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**Vietnam, 1975-1980:
Reflections on a Revolution**

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On the morrow of the victory of the communist forces in April 1975, Vietnam had everything going for it: peace, territorial and political unity, a population apprehensive but prepared to cooperate with its new rulers, an international community - including former enemies - ready to help the Vietnamese people and their new government in the task of reconstruction and development. Now, five years later, all that is gone, and Vietnam finds itself literally in a hole so deep that there seems to be little hope that it will be able to climb out in the near or distant future.

The story of Vietnam since 1975 is indeed a depressing, astonishing, and disturbing one. It is the story of a spectacular and disastrous failure. All visitors returning from that country are fully agreed on this point. It is the story of shattered illusions, darkened horizons, and evaporated hopes; of revolutionaries who have succeeded brilliantly in war, but failed miserably in peace; of a people who have to watch in utter disbelief the well-deserved fruits of their long years of sacrifice and suffering thrown away.

If Ho Chi Minh were to be resurrected today, he would be deeply shocked and grieved to see that the spectacle unfolding before his eyes is the exact opposite of his final wishes, as recorded in his will before he died in 1969. He would now see a Vietnam whose economy has been irreparably damaged, whose war-weary young men are again being dispatched to war, whose people are overwhelmed by misery and can choose between only muted despair, flight abroad, or rebellion; a bungling party, corrupted, divided, and leading one socialist state into armed conflict with other socialist states; a world in which admiration, support, or sympathy - once given without stint by many to his country - have been replaced by condemnation, antagonism, or reservation; a national independence, won at the cost of much blood and tears, being again called into question.

What has brought about such a bleak situation?

This paper will attempt to give an answer to the above question. What it will not do is to establish the facts. This task has already been done, and extremely well, by observers who have visited the country over the past five years, some very recently, and written very comprehensive and detailed accounts of the situation there. Special mention should be made of Patrice de Beer of *Le Monde*; Henry Kamm of the *New York Times*; Philippe Devillers, Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, Paul Quinn-Judge, of *Le Monde Diplomatique*; and Francois Nivolon of *Le Figaro*.¹ This article will draw heavily on their reports.

Finally, Francois Nivolon of *Le Figaro*, who visited the country for Vietnam of the past five years, however, is not what has happened or how, but why. To answer this question, we must take into account some fundamental factors. The first factor is of course ideology. But in the case of Vietnam, there is perhaps some danger in giving excessive weight to this consideration. The next factor is history which, in spite of its displacement by ideology and "model building" in recent years, still remains basic in any attempt to understand the behaviour of a nation and its government.

The third factor is psychology, both national and individual, which, in the case of Vietnam, is very important in helping us find the answer to the question "why?" Psychology, however, is a very elusive factor, and is available only to those who have lived and worked for many years among a people whose language they speak, about whom they have great curiosity, for whom they feel a deep affection, and among whom they count many close friends and reliable contacts. Incidentally, these are the characteristics that have given the reports by the French authors cited above an exceptional quality.

Finally, basic economics which, like history and psychology, has been pushed into the background by ideology, perhaps because the latter has a certain glamour about it, or perhaps because it provides the "involved" and "progressive" with a tool better fitted for their purposes.

The most glaring and the most dramatic fact about post-1975 Vietnam is the country's failure in the economic field. This is what has immediately struck every visitor to Vietnam in the past five years. "A whole generation will bear the stigma all their lives. The Vietnamese people do not have enough to eat." Thus Henry Kamm began a report from Hanoi in August 1979. He was quoting Dr. Ton That Tung, Vietnam's most respected physician and a "hero of labour" of the regime.² Philippe Devillers, whose

¹ Patrice de Beer reports regularly and often extensively on Vietnam in *Le Monde*; see Henry Kamm's reports from Vietnam in *The New York Times* of 18 and 19 Aug. 1979; Philippe Devillers, "Nouvelle Orientation économique au Vietnam", *Le Monde Diplomatique*; Jan 1980; Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, "Le Vietnam exangue", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Mar. 1980; Paul Quinn Judge, "Le Vietnam face à la Chine", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Sept 1978; Francois Nivolon, "Vietnam: la vie quotidienne cinq ans après", *Le Figaro*, 2, 3, and 4 April 1980. The reports of these correspondents corroborate what I have learnt from a number of "boat people" recently arrived in Canada, who are known to me as cool-headed and reliable. I have, however, refrained from using this source, except where necessary to complement the above correspondents.

