under the "closed door" policy implemented by Ho's regime from 1954, the world was completely unaware of this catastrophe. Genuine information related to this land reform is extremely scarce, and even inaccurate and vague. As a result, it is almost impossible to establish a clear picture of this internecine massacre.

A recent memoir by Hoang Van Hoan — a former member of the Hanoi communist Politburo who fled the country in September 1979 and is presently in exile in China — partly uncovered the disastrous situation the government had created for the population. Like the Vietnamese Communist Party's other leaders, Hoang Van Hoan dwelt lightly on the "errors" and "deviations" of the lower levels. He never revealed the real number of victims who suffered in this reform campaign or the number of innocent people wrongly accused by people's tribunals and later executed.

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## Ho Chi Minh's Land Reform...

In 1987, the Institute of Marxist-Leninism in Hanoi published a book entitled *Ho Chi Minh: The Era of 1954-7* (simultaneous with the progression of the land reform). However, the book failed to provide anything useful and only touched on the incident briefly in 2 pages.

Vo Nhan Tri, at the request of the Hanoi government, wrote a book, *Croissance économique de la République démocratique du Vietnam* (*Economic Growth in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam*). Having been given this task, the author was allowed to access the documents in the Prime Minister's archives, where he "found and read a top-secret report on the number of communist cadres falsely accused and executed: 15,000." Ho Chi Minh, in an attempt to hide the truth, reduced this number to 10,000 when he addressed an assembly of Party members, confessing to having killed a number of "innocent victims." "Of course, this number of so-called 'innocent victims' would be much greater," according to Vo Nhan Tri.

In South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Canh, a former Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Information and Amnesty (1969-70), sought an answer to this problem by interviewing returnees from Chieu Hoi programs and interrogating POWs, including communist cadres, soldiers, and officers from the North. These interviews and interrogations produced a great deal of valuable and reliable information. Ultimately Nguyen Van Canh was able to generate an estimate of 200,000 victims, which he divided into 2 main categories:

- 100,000 accused and murdered during the period before 1955, excluding another 40,000 victims who were sent to various concentration camps in the mountain areas. Here most of them died of malaria or other epidemic diseases. Those who were able to survive and were released became crippled mentally as well as physically. They have led a dog's life ever since.
- 100,000 killed during phase 5, the last phase of the reform campaign, known as the Dien Bien Phu General Offensive, which ended in summer 1956. Thousands of others, most of them rich farmers and land owners, were sent to concentration camps for "reeducation."

Of more than 200,000 victims executed, 40,000 (20%) were communist cadres, according to Nguyen Van Canh.

During work visits to the Mekong Delta (assigned by Ho Chi Minh City's agriculture department), we had opportunities to talk to a number of Northern cadres working in scientific and technological areas as part of the "agricultural collectivisation policy" in 1978-9. The discussions eventually touched on the land reform campaign in the North. Two of the cadres admitted that they were participants in the campaign in 1955-6.

- One estimated that 120,000 victims were falsely accused and executed. This number included 40,000 communist cadres.
- The other gave a larger figure: 150,000-160,000 victims killed, among them 60,000 communist cadres.

In general, the conclusions and estimates are similar; especially the number of communist cadres, which ranged from 20-30% of the total number of victims. Though the numbers of victims falsely accused may be different, the acceptable figure is 120,000-200,000 (including cadres and Party members).

According to official statistics, the outcome of the land reform was an award of more than 800,000 hectares of land and rice paddies, plus 100,000 cows and water buffalo, redistributed to 2 million farmers. Nearly 150,000 houses and huts were allocated to new occupants. These estates had been in the possession of people classified as "indigenous oppressors, reactionaries, or traitorous elements." These figures are quite significant in relation to the number of murdered victims. Another estimate for the period 1952-6 was about 150,000 victims (of which 30% were communist cadres and Party members).

Let us note how Hoang Van Hoan described the situation in that period:

... unjust and false verdicts imposed on the victims were concealed and were never brought to light for verification. Those who had been erroneously classified and accused were never exonerated. Grievances against the Party accumulated during the reform campaign have taken root in everyone's heart and have remained intense to this day...



## Vietnam's Lost Revolution *Geoffrey Stewart*

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/who-was-ngo-dinh-diem?>

### Who Was Ngo Dinh Diem?

June 26, 2017

By Geoffrey C. Stewart

Community development projects undertaken in South Vietnam suggest an alternative interpretation of Ngô Đình Diệm: a postcolonial leader.

The ill-fated regime of South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm has endured many criticisms over the years. To name only a few of the worst characterizations, Diệm has been identified as an autocrat, backwards, byzantine, and a Cold War creation of the United States.

Although Diệm's rule over South Vietnam appeared to exhibit each of one these traits at various times during its existence from 1954 to 1963, each dismissive label, in its own way, diminishes the unrealized hopes, aspirations, and possibilities of his administration.

Using archival collections in both Vietnam and the United States, it is now possible to see, from a Vietnamese perspective, what a viable South Vietnamese nation might have looked like. These sources suggest that, of the many ways that Ngô Đình Diệm could be perceived, perhaps the most appropriate is as a postcolonial leader. Throughout the near decade he was at the helm of South Vietnam, Diệm attempted to establish a politically viable and economically sustainable nation in a Cold War world. Like many other leaders of the Global South, he faced developmental challenges left behind by decades of colonial occupation. A fervent nationalist, Diệm was determined to meet these challenges head on in such a way as to maintain as much of South Vietnam's newly-won independence as possible.

