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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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Extrajudicial Killings After the War

Nghia M. Vo

"The Vietnamese communists are experts in mass murder: they have had nearly 40 years' practice at it [when they entered Saigon in 1975]," Nguyễn Văn Cảnh, Professor at the Law School of Saigon University warned us. They are good at killing military personnel on the battlefields as well as civilians in towns and cities. After wiping out the members of the various nationalist parties in northern Vietnam in 1945-46 and killing 50-70,000 northern land owners in 1953-56, they proceeded with suppressing government representatives in South Vietnam in 1954-60 and outright killing more than 3,000 civilians during the Tết Offensive in 1968. (1)

The communist road to total control of Vietnam was littered with the blood of Vietnamese people. This discussion deals only with the killings committed by the Vietnamese communists after 1975. They systematically proceeded with eliminating people they did not like and were far from gentle people. Extrajudicial killings can be grouped into four categories: wanton killings, reeducation camps, new economic zones (NEZ), and boat escapes. While some were local and fairly unorganized, others were widespread and sophisticated in scheme and organization.

1. Wanton Killings

The first thing the communists did when they entered Saigon on 30 April, 1975 was to take control of all South Vietnamese institutions, including hospitals. By 1400, they began kicking out all the hospitalized patients of the 2,000-bed Cộng Hòa Military Hospital including patients on the operating tables. "Seriously wounded soldiers whose limbs were torn and bleeding, some with stomachs cut open and intestines exposed were pulled out to the terrace in front of the hospital gate. Many died in a short time. I had never imagined that such barbarism would happen. " (2) Hundreds of cyclo drivers having heard about the story came by to offer their services for free. To sympathize with the patients' ordeal, they either transported them to local private hospitals or bus stations because many lived outside the city and even bought them food. Other people gave patients, money to buy tickets to return home.

According to Nguyễn Công Hoàn, a legislator under Thiệu and then under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam until he escaped by boat in 1977, "over five hundred people in the villages of Hoa Thảng, Hoa Tri, Hoa Quang, and Hoa Kiên (all in Tuy Hòa district) were murdered during the first days of the [communist] occupation. (3)

Reprisals by the Việt Cộng can be grouped into: secret liquidations or so called people's trials followed by official executions. The extreme cruelty and barbarity of these killings were part of the communists' plan to terrorize the population. Beheading, stabbing, and denial of burial served to outrage and humiliate the victims' families. (4)

2. Reeducation camps

The whole country was under seclusion. Internment camps were set up or built anew often by the prisoners themselves. The highest ranking officials, civilians and officers, were said to have "committed serious crimes against the people" and sent to northern camps. Included were members of the air-borne, marines, and rangers; members of nationalist parties; police and intelligence officers. The southern camps tended to be more specialized.

The purpose of the camps was to lock up and "exact revenge against whole classes of people, with scarcely a pretense of legality and with total disregard for human rights." Prisoners were controlled by hunger, deprived of medical care, terrorized, tortured, and summarily executed. Nguyễn Mạnh Cồn, a writer, was shot at Xuyên Mộc Camp in Đồng Nai Province because he had begun a hunger strike in an attempt to gain his release. Venerable Thích Thiện Minh, vice president of the United Buddhist Church died in Hàm Tân Z-30D Camp on 17 October, 1978 because of imprisonment and torture. (5)

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Extrajudicial Killings...

3. New economic zones

Civilians were sent to the NEZ that functioned as “reeducation camps without fences.” People were forced to move to the NEZ under the threat of being sent to reeducation camps, having their food ration cards withdrawn, or not allowing their children to go to schools.

Most NEZ were disastrous failures. Such was the case of the Lê Minh Xuân NEZ about 30 km northwest of Saigon. The party cadres in charge of the projects failed to take a soil sample before ordering the land plowed and diked. About a foot below the surface was a layer of acid soil. When mixed with water, the soil poisoned the entire planting area. The land, freshly plowed, irrigated and worked on had turned to wilderness again. Huts were deserted and villages abandoned. People tried to return to the city, where since their homes had been confiscated, they joined the thousands already sleeping in the streets. In Minh Hải Province, people were dumped in a NEZ where land was inundated with salt water. The only way to live was to dig clams, but there were not enough of these to go around. (6) The unschooled and ignorant communists created one disaster after another.