² Kamm, op.cit.

sympathies for the Vietnamese revolutionaries are well known, also began a report on Vietnam, which he visited in late 1979, in similar terms: "Vietnam is today facing immense difficulties: a critical food situation, general scarcity of consumption goods, unemployment and underemployment, tensions between the populations and the bureaucracy etc..."³

Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, who visited Vietnam from September to November 1979, began their long report, not accidentally, in the following terms: "Vietnam is racing economic failure and material destitution, , - - The scarcity of food has become general and has never reached such a magnitude..."⁴

Finally, Francois Nivolon of *Le Figaro*, who visited the country for two weeks in March 1980, began a series of three long articles in a similar' vein, although more diplomatically: "Hanoi is still Sparta. Three years running, the crops were bad, or at best mediocre, as a result of catastrophic floods or drought. As a consequence, the allocation of rice per head has been reduced to three or four kilos out of 13 kilos of cereals. . . . Add to that a pound of meat per month, as much fish, three hundred grams of sugar, a little oil. That's all."⁵ And Nivolon was rather generous in regard to the rice ration. Brocheux and Hemery reported that rice accounted for only one kilo out of the 13 kilos of cereals allocated monthly to each Vietnamese.

Whether it was one or four kilos per month, it is dismally little, especially in Asia, where it is a staple food, and where a person normally consumes a minimum of 15 kilos of it per month. Furthermore, 13 kilos of cereals per month means a ration of basic foodstuffs of only less than a pound per day.

Lastly, the Vietnamese had to make up for the lack of rice by eating cassava, sweet potatoes, wheat (imported from the Soviet Union and which the Vietnamese called "stuffing"), and vegetables, the only food in relative abundant supply, but which is very poor in protein. It is thus no wonder that the people suffered from malnutrition, and this could be seen on their faces. "They are pale, anemic and skinny", and could not work for long. "After two operations, my surgeons are tired ", Dr. Tung told Kamm. The latter added that foreign teachers said that after two hours their students seemed incapable of absorbing instruction. The look of fatigue on the people was obvious even to the casual stroller on the streets of Hanoi.⁶

If the food situation was had, that of basic consumption goods was worse. The population had to go without the most elementary products such as soap, charcoal, paper, and they got only five yards of textiles per year. The shortage of medical supplies, in particular, was tragic. Dr. Tung, mentioned above, said that his hospital, although the best supplied in the country, lacked everything, from basic medicines to soap, from basic tubing to corks for the infusion bottles. Kamm reported that because of the shortage of

³ Devillers, op. cit.

⁴ Brocheux ;and Hemery. op. cit.

⁵ Nivolon, op. cit.

⁶ Kamm, op. cit.

disinfectants, hospital equipment could not be anaesthetized, and often doctors helplessly watched their patients die.⁷ The population was told by the authorities to make maximum use of medical herbs, but these herbs are of little help in the treatment of infectious diseases, which are frequent in tropical countries. With regard to durable goods, "the use of modern technologies is exceptional, the wear and tear is very marked . . . the cities are poorly lit or even lack electricity. . . charcoal, cement, rice bags are carried largely in carts, or by hands, or in old rickshaws dating back to the 1960s. Work is done mostly manually", Brocheux and Hemery reported.⁸

Not only were the goods in short supply, they were also very expensive, considering the salaries earned. These varied between 50 dong for an unskilled worker to 200 dong for a top government official (one dong is worth 40 U.S. cents officially). On the "free" market of Hanoi, much needed products could be obtained, but at very high prices: a kilo of beef 28 dong, a kilo of pork 30 dong, a kilo of fish 18 dong, a kilo of rice 7 dong (as against 0.60 dong officially), an egg 0.30 dong, a mango 2 dong, 10 bananas 3 dong, a frying pan 9 dong, a tiny radiator 65 dong, a thermos bottle 25 dong, a metre of printed cloth 10 dong, a tee-shirt made in Vietnam 45 dong, a pair of sunglasses 45 dong, a litre of petrol 15 dong. On the "free" market of Saigon, the prices of certain goods were out of reach of the highest officials or ordinary citizens (if they were honest): a metre of satin (used for making women's trousers) cost 80 to 150 dong, a pair of shoes 250 dong, a tube of toothpaste 60 dong, a bottle of Hungarian wine 130 dong a kilo of coffee 130 a pullover 150 dong, a tin of sweetened milk 16 dong, a carton of cigarettes 300 dong, a pair of American blue jeans 500 dong, and a French-made bicycle three thousand dong.⁹

