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Vietnam: The First Year

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On the veranda of the Continental Hotel overlooking the main square of Saigon, the foreign officers, the girls in elegant Western clothes, the long-haired children of the Saigon bourgeoisie are gone now, replaced by young soldiers from Hanoi and peasants who have come to town as political commissars of the revolution. They sit in the same old yellow armchairs drinking the locally made “33” beer or *café filtre*.

The waiters, who now serve without their old white uniforms, are all still there, except Joseph, who on April 30 last year turned out to be a Vietcong agent and now, smiling with a new set of false teeth and wearing a red armband on his green uniform, is in charge of security for the whole block. Monsieur Loi, the old Vietnamese manager of the hotel, after a public trial in which he was accused of being a “*comprador*” exploiter, has “retired,” and his place has been taken over by a revolutionary management committee. The hotel is no longer for private citizens or tourists. It is now the “Hotel of the Popular Insurrection,” and it is exclusively reserved for official delegations and cadres coming from the North.

On Tu Do Street girls in miniskirts still wave at the passers-by from the dark doors of open bars, young boys in tight, colored shirts still ride their Hondas. Except for a few shops owned by Indians who have left the country, the old boutiques where one can buy a cheap leather jacket or a baseball cap with the golden inscription “boss” are still open for business. The Russians, whom the Saigoneses refer to as “Americans without dollars,” seem the rare patrons. The Miramar Hotel, which after Giai Phong—the liberation—was taken over by the revolutionary government, is managed by a cadre appointed by the new authorities; but along with a stream of Vietnamese experts and political commissars arriving from Hanoi it now houses a group of “obstinate” Saigon girls who still work at their classic trade, paid by the hour.

Untamed Saigon, one might think. But a visitor like myself, who left Saigon three months after the communist takeover and returns looking for places and persons he knew, soon realizes that the first impression of an unchanged Saigon is false. Under the old, hard skin of a city that has already survived so many upheavals, life has been profoundly transformed, and the revolution is turning everything upside down, as it enters families, schools, factories, and churches.

The rich wife of Senator Tran Van Thuyen, one of the “puppets” in the “reeducation camps,” still lives in her elegant villa on Hung Tap Tu Street; but having lost all her income she has opened a bicycle shop at her front gate. The whole family of N. C. Tien, a landlord of the Delta, was arrested while trying to leave the country by boat out of Nha Trang. The tricyclo driver and his family whom I used to visit in Gia Dinh during the war have gone back to work as peasants in the village of Ben Suc from which they came as refugees in 1967. (The Americans had leveled it with bulldozers to deprive the Vietcong of the support of the population.)

Nguyen Thi Man, a young girl at Saigon University who spent four years in the tiger cages of Con Son island, and whom I saw after she was freed, is in Hanoi to take a three-year course that will turn her into a *can-bo* (political cadre or commissar). Her father, an unemployed journalist under Thieu, is now an editor with *Saigon Giai Phong*. Madame Ngo Ba Thanh, a leader of the “third force” who was imprisoned by Thieu, has been elected to the new national assembly of reunified Vietnam. Her children, one of them a former drug addict, are members of the revolutionary youth organization and spend one week every month doing “socialist work” in the countryside. Whether they regret the old days or welcome the “new revolutionary life,” the people of Saigon know that the soul of Saigon has changed.

From the windows of a car traveling from Hanoi to Saigon, Vietnam looks today like a gigantic construction site. Everywhere along the 1,752 kilometers of “Highway One” you see thousands of people digging new canals, repairing dikes and bridges. Small groups work at rebuilding houses. In the North the new walls are made of mud, the roofs of straw; in the South of bricks and tiles. The war left both parts of the country devastated, but the North was terribly poor and it suffered much greater damage, while the South was relatively rich. One year of peace has hardly changed this situation. The government department stores in Hanoi are still pathetically empty and people queue for a new delivery of shirts or matches. Soap is still a dream and the only kind of shoes available are still the Ho Chi Minh sandals made of old rubber tires or their plastic equivalent. In the South, by contrast, people still enjoy the leftovers of the American largesse. In Hanoi the sight of a Honda, brought back by a proud *bo-doi* (people’s army soldier), still gathers a crowd; in the South it is common.