4. Boat escapes

Unable to live under the erratic and repressive communist regime, people looked for ways to escape. It had been said that had lamp posts known how to run, they too would run out of Vietnam. The massive refugee exodus was not merely a result of the harshness of life there, but was part of Vietnamese strategy in Southeast Asia. The risks were terrible: death by inanition because of lack of food, water, or fuel or in the hands of pirates, government officials, or inclement weather like storms; probably half of those who left had been drowned. The choice was tragic and unhuman: it was either death under a repressive and cruel government or from drowning at sea.

The four ways of becoming a refugee were:

- **Escape (đi chui):** people bought a fishing boat, worked temporarily as fishermen, sold fish to the government and officially bought gas, which they saved for a planned escape. If caught, they got arrested.
- **Escape with permission of local authorities (mua bài).** They offered bribes to local authorities in an attempted escape during nighttime. They sometimes got caught by higher echelon officials or the Naval Patrol Forces who were not involved in the bribery scheme. This could mean more bribes or imprisonment: a hellish circle of loss and suffering. The usual bribe was six to twelve taels of gold per person. (7)
- **The semi-official way (đi bán chánh thức).** The provincial party committee was in charge of the matter. Each refugee paid 12 taels of gold to the organizer who bought the boat and gas and handed over half of the bribe to the party committee. The refugees offered their possessions: houses, cars, and so on to the party committee before leaving.
- **Official registration (đăng ký chánh thức).** This was handled by the central government for ethnic Chinese. Each refugee paid 12 taels and handed over the family book and personal possessions. Steel hulled-refugee ships were used to carry 3-4,000 refugees.

Over half-a million people were released under Hanoi’s human trafficking scheme. Boats were sunk and a great number of refugees drowned. (8) Millions of others escaped unofficially. It was surprising to witness a bloody and idealistic “liberation” movement turn degenerate into a corrupt human trafficking scheme. (9) The irony of the situation was that if attempted escapees had bribed local officials, they could be caught by higher government officials. That could mean more bribes or imprisonment: a vicious hellish circle of suffering.

5. Continuing repression.

The southerners who either did not have the means or were unlucky in their escape attempts were forced to remain in their country where they were treated as third class citizens subjected to the whims of the rulers.

The cost of the occupation of South Vietnam after 1975 was high. Some authors have tried to estimate it and came back with almost half a million casualties (Table 1).

Events	Estimated number of casualties	Authors
Killings	60,000 (low)	Desbarats (10)
	100,000 (high)	Rummel (11)
Reeducation camps	95,000	Rummel (11)
New economic zones	100,000	Rummel (11)
Boat people	250,000	Rummel (11)
Total	485,000	Rummel (11)

Table 1. Extrajudicial killings after the Vietnam War

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Extrajudicial Killings ...

In conclusion, although there was no visible blood bath immediately after the war (1975) like the one in Cambodia—How many people had to die, to call it a bloodbath?— 60 to 100,000 South Vietnamese were killed, most of them during the first two years after the war. (11) There was and is a continuing repression as well as killing of southerners under the present regime: a low-key, insidious blood bath that continues until today. Overall, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) has killed close to half a million South Vietnamese since 1975 (table 1). They were and are the real murderers.