Nowhere in the world, and certainly not in Southeast Asia, is there a comparable situation. Obviously Vietnam's economy has failed to produce the goods needed by its population. This applies to the industrial sector and, what is really astonishing in land-rich Vietnam, to agriculture too. How did it happen?

First, and most obviously, the five-year plan (1976-80) adopted by the government failed to achieve its objectives. With regard to Industrial growth, the target set for 1978 was 21 per cent, but only 7 percent were actually achieved. The figures for 1979 were 12 per cent and 6 percent respectively. Compared to 1978, production of coal, steel, glass, processed tea, sugar, bricks increased in 1979, but that of electricity, timber, cement, paper, chinaware, cotton yarn, and cloth decreased. In 1980 the production of coal was 7.5 million tons (the same as in 1979); that of fertilizers 700,000 tons (also the same as in the previous year); that of cement 1.3 million tons (original target - 2 million tons) compared to 729,000 tons (original target - 1.028 million tons); figures on actual production of electricity are not available, but the target was 5 billion KWH compared to 3.65 billion KWH (original target - 4.2 billion KWH).¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brocheux and Hemery, op.cit.

⁹ Figures from Nivolon, op. cit., Brocheux and Hemery, op. cit., and Devillers, op. cit. and *Le Devoir* (Montreal) March 31, 1980.

¹⁰ Brocheux and Hemery, op.cit

The party's official organ, *Nhan Dan*, recognized that in 1978 machines and equipment were used only to 50 per cent of their capacities, and daily work time was only four to five hours.¹¹ The explanation for this is simple: in the first year or two after Hanoi's occupation of Saigon, the factories, if well managed, could still operate because of the stock of raw materials left behind by the Americans and the Thieu regime; but when this stock ran out, the machines had to stop, if they had not already stopped because of breakdown and lack of spare parts. There was not enough foreign exchange to import these parts, nor raw materials, nor consumption goods: in 1979, Vietnam's exports amounted to only 300 million roubles while its imports amounted to 1,000 million roubles, and most of this was channeled into capital equipment and, especially, defense.

With regard to agriculture, according to the five-year plan, Vietnam should be self-sufficient in food by 1980, when production was expected to reach 21 million tons. But in 1979, actual production was only 13.5 million tons against 16.5 million planned, and the targets for 1980 were reduced from 21 million to 15 million tons.¹² In 1978, only 30,000 tons of meat were produced (100,000 tons were needed) 60,000 tons of vegetables (400,000 tons were needed), 6,000 tons of peanuts (30,000 tons were needed), 10 million eggs (100 million were needed).¹³ At the twentieth conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome in November 1979, Vietnam's delegate, Tong Trung Dao, told the participants that "in spite of our efforts, food production is far from meeting the minimum needs of more than 50 million people".¹⁴ The shortage of rice was such, and the prospects of it ending so poor that in 1977 General Vo Nguyen Giap advocated a revolution" in food terminology. He said that instead of saying "eating rice" the Vietnamese should say "take meals" for a meal could consist of rice or cassava, sweet potatoes, or beans. Not only did the general leave out meat, eggs, and fish, but he had this further advice for his men: in the past, the troops have eaten cassava with reluctance, now they, should eat it 'with pleasure'.¹⁵ A depressing thought for a nation of rice-eaters! Above all, a telling admission of failure.

Vietnam's failure in industry is, to some extent, understandable but not its failure in agriculture. In any case, to explain Vietnam's failure in terms of that of the five-year plan would be to explain tweedledum in terms of tweedledee. We must search for other, less superficial factors. There are several of them, and they have combined to make economic progress impossible, in spite of favourable conditions existing in 1975 for reconstruction and rapid development. Since the magnitude of the failure seems so astonishing, these conditions should be mentioned.