Since 1965 all the surplus produced by the North went into the war effort, and with the increase in population—and the ruinous bombing of dikes, farms, factories, and over a thousand villages—the standard of living went steadily down. In the South during the same period billions of US dollars were pumped into the economy, mainly in the cities. Saigon therefore lived on wealth that was not produced by its people. The price of this wealth was the war. Now the false wealth of the past is slowly disappearing and people have to adapt themselves to the new conditions. The war is over but the price of peace is Vietnamese poverty.

Life in Saigon has become much harder than it used to be. There is no starvation but people eat less today than they did a year ago. They have to buy rice in addition to the quota sold by the government at the official price, and this costs three times more than in the past; milk costs six times more, cigarettes four times, beer twice more.

Thousands of the city’s unemployed stand in line, sometimes for days, in front of the state-controlled stores to get goods at the official price and then to sell them on the free market. A man who was queueing up in front of the old Le Loi Hotel, now turned into a government store, told me: “I get rice, salt, matches, sugar, and cigarettes, but I don’t smoke and with what I make out of reselling the cigarettes I pay for the rest.”

With their money lost in frozen bank accounts or in the monetary reform, with no new jobs available to them, the well-to-do Southerners are now selling, day by day, all their possessions. Many of the goods with which the Americans flooded the South are now moving toward Hanoi through the *bo-fois*, who spend in Saigon the savings of a Northern peasantry that for over ten years has had nothing to buy. At the bridge of Ben Hai, at the seventeenth parallel, the old border between the two countries, there is a continuous stream of buses coming from Saigon and heading back to Hanoi loaded with people, fans, sewing machines, and TV sets. One *bo-doi* was slowly crossing the bridge on foot with the frames of two bicycles on his shoulders. (This border, by the way, did not seem to be seriously policed: our car stopped but the guards who were supposed to stamp my passport were not there.)

“To survive you have to produce. To produce you have to till the land.” This is the slogan the *can-bos* constantly repeat to the populations of the cities. Thirty thousand people have already left Hue for the “new economic zones”; half a million have left Da Nang and 600,000 Saigon. Until now the revolutionary regime has invited, encouraged, but not forced people to go to the countryside. The only pressure that has been brought to bear is the natural pressure created by worsening economic conditions. But people still cling to their old lives in the city. In Saigon, for instance, many families no longer register for the free distribution of rice; they fear that they will be asked to resettle if they do so. In the first year since the communist takeover the urban population, particularly that of Saigon, has been treated with great caution and has been granted special privileges by the new authorities. (Saigon has a larger quota per person for rice and gasoline than does Hanoi.) But according to the official estimates, as many as 8 million more urban dwellers throughout South Vietnam will have to be resettled in the countryside, and it is likely that the grace period granted to the cities may soon be over.

The problems facing the government of reunified Vietnam are immense: the South is accustomed to comforts it can no longer afford; the North is thirsty for consumer goods it could not get during decades of war and sacrifices; but the slow-moving economy has a limited industrial base. Morale is sagging in both parts of the country, but for different reasons. A year ago one sensed that the coming of peace was itself a great victory, but the joy has evaporated with the passing months. In the South peace has meant more unemployment (1.5 million “puppet” soldiers and officials of the former regime have been added to the 1.5 million jobless that already existed under Thieu, not counting the dependent families of these unemployed). It has meant that urban people have had to become peasants and to work harder than ever before.

In the North peace has not brought home the sons still in the army. Hanoi has not demobilized its forces, and could not, since there was no way to absorb new manpower in the present economy. Peace has also not yet brought about many of the material improvements that people hoped it would. Moreover, the fighting spirit that dominated the North during the war has faded. “Before, the national sport was shooting down B-52s; now it is football,” a diplomat in Hanoi said. “People here are now asking for more comfort, more goods. They see no reason why they should continue to make sacrifices.” Even families living in the center of Hanoi, let alone those in the northern countryside, have no running water and their clothing is barely sufficient. During the recent exceptionally cold winter, I was told, some people died because they did not have woolen pullovers.