“Crimes against humanity” has been defined as, “Murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population before and during the war; or persecutions on political, racial, or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.” (12)

“War crimes” was defined as, “The deportation, enslavement, or mass scale and systematic practice of summary executions, abduction of persons following their disappearance, torture, or inhuman acts inspired by political, philosophical, racial, or religious motives, or organized for the purpose of implementing a concerted effort against a civilian population group.” (13)

The SRV has committed both war crimes and crimes against humanity in its conquest and occupation of South Vietnam. History will someday judge Hồ Chí Minh, Lê Duẩn and the Communist Party of Indochina (CPV) members as flawed, rogue, and corrupt leaders in their quest to conquer South Vietnam. They had erred into spreading communism instead of bringing freedom and independence to the people of Vietnam. Their regime is one of “mendacity and mendacity” (14) and they in a twisted irony managed to become a puppet of communist China.

Under communist regime, Vietnam is stuck to the lower rung of the world community: a 20 out of 100 freedom index and 135/196 GDP per capita. (15) Vietnam as a proud nation that claims of having a four millennia history deserves better leaders than these crooked CPV members.

Notes

1. Nguyen Van Canh. *Vietnam Under Communism. 1975-1982*. Stanford, Stanford University, 1981: pp. 120-22; Turner, Robert. *Vietnamese Communism*. Stanford University, Stanford, 1975: pp. 53-59, 142-146.
2. Nguyen Cong Luan. *Nationalist in the Vietnam War*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 2012, p. 459-60.
3. Nguyen Van Canh, p. 124.
4. Ibid, p. 128.
5. Ibid, pp. 210-216.
6. Vo, Nghia M. *The Bamboo Gulag. Political Imprisonment in Communist Vietnam*. McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2004: pp. 188-197; Nguyen Van Canh, pp. 219-221.
7. Vo, Nghia M. *The Vietnamese Boat People*, 1954 and 1972-1992. McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2006: pp. 115-129. A tael equals 37 grams or 1.3 ounce.
8. Nguyen Van Canh, pp. 129-130.
9. Vo, Nghia M. *The Vietnamese Boat People*, pp. 193-198.
10. Desbarats, Jacqueline. "Repression in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Executions and Population Relocation." *The Vietnam Debate: A Fresh Look at the Arguments*, [edited] by John Norton Moore. New York: University Press of America, 1990, pp. 193-201.
11. Rummel, R.J. Statistics of Vietnamese Genocide Estimates, Calculations and Sources. <https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/SOD.CHAP6.HTM>
12. Courtois et al. *The Black Book of Communism. Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press. 1999, p. 6.
13. Ibid, p. 7.
14. Dommen, Arthur. *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 1006.
15. In 2019 Vietnam has a freedom index of 20 (with 0 being the worst and 100 the best). <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>
16. With a GDP per capita of \$2,342, Vietnam ranks 135 over 192 countries in the world [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)_per_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)_per_capita)

Lady of LaVang in Orange County

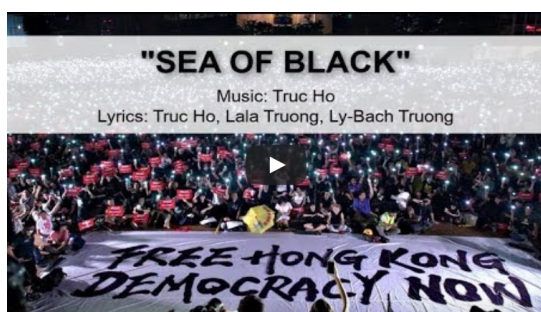
A piece of Vietnam has arrived in the Diocese of Orange County, the home of the largest Vietnamese population outside of Vietnam itself. It is in the form of a 12-foot statue of Our Lady of La Vang.

<https://www.romereports.com/en/2019/06/30/orange-county-brings-larger-than-life-marble-statue-of-our-lady-to-vietnamese-community/>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7XOM0oMb_4



Freedom, Democracy: Sea of Black



The overseas Vietnamese community supports the 2019 Hong Kong Free Democracy Movement by dedicating the Vietnamese-English song SEA OF BLACK to the Hong Kong protesters.

Hong Kong Sea of Black
Sea of hearts, Sea of love,
Hong Kong Land of Free,
Land of You, of Me.
The whole world is watching you all the way...