Firstly, war, the major obstacle to any economic progress, was a thing of the past. With the restoration of peace, the government could now turn its energies and devote itself to

¹¹ Brocheux and Hemery, op.cit

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Alexander Woodside, "Nationalism and Poverty in the Breakdown of Sino-Vietnamese Relations", *Pacific Affairs* 52, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 381-409

¹⁴ *Le Devoir*, 17 Nov. 1979.

¹⁵ *Le Devoir*, 22 Nov. 1979.

economic development. Next, there was political stability, another basic condition of economic development. The new government had made peasant interests one of its main justifications for the war and the revolution, and Vietnamese communism being peasant communism, one should expect the peasants to cooperate with that government and work enthusiastically to raise production, as was the case in China. Among the bourgeoisie, there were many professionals and technicians who had secretly or openly sympathized with the insurgents during the war, had refused to leave the country in 1975, and were eager to put their competence and skill at the service of the new state. Also, the country was at long last reunified, and this reunification of an adequately industrial north and a predominantly agricultural south should give the country a very favourable base on which to build a balanced economy.

Lastly, there was considerable goodwill abroad. Many countries of both East and West were prepared to help Vietnam, China, which had given Vietnam, some US\$13 billion in aid, mostly foodstuffs, consumption goods, medical products, and petrol, during the war, continued this aid in 1975 to the tune of US\$300 million. The Soviet Union and the East European countries continued to supply industrial and capital goods worth some US\$700 million a year (US\$500 million from the Soviet Union). Many Western countries, France, Great Britain, Sweden, Germany, as well as Australia and Japan were prepared to extend the new Vietnam a helping hand.¹⁶ And there was the United States, prepared to normalize its relations with its former enemy, and to help in Vietnam's reconstruction (although not to the tune of US\$3.5 billion which Hanoi demanded as "war reparations"). Set against all that, there were negatives, and strong ones, some not imputable to the communist authorities, but others for which these authorities are fully responsible."

First, there were the sequel to a long and devastating war, with its heavy toll on the material and human resources of the country. There are no precise figures available on the material cost of the war, but these surely run into billions of dollars: the readiness of the American government to give some US\$5 billion for reconstruction to South and North Vietnam as part of the Paris peace agreement of 1973 is perhaps a good estimate of those costs. But more serious than the material losses, there was the irreplaceable loss of human lives. Again, there are no figures available on how many Vietnamese had been killed between 1960 and 1975 (if we leave out the 1945-54 war), but those figures may well exceed one million, if we include both civilians and military. The case of the commune of Ba To (Quang Ngai province, Central Vietnam) gives an idea of what the war has cost in terms of human lives, and hence of potential producers, especially of potential farmers (who made the best soldiers, in both camps). This commune, which had a population of 3,800, had supplied the People's Liberation Army with 700 soldiers during the second Vietnam war alone, and of these 140 had been killed - one out of five.¹⁷

Another consequence of the war was the emigration of population from the countryside

¹⁶ France and Japan were the most important donors, France giving US\$264 million in 1976 and Japan US\$73 million..

¹⁷ Brocheux and Hemery, *op.cit.*

to the cities, as a result of a deceptive urbanization in the South. Large numbers of potential farmers had flocked into the cities, especially Saigon. They were reluctant to return to their villages after 1975 or proved useless as farmers in the "new economic zones", and became a burden instead of an asset to the new regime by swelling the ranks of the army of unemployed. These included 1.2 million military and half a million civilian employees of the former Saigon regime and their families, altogether some five million people. These people had depended on Thieu and the Americans for livelihood, but, as a result of the departure of the Americans and the collapse of the Thieu regime. They were thrown out of work. Still. They had to be fed. This means an additional burden on the new government - responsibility goes with power!

Yet another consequence of the war was the shrinkage of the area under cultivation. Vast tracts of land had been rendered unfit for farming by mines or by the clogging of the irrigation canals; others had been neglected for so long that they had reverted to jungle. Putting them back to production would require time as well as important resources, especially mechanical implements, and of these Vietnam was desperately short after 1975. Lastly there were natural calamities. The years 1976, 1977 and 1978 were marked by exceptionally damaging floods and prolonged droughts. In 1977, because of the floods only 72.3 per cent of South Vietnam planned sowing area could be planted, while drought affected 30 per cent of the cultivated area; in Central Vietnam, one-third of the crop was destroyed. In 1978 a devastating typhoon "Lola" inundated 500,000 hectares of land already planted in the South, and destroyed 83 per cent of the winter crop in the North.¹⁸

The sequels to the war and natural calamities are bad enough in themselves, but their effects on the food situation are insignificant compared to the man-made calamities, those resulting from the attitudes and policies of the new authorities themselves. They can be summed up as the stubborn belief of the communist leadership that the revolutionary approach which had proved so effective in war would be effective also in peace. Hence relentless victimization, breakneck socialization, and militarism.