In the small backyard factories of Hanoi that run twenty-four hours a day in the dim light of tiny lamps, men and women work diligently in conditions where hygiene and safety are primitive. Knowing how crippled their two economies have become, the new revolutionary authorities have renounced any radical models of development based on self-sufficiency and therefore exclusively on agriculture (e.g., the Khmer Rouge model). They have adopted an economic strategy that relies on foreign aid to help them to build an industrial base quickly. “It has become almost embarrassing,” a European ambassador in Hanoi told me. “Every time we meet a high official we are asked what we are prepared to give or to invest

in this country.”

For the time being the Soviet Union might be called the Maecenas of Vietnam, along with other East European countries. While the Chinese are hardly visible and maintain only a limited aid project, the Russians offer even more than the Vietnamese ask for. The Hanoi government sees the danger in this. Having decided it must depend on foreign help, but wanting to protect its own independence, it must diversify the sources of this aid. That is why Hanoi is now offering diplomatic relations to the United States, hoping that Washington will help with the reconstruction of the country, that it will seize the opportunity to prevent Vietnam from becoming a Soviet economic dependency. One Vietnamese official surprised me by saying: “On a base of mutual interest we are prepared to accept American private investments in the country.” Though Hanoi’s authorities are reluctant to say so openly, the fact remains that what Vietnam has to offer to Western capitalism is a hardworking force of cheap labor.*

The revolutionary authorities I talked to seemed particularly aware of the mood of the Southern population, which would react against any plan for rapid collectivization. With considerable disregard for ideological purity, they reiterate nowadays that the first priority of Vietnam is production, and they see no better way to reach this goal than to encourage some private initiative and private enterprise. Southern construction companies, which during the war used to work for the Americans, have now been given contracts to build large housing developments around Hanoi, and Southern capitalists are being encouraged to continue with their activities.

Even in the “new economic zones,” where everything is now being built from scratch and where it would have been easier to impose a more socialist mode of production since most peasants have no tradition of owning their own land, one often finds that “private property” is the rule. Obviously, if South Vietnam is to be transformed into a socialist society comparable to that of the North, many of these material incentives will eventually be replaced by more political ones. One can expect ambitious ideological campaigns to encourage a spirit of sacrifice and communal effort for national reconstruction. But there could also develop among the population a growing attitude of apathy and noncooperation, or even cases of open rebellion and, consequently, serious violence.

Such dangers are present in Vietnam today and some people already see the “reeducation camps” as a sign of the “repressive” policies of the new regime. At least 200,000 persons—some would claim 300,000—are still in these camps, which are dispersed throughout the country but are mainly concentrated in remote areas and the jungles. The revolutionary authorities call them “schools of reeducation”; the families of those who are inside call them “concentration camps.” I visited one of these places in Tay Ninh Province behind the Black Virgin mountain. After having spent one day there I came out with the impression I had been in a “model prison” where the inmates were not being punished for their “crimes”; they were doing manual labor—learning how to become carpenters, blacksmiths, farmers—and had lectures and classes several hours a day. From what I could gather, the regime in the other camps is not harsh; but no journalist should claim he knows much about such camps, having been shown one.

The two main reasons given for keeping former army officers and officials of the Thieu regime on in the camps were that the government genuinely desired to prepare them for a new life and that it had to segregate them as a security precaution. But the protracted period of detention has aroused doubts about the policy of “national reconciliation and concord” announced by the revolutionary authorities after Giai Phong. This is particularly felt in Saigon where almost every family has someone in the camps. People who had worked for the former regime believed they would be massacred by the communists. They were not—and even the most disaffected do not claim that massacres took place. People were told, however, that after a period of *hoc tap* (reeducation) they would be forgiven and would become citizens of the new Vietnam like everybody else. They were relieved; but still the men in the camps did not come home. On May 25 the government issued a decree saying that reeducation could last for a total of three years for many of the former “puppets.” While it spoke of leniency and probation for those who “wholeheartedly make efforts,” it threatened “appropriate punishment” for those of “an unchanged stubborn nature.” Well before the May 25 decree much of the gratitude that people who had been on the Saigon side of the war felt at first toward the new rulers had faded away.