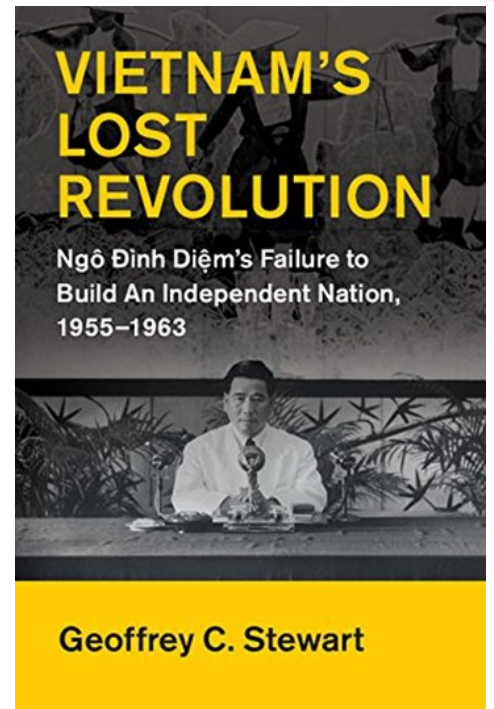
This meant thwarting communist efforts to win the allegiance of the South Vietnamese population while simultaneously avoiding undue dependence on his principle benefactor, the United States. Lacking any industrial or manufacturing sectors upon which to base his state's development, Diệm turned to the one resource he had in abundance: South Vietnam's human capital. As works like Edward Miller's *Misalliance*, Jessica Chapman's *Cauldron of Resistance*, and Philip Catton's *Diem's Final Failure* reveal, Diệm attempted to harness this human capital by fomenting a social revolution across the South Vietnamese countryside.

At the heart of Diệm's project was his confidence in the voluntarism of the South Vietnamese peasantry, a population that he believed would willingly sacrifice individual interest for the greater good of the community and the country.

The records of the Office of the President of the First Republic in National Archives Number 2 in Hồ Chí Minh City and the papers of the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, held by the Michigan State University Archives, offer numerous examples of how this social revolution was put into practice. One such example is South Vietnam's community development plan officially pronounced in 1957.

As Daniel Immerwhar demonstrates, the plan drew upon a low-cost, transnational concept for spurring development that was sweeping the Global South at the midpoint of the twentieth century. The government would send an individual, with a background in sociological or anthropological training, to a particular community, where they would engage with local residents to determine their "felt needs." This facilitator would then draw upon local human and material resources to design various development projects, which would meet the local needs. These projects ranged from agrarian reform to reconstruction of local infrastructure.

Diệm's government, by offering to support such projects, aimed to not only boost its own legitimacy but to also





## Vietnam's Lost Revolution...

successfully bind the population into the overarching nation-building process. Beginning in 1957, Diệm charged the Special Commissariat for Civic Action with implementing this plan. With the goal of transforming each community into a “model village,” the Special Commissariat was to develop capable communities, ready to contribute to the national economy through agricultural and small-scale industrial development (depending on the “family economics” of the village). Under the guidance of Civic Action cadres, the village population would do the work for each project which, where necessary, would be supported by the financial and material assistance of the village, province, and requisite government organ (such as the Ministry of Agriculture or Land Development). As more trained cadres became available, new projects would be initiated in other districts, while previously formed teams would be free to assist with other projects once their initial work had become self-sustaining.

In the end, these efforts came to naught. The Special Commissariat for Civic Action was perpetually undermanned and, at times, suffered from association with some of the regime’s more draconian practices. Ngô Đình Diệm’s broader vision for a viable and independent South Vietnamese nation likewise foundered.

Yet the failure of the community development projects does not mean we should overlook Diệm’s efforts to transform the South Vietnamese state and its society. Archival materials, in locations as disparate as Hồ Chí Minh City and East Lansing, Michigan, demonstrate that Diệm was a postcolonial leader who had national ambitions that transcended Cold War geopolitics. While firmly embedded in the camp of the United States, he did not want to be beholden to it. In addition to winning the allegiance of the South Vietnamese population, Diệm had a plan to create a nation capable of pursuing its own destiny—a plan dealt with at greater length in my new book, *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm’s Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955-1963*.

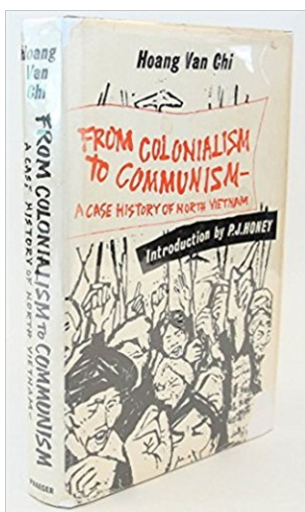
Geoffrey C. Stewart

Assistant professor of history at the University of Western Ontario

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## From Colonialism to Communism *Hoang Van Chi*



Hoang Van Chi, born in North Vietnam in 1913, he graduated from the Lycee Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, joined the French socialist Party in 1936 to promote Vietnamese nationalism in cooperation with French progressives. His medical studies being interrupted by the Japanese invasion, he turned to study the chemical techniques of paper making. In 1945, hoping that cooperation with communists and nationalists would lead to a democratic independent Vietnam, he joined the Viet Minh resistance. He was made director of the National Mint in Hanoi and later director of a paper manufacturing plant.

Hoang’s family suffered heavily during the Land Reform terror: two of his uncles were tortured and died in prison and a cousin and his wife were driven to commit suicide. In April 1955, he escaped from North Vietnam.

He worked for a time in Saigon then as a vice-consul in Delhi. In 1960, he came to Europe settling eventually in Paris where he combines technical translation work with writing books and articles.

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