During and following the 1968-73 Paris peace negotiations, the phrase "national conciliation was common currency in many statements originating from Hanoi. But soon after the communist forces had overrun the South, it became clear that those were only tactical political slogans for Hanoi embarked on a policy of harsh victimization not only against the "lackeys of imperialism - the government servants and troops - of the Saigon regime - but also against the population of the South generally for having chosen to live under a regime condemned, by the Revolution. Incidentally, I have heard a high revolutionary cadre tell the population of a village occupied by the revolutionary forces that "you are all guilty towards the Revolution because you have chosen to live in the areas under *nguy* rule" (*nguy* meaning illegitimate, a term used to designate the Saigon regime). And this was as far back as 1968.

Premier Pham Van Dong told Marc Ribaud of the *Express* in 1976 that some people had predicted a bloodbath in the South following the victory of the revolutionary forces, but

¹⁸ *Le Devoir*, 22 Nov. 1977 and 5 Oct 1978

instead there was a "bath of fraternity and generosity".¹⁹ Premier Pham Van Dong may have sincerely believed in the generosity of his government, but the fact is that hundreds of thousands of southerners, and not only government officials, military people, or politicians, have been sent to "reeducation camps" from which many have not returned after five years' detention, or will never return because they have died of mistreatment, exhaustion, disease, and malnutrition. Estimates of the number of people sent to those camps vary between 200,000 and 800,000. But the higher figure is probably closer to the truth since Premier Pham Van Dong told *Paris-Match* in September 1978 that his government had returned to citizenship and family life "over a million people who have collaborated in one way or another with the enemy".²⁰ The number of people still detained is not known because the Hanoi authorities have steadfastly refused to give any details on the matter and told correspondents who insisted, that such insistence was "unfriendly". One figure was given by R.P. Paringaux of *Le Monde* in 1978 50,000 people were still detained in the camps, many of whom were in the North (the "serious" cases).²¹ There have been stories of deliberate mistreatment of prisoners, especially those with a "blood debt" (former paratroopers, marines, police)²² and also of deliberate liquidation of them.²³

Those who have escaped the camps were subjected to a policy of political and social ostracism. They were denied the right to exercise a trade, even a professional one, and were subjected to vexatious and humiliating treatment (for example, they were delivered identity cards describing them as "daughter of a lackey of imperialism"). All lived in fear of being accused, not infrequently by mistake, of working "against the Revolution". Those so accused - and they included old party members - were arrested and sent to jail in conditions which Doan Van Toai (a former pro-NLF National Liberation Front) activist jailed by the Thieu regime and again by the new regime, described as The Vietnamese Gulag".²⁴ The Chinese, too, were subjected to victimization, which was to lead to conflict with China in 1978. This victimization should be viewed in connection with the out-and-out socialization of the South, which could be said to be the main cause of the troubles besetting Vietnam today and which, therefore calls for a detailed treatment in this paper.

The two major aims shared by all Vietnamese, and for which they were prepared to go to war and make sacrifices, were national independence and reunification. Independence was achieved in 1954 at the Geneva conference when France acknowledged the existence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) as an independent state, and formally recognized at the same time the independence of the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The country was independent, but remained divided. With the destruction of

¹⁹ *L'Express*, 9 Feb. 1976.

²⁰ *Paris March*, cited by *L'Express*, 13 Oct 1978

²¹ *Le Monde*, 15 April 1978

²² Some are known to me through the parents of the victims.

²³ One case of extermination "pure and simple" of 3,000-5,000 former policemen detained in a camp occurred in April 1976. Their camp blew up and all were killed. The official version was that they had died "resisting an anti-communist attack", but witnesses said otherwise. The case has been reported by Father Andre Gelinas in *The Montreal Star*, 16 Dec. 1976.