When I left Vietnam last summer, three months after the liberation of Saigon, even people who had been staunch anticommunists showed, in the general euphoria, a surprising willingness to cooperate with the new authorities. Now many of these same people, feeling that they are under suspicion and rejected by the revolution, have become passive, withdrawn. The atmosphere in the Southern cities has become heavy with apprehension; a gap of suspicion has grown between the revolutionaries and certain groups in the South. This is partly because many cadres have been unable to “establish correct links with the masses.” Seasoned guerrilla fighters, excellent at setting up ambushes and shooting down American planes, have proved to be less good at administering the villages and cities entrusted to them. Younger and politically raw *can-bos* have often shown themselves to be authoritarian, unsophisticated, and at times even corrupt. The communists lost many of their best cadres in both the Têt offensive and the American-sponsored Phoenix program—set up precisely to assassinate all suspect *can-bos*. They now suffer heavily from the weaknesses of their more recent recruits.

The revolutionary regime is aware of these problems. It discusses them publicly, admits that some *can-bos* have acted badly, and invites the population to denounce any cadre who misbehaves. But even this cannot prevent the erosion of the moral superiority which the revolutionaries enjoyed immediately after the liberation. Furthermore, the new regime remains distrustful of everybody and everything that lived under the Thieu regime and the American influence. There are many Southerners with valuable skills which might be put to use. The May 25 decree states that doctors and other advanced technicians will be released early from the camps, subject to “on the spot surveillance” for six months; but how much scope they will be given remains to be seen. As of this spring, no Southerner over forty without a revolutionary record could get a job with the new government. Instead many thousands of people from the North (some estimates put the figure as high as half a million) have been imported to take over the responsibilities for administering many aspects of life throughout the South.

Education is one of these. Teachers suspected of having been strongly connected with the old regime have been fired, and at least one thousand school-masters teaching in the South come from the North. Under the new educational system all private schools, including the Catholic ones, have been nationalized. New elementary school textbooks are designed to encourage national loyalty and socialist attitudes. In one primary textbook I found a story about Lenin refusing to get ahead of other customers in a Moscow barber shop. “No privileges,” he said, “in a socialist society.”

It seems likely that the very young will quickly absorb revolutionary ideas. Certainly for the regime they represent the hope of linking the North and South, of canceling the anticommunist past in favor of the socialist future. The problem remains with the older generation, with people who lived under the Thieu regime and whose “hearts and minds” have still to be won. Unless these people are convinced by persuasion, coercion will probably be resorted to. The reeducation camps are now being used, it is claimed, to adapt people of the old regime to a new way of life, and are thus justified not only as necessary and “positive,” but as only temporary. They could become, however, permanent “institutions” where those who are so stubborn or “insane” as to oppose revolutionary changes will continue to be isolated.

Most modern revolutions have tended to become more rigid and bureaucratic after consolidating their power, and Vietnam’s is no exception. The treatment of Ho Chi Minh is a small but telling example. While he was alive, and until the end of the war, Ho Chi Minh was referred to by everybody as “*Bac Ho*” (Uncle Ho), a fatherly peasant figure in a world of peasants. Now Ho Chi Minh is referred to as “the glorious president Ho Chi Minh,” and his body, badly preserved by the Russians, and illuminated by macabre red and yellowish lights, lies on display in a glass coffin inside the newly completed Stalin-like mausoleum on Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi. On Sunday mornings thousands of Vietnamese line up, waiting patiently their turn to walk by the glass coffin under the suspicious eyes of guards in ceremonial uniforms; they warn the people to take off their hats and keep their arms straight.