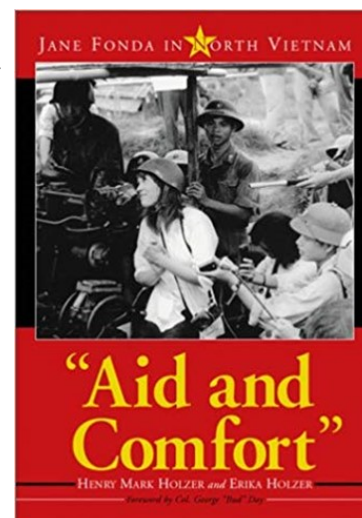
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gh8-kT-9uL4>
Music by Truc Ho

Truc Ho, born Hung Anh Truong is a well-known and successful Vietnamese-American musician turned producer for his series of musical variety shows entitled *Asia* (produced by his own company Asia Entertainment, Inc.) and his 24 hour-Vietnamese channel Saigon Broadcasting Television Network (SBTN).

Aid and Comfort: Jane Fonda in Vietnam Henry Mark Holzer

Jane Fonda's visit to Hanoi in July 1972 and her pro-North Vietnamese, anti-American conduct, especially her pose with an anti-aircraft gun used to shoot down American planes and her propaganda broadcasts directed toward American troops, angered many Americans. In their eyes, she was guilty of treason, but she was never charged by the American legal system. Instead, she has made millions, been the recipient of countless awards, and remained an honored American icon.

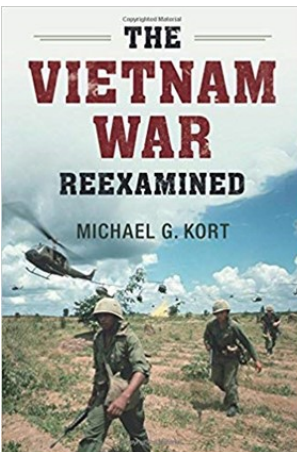
This work investigates Fonda's activities in North Vietnam and argues that she could have been indicted for treason, that there would have been enough evidence to take the case to a jury, that she could have been convicted, and that a conviction probably would have been upheld on appeal. It also considers Fonda's early life and the effect it had on her behavior and beliefs in her later years, her audience of American POWs who were forced by the Vietnamese to listen to her broadcasts condemning them as war criminals, her arrival in Vietnam and how it was viewed by American servicemen and civilians, the crime of treason throughout history, and the only Congressional inquiry into her actions, which resulted in the government's decision to take no legal action against her. Texts of Fonda's radio broadcasts to American servicemen comprise the appendix.



Available on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Aid-Comfort-Fonda-North-Vietnam/dp/078641247X/>

The Vietnam War Reexamined *Michael Kort*



Going beyond the dominant orthodox narrative to incorporate insight from revisionist scholarship on the Vietnam War, Michael G. Kort presents the case that the United States should have been able to win the war, and at a much lower cost than it suffered in defeat. Presenting a study that is both historiographic and a narrative history, Kort analyzes important factors such as the strong nationalist credentials and leadership qualities of South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem; the flawed military strategy of 'graduated response' developed by Robert McNamara; and the real reasons South Vietnam collapsed in the face of a massive North Vietnamese invasion in 1975. Kort shows how the US commitment to defend South Vietnam was not a strategic error but a policy consistent with US security interests during the Cold War, and that there were potentially viable strategic approaches to the war that might have saved South Vietnam.

Available on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Vietnam-Reexamined-Cambridge-Essential-Histories/dp/1107628172/>

Vietnam Embalms a Sacred Turtle, Lenin-style

By **Mike Ives**; March 20, 2019

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/world/asia/vietnam-turtle-embalmed.html?>

Vietnam has embalmed a turtle that many saw as a symbol of the country's independence and longevity until its death in 2016, the state-run news media reported.

The move catapults the animal, *known as Cu Rua, or Great-Grandfather Turtle*, into an elite club of famous figures embalmed and put on display by Communist regimes. That list includes Lenin, Mao, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il of North Korea, and Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's own revolutionary hero.