²⁴ Doan Van Toai, *Le Goulag Vietnamien* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 1979).

the southern state by the DRVN, it seemed that reunification was finally achieved in 1975.

Since the sixteenth century, except for a brief span of forty-six years (1820-65), the two parts of the country had lived under different governments. Since 1866, when Cochinchina, the main part of South Vietnam, was ceded to France by Emperor Tu-Duc, those two parts had lived under different political systems. And for thirty years prior to 1975, they had lived under two mutually hostile and diametrically opposed regimes. It would be difficult to unify them. It would require time and much patience and sensitivity. In the past five years, it has become more and more apparent that the new government has achieved territorial and legal unification by bringing all of Vietnam under the authority of one single government unification in the real sense - the full political, economic, social, and emotional integration of South Vietnam into North Vietnam - has remained an elusive end.

In 1975, there were three schools of thought in the CPV (Communist Party of Vietnam): the "maximalists", represented by Truong Chinh (well known for having provoked a peasant rebellion in the North in 1956 because he tried to impose too radical a land reform) with the apparatchiks, the security services, and the military (with Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung: the victors of Dien Bien Phu and Saigon respectively), who advocated the accelerated socialization of the South; the SVNLF (South Vietnam Liberation Front), which was in favour of the status quo (agreed upon at Paris in 1973 and supported by China); and those who, with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, advocated a middle course.²⁵

At first the middle course prevailed, and this has led some people in the West to believe that, "the communists are moving slowly and cautiously along the road to socialism".²⁶ But, at the end of 1976, at the fourth plenum, of the Central Committee of the CPV the "maximalists" succeeded in imposing their views, and a change of course took place. It was decided to achieve three revolutions simultaneously: liquidate capitalism (revolution in the production relations), modernize the economy (scientific revolution), and eliminate reactionary elements (ideological revolution). In the South, in particular, the aims were: the immediate liquidation of feudal ownership, the immediate nationalization of the industrial and commercial establishments of the comprador bourgeoisie, the development of every sector of the state economy, and the turning of agriculture and handicraft into cooperatives and the orientation of the private capitalists towards mixed enterprises.²⁷ The whole commercial infrastructure of South Vietnam (banking, foreign trade, processing industries) was to be broken up. The name of this new game was "normalization."

What does "normalization" mean? It means the immediate and complete alignment of the South to the North. In practical terms, it means the accelerated socialization of the South

²⁵ On this, see Patrice de Beer, "Vietnam: Tensions internes et rupture", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 1979.

²⁶ *Time*, "The Slow Road to Socialism", 16 Feb. 1976

²⁷ Devillers, op.cit

or, in the words of Jean Lacouture of the *Nouvel Observateur*, the "nord-malizacion" of the South (a play on words in French, which could be rendered by normalization through "northernization") - the imposition of the harsh regime of the North on the South.²⁸ This regime seemed all the harsher to the southerners, including the peasants, as the population of the South had been used to a life of greater material comfort thanks to a generous natural environment and especially to long years of massive American aid - and had enjoyed some measure of freedom conceded by the various rulers of the South who, in spite of their inclination towards dictatorship, had to reckon with public opinion in the West, especially in the United States, the source of their support and hence, of their survival.

"Normalization" translated into rigid control of the movement of people and goods not only between one province and another, but also between one district and another; the banning of all private economic activity, and the taking over of all trade - big, medium, and small by the state and their turning over to the state trading agencies the notorious *quoc doanh* (pronounced *kwok zoan*); and the suppression of the two currencies (one for the North and one for the South) system. One of the side aims of the suppression of all private economic enterprise, formally declared on 28 March 1978, was to accelerate the movement towards the "new economic zones" by forcing those who no longer had any means of livelihood - some four million people - to move to those zones to do "productive" work. Another was to destroy the economic power of the Chinese. In agriculture, it was decided that all the forces of the country would be concentrated for "a great leap forward", two-thirds of the land would become collectivized and 90 percent of the peasants would be working in collective farms.