The signs of a firmly authoritarian political line are emerging in today’s Vietnam. One observer defined it to me as “Stalinist-Confucian.” This line seems to have its main power base in the Northern army. Whether it will win against a more open and less dogmatic policy, one in favor of building socialism at a slower pace—and inclined to place more confidence in the Southern population—is a great question for the future. Certainly this second approach is favored by many of the North Vietnamese civilian leaders as well as by members of the former Southern provisional revolutionary government. My impression is that such gradualists would be encouraged and strengthened if the Western nations, and particularly the US, were to respond favorably to Vietnamese offers of relations and its need for aid—while they will become weaker if Vietnam remains isolated, and thus dependent mainly on the USSR.

The danger of a tougher and more authoritarian policy is accompanied by the strongly bureaucratic mentality of the North which is spreading South and could be a serious handicap to the country’s development. In Hanoi a visitor is appalled to find how many papers have to be filled out to get a room in a hotel, to pay for a restaurant bill, not to mention sending a press telegram. Although the new Aeroflot jet from Laos can no longer land at the Gia Lam airport, but lands instead at a military base forty kilometers outside Hanoi, passengers are still taken daily to the old airport to go through immigration and customs. It would obviously be more reasonable to transfer a few policemen from Gia Lam to the military airfield. Just outside Hanoi a much needed factory, built with Polish aid, was completed eight months ago; but work has not yet started since the machinery is still in huge containers lost in the chaos of unloaded and undelivered goods that jam the Haiphong docks.

This kind of bureaucratic muddle has already reached Saigon. When I found the new brand of cigarettes “Saigon Giai Phong” utterly unsmokable, I was told that the political commissar in charge of the tobacco factory had refused to sign the delivery orders until he had personally inspected all the stocks in the warehouses. Thus, for weeks there had been no cigarettes on the market. When they finally arrived they were all stale from having been kept too long in the storerooms.

Vietnam, one year after the end of the war, can already claim important successes in public health and agriculture and education. That they should have been accomplished at all by, and in, a country that has suffered so much from bombing, defoliation, and destruction is itself remarkable. But what mainly impresses the visitor is how immense are the problems created by peace. For the first time in their lives most Southern Vietnamese can feel free of the old fears—of being killed, bombed, drafted, sent to the front; of being tortured by police and of being under the control of foreign masters or protectors. Now Vietnam is at last being reunified by Vietnamese—but it is not, as some might have expected, a peace that can easily be enjoyed. The Vietnamese communists who brought about these changes are now remodeling the society, which means revolution; and that revolution, as the Vietnamese people are daily discovering, is a hard, painful process. Above all it will mean hard work in the Southern rice fields—and no agricultural labor is more taxing—since those fields are the main, and the most immediate, source of survival in this underdeveloped but over-urbanized country.

So there can be little relaxation now and there will be less in the future. The economy is the new battlefield of Vietnam. As a member of the Party Central Committee in Hanoi said to me: "It is our third resistance. We fought the first one against the French, the second against the Americans, now we have to fight a new war against our own underdevelopment."

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On the need for assistance—which an act of Congress now forbids the US to provide directly or indirectly—it is worth quoting from the report of the recent US mission to Vietnam led by the Swiss diplomat and industrialist Dr. Victor Umbricht:

Because of the vast scale of the disaster, it is evident that the work of national rehabilitation far exceeds the human and material capacity of the Viet-Nameese people. The grave shortage of rollingstock, construction materials and machinery of all kinds, cranes, tractors, vehicles, agricultural equipment, farm tools, draught animals and chemical and other fertilizers makes this task particularly arduous.

This is all the more true because, as a result of the destruction of local factories, the lack of establishments capable of manufacturing such products or the inadequacy of local production, such equipment will have to come essentially from foreign countries. Its importation on a commercial basis would be hampered by almost insurmountable obstacles resulting from a lack of foreign exchange.

It is therefore necessary, indeed essential, that the international community should provide assistance to Viet-Nam, in order that the country may carry out the heavy task it has set itself: repairing the damage caused by a long and devastating war. While it is true that prompt and effective assistance from the international community can relieve present difficulties to a considerable extent, it is equally apparent that the lack of such outside support will doom the country to great distress for many years to come.

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