"The extremely rare giant turtle has been plastinated and lodged in a temple" at Hoan Kiem Lake in Hanoi, the capital, where it once lived, the news site VnExpress *reported on Tuesday*. Plastination, a method of preserving bodies by *infusing them with resins*, was developed by a German anatomist in the 1970s.



Cu Rua in its glass case this week at Ngoc Son Temple in Hanoi, Vietnam. Many Vietnamese saw the turtle, which died in 2016, as a symbol of the country's independence and longevity. Credit: Luong Thai Linh/EPA, via Shutterstock

In plastic as in life, Cu Rua carries immense spiritual and cultural significance in Vietnam. A Vietnamese legend says that in the 15th century, a nationalist hero borrowed a magic sword, used it to drive out occupying Chinese forces and returned it to a turtle that surfaced in Hoan Kiem, the Lake of the Returned Sword. A turtle shrine was built on a small island in the lake in the 1880s, and the "great-grandfather" that died there in 2016 was widely thought to be the earthly embodiment of the ancient legend.

The "returned sword" legend is convenient for Vietnam's government as a nationalist symbol of resistance to China, the country's northern neighbor and former occupier. Cu Rua's death, which occurred during a heated national debate about Vietnam's perceived political and economic dependence on China, prompted an outpouring of sadness. Some Vietnamese saw it as a bad omen for the country and the ruling Communist Party, which has been in power for decades.

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Vietnam Embalms a Sacred Turtle...

Cu Rua was believed to have died of natural causes. But Hoan Kiem Lake is notoriously polluted, and the turtle was occasionally seen surfacing for oxygen in the years before it died. The death was also a loss for biological history because Cu Rua, who weighed an estimated 360 pounds, had been among the last of the Yangtze giant soft-shell turtles.

The species, known as *Rafetus swinhoei*, was once common in northern Vietnam's Red River Delta but was hunted down in the 1970s and 1980s. Cu Rua's death left just three known specimens — a couple in a zoo in Suzhou, China, and one turtle in Dong Mo Lake, outside Hanoi, whose sex has not been revealed.

The Suzhou turtles have produced no offspring, Tim McCormack, the program director of the Asian Turtle Program, a conservation group based in Hanoi, [wrote last April](#). But he added that a fourth member of the species had been found in Xuan Khanh Lake, outside Hanoi, fueling hopes that wild *Rafetus swinhoei* could be brought together for captive breeding.

A few months later, Mr. McCormack wrote that the program had [potentially found a second turtle](#) of the same species in Dong Mo Lake, but that more investigation was needed to confirm the discovery. He said on Wednesday that a "species recovery" alliance, including Vietnamese officials and international wildlife advocacy groups, was working on a plan to capture known members of the species, determine their sex and possibly breed them.

"Finding the second animal has got people excited in the species again, and we believe it can be saved if we can bring them together," Mr. McCormack said in an email.

After Cu Rua's death, the corpse was kept in cold storage for weeks at the Vietnam National Museum of Nature, at minus 15 degrees Celsius, as the authorities debated how best to preserve it.

"It is not simple to mummify the turtle, so intensive consideration is inevitable," Nguyen Trung Minh, the museum's director general, said in 2016. The government ultimately rejected traditional mummification techniques and opted to plastify the animal instead, with help from German experts.

The plastinated Cu Rua now shares a room in Ngoc Son Temple with an embalmed relative who died in 1967. It can now be safely displayed at room temperature, but to shield it from dust, mildew and sunlight, the authorities have placed it in a glass case.

Ngoc Son Temple sits on an island in Hoan Kiem Lake that is connected to shore by a footbridge. The lake is a short drive from Ho Chi Minh's granite-and-marble mausoleum, which Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader, [visited this month](#) after his failed summit meeting with President Trump.



Cu Rua underwent plastination, a method of preserving bodies by infusing them with resins.
Credit Luong Thai Linh/EPA, via Shutterstock