To ensure the success of "normalization", the southern cadres - former members of the SVNLF - were discarded because they were considered lukewarm or unreliable, and large numbers of cadres from the North were brought in to replace them. Thus 25,000 cadres were imported from the North to run everything from government bureaucracies to telephone and bus companies".²⁹ Worse still, at the village level, all the command posts were taken over by the northern cadres. These cadres soon became notorious for their arrogance, their hustling, their corruption, and above all, their incompetence. This was to accelerate and deepen the degradation of the situation in the South and compound the problem facing the country's leadership.

By the end of 1978 the authorities realized that things had gone very wrong. In their view, the main causes of the catastrophic deterioration of the situation were the hastiness and lack of realism of the leadership, and the incompetence and corruption of the cadres. While blaming failure on the latter, they also admitted their responsibility. Thus Hoang Tung, an important member of the Central Committee of the CPV and editor of *Nhan Dan*, the party's official organ, admitted at a press conference on 26 October 1979 that

²⁸ Jean Lacouture, "Vietnam: la 'Nord-malizacion' du Sud", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 31 May- 6 June 1976
Le Devoir, 30 Apr. 1980.

²⁹ *Time*, 16 Feb. 1976.

"out and out socialisation has resulted in economic strangulation".³⁰ In Ho Chi Minh City, the AFP correspondent reported, officials recognized that errors "fraught with dire consequences" had been committed and these errors were due to inexperience and hastiness. The deputy director of the agricultural office of Ho Chi Minh City, To Dung, admitted that "political mistakes" had been made (mistakes made at the leadership level) and that "we are short of competent cadres capable at the same time of fully understanding the instructions from above, of implementing them correctly and ensuring a sound management". These cadres had "precipitated" the collectivization movement and the result was that the peasants had left the land, sometimes the country, or had scamped their work, thus bringing down production and productivity..³¹

Earlier, in October 1976, *Hoc Tap*, the theoretical organ of the CPV, had violently attacked "the indiscipline, the arbitrariness and the abuse of power of the cadres", thus recognizing that the problems had existed right from the start.³² But even earlier, in April, Premier Pham Van Dong, had called for an offensive against bureaucracy and authoritarianism. "At present," he said, "the phenomena of bureaucracy, red tape and authoritarianism are constantly observed and are sometimes serious, at all echelons, in a number of organs of state...Bad people have taken advantage of this situation to engage in illegal acts at the expense of the state....from now until the end of 1976, the ministries and cooperatives must review their work system to determine what is unreasonable, cumbersome, and unnecessary..."³³

It was not however, the shortcomings of the cadres which had led to the dispersal of centers of decision and the resulting administrative chaos, another major cause of failure. Responsibility for the administration of the new economic zones, for example, was divided among no less than ten ministries.³⁴ Moreover, secretiveness and other underground practices were carried into the 'administration of a normal state. For example, in Saigon, the locations of the various state agencies were not indicated publicly by official signs; they were known only by numbers to the initiated who communicated among themselves by scribbling personal notes on small pieces of paper and kept no official records of their correspondence, as a refugee who had occupied a high position in a ministry has told this author.

The main cause of the troubles remains, however, a policy of "socialization for the sake of socialization", as the official press admitted.³⁵ It was done in disregard of the objective "laws" of the economy. This, as Devillers³⁶ has pointed out, had for a result the breaking or the "permanent flattening out" of the economic springs. Hoang Tung, mentioned above, explained that the massive flight of people abroad was due to the low standard of living, but also to "our weaknesses in the management of the affairs of the state of the

³⁰ *Le Monde*, 6 Oct. 1976.

³¹ *Le Devoir*, 30 Apr. 1980.

³² *Le Monde*, 6 Oct. 1976

³³ *Le Monde*, 22 Apr. 1976.

³⁴ For more details, see Woodside, op.cit.

³⁵ *Le Monde*, 23 Oct. 1979.

³⁶ Devillers, op.cit.

economy".³⁷ And Tran Phuong, the number two man in economic planning, candidly listed some of the errors committed: "we have prohibited the transport of goods and the freedom of movement of people, from one province, and even from one district, to another, and this carried with it the risk of illicit trading. We have thus turned many people against us... Another error was the interdiction of the slaughtering of oxen and to reserve these exclusively for transportation except when they had become too old and their meat was then unfit for consumption. . . . There was no stimulation of cattle and poultry farming. Small trade too. . . . We have seen too big. . . ." ³⁸ And to Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien, a well known theoretician, "The work norms, the wage scales and bonuses were maladjusted, and we have had recourse to political mobilisation rather than to calculations of profit ability."³⁹

The CPV leadership had ignored the limits of human endurance. They wanted everyone to be a "revolutionary" to the utmost, and a hero all the time. They believed that with revolutionary fervour, every problem can be solved. "The first quality of a citizen is not effectiveness. He must, even if he is stupid, be above all revolutionary" wrote the AFP correspondent from Hanoi in September 1977. And he added, "that is not a journalist's metaphor, but a statement by an official".⁴⁰ They ignored the fact that there are limits to man's endurance, to his capacity to make sacrifices, that, at some point, heroes get tired, and the population no longer wants to live in order to fight. As a Vietnamese in Hanoi said, "For forty years my head has commanded my stomach, but I confess that today my stomach commands my head."⁴¹

In theoretical terms, the Hanoi leadership has acted in conformity with their worship of doctrinaire Leninism, that is, with the Leninism of over half a century ago, and which had been intended for the Soviet Union. "Hanoi had even prepared for its victory in the South by reprinting the Vietnamese translation of Lenin's April 1918 treatise on the immediate tasks of the Soviet government. . . . The Mekong delta peasants, after 1975, were thus invited to buy their chickens according to procedures which Lenin had improvised six decades earlier."⁴² Tran Phuong, mentioned above, admitted that much when he said that "we have adopted out of date, erroneous measures".⁴³ It is ironic that the Vietnamese communists, who had great contempt for the intellectuals and claimed to be scientific socialists, were the most bookish and the most unscientific of all. But the books they used were hopelessly out of date, and, as Jean Lacouture has pointed out, they still clung to the bureaucratic socialism perfected by Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s. It is true that Leninism had served them well as a "weapon" for the conquest of power. But experience of the last thirty years has proved, that there is little in Leninism that could teach anyone in the third quarter of the twentieth century how to produce more food and industrial goods, or how to manage a modern state. On the other hand, in a fast developing technological age, the word "labour" has ceased to have the meaning that it had in the

³⁷ *Le Figaro*, 30 Nov. 1978

³⁸ Nivolon op. cit

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Le Monde hebdomadaire*, 1-7 Sept. 1977

⁴¹ *Le Devoir* 23 Oct. 1979

⁴² Woodside, op. cit

⁴³ Nivolon, op. cit

early nineteenth century, and to persist in thinking that labour means manual labour would be to accept economic immobility. But this is exactly what the Hanoi leadership has done.⁴⁴

Bureaucratism, administrative chaos, arbitrariness, incompetence, and misplaced revolutionary fervour are, by themselves, enough to break an economy, reduce the people's standard of living, and cause discontent among the population. But what is perhaps worse is corruption. Ironically enough, during the war years, public opinion both in Vietnam and abroad had been swayed towards the communist side, in disgust at the corruption of the Saigon regime. Now, the word corruption has become one of the main attributes of the new regime. By all accounts, this regime is now recognized as more corrupt than the one it had fought and destroyed. This corruption, not only at the individual but also at the governmental level, was highlighted by the exodus of the "boat people" who had paid very large sums to get out of the country, with the help and protection of the government officials and cadres. The words "racket" and "human traffic" have been used to describe the exploitation of the flight of the refugees to amass large amounts of money, estimated by the Hong Kong authorities to amount to one billion US dollars.⁴⁵ This traffic has been so well publicized that there is no need for us to go into detail here.⁴⁶

The exploitation of the refugees is, however, only one aspect of the corruption which, noted the AFP correspondent in Hanoi, "tends to become omnipresent in the North as well as the South". Even socialist diplomats in Hanoi have taken, voluntarily or not, to "paying" to avoid inconvenience and administrative delay. The price for "tranquility", which the diplomats paid without wincing, varied generally from one carton of cigarettes to a bottle of whisky or cognac. In some cases, direct payments in dollars were reported.⁴⁷

"Never, under the former rotten and enslaved old regime, had corruption and arbitrariness reached a degree comparable to what exists now in socialist Vietnam", said Doan Van Toai, author of *Le Gulag Vietnamien* mentioned earlier. A Buddhist priest who escaped in 1979 said on arriving in Indonesia, that many communist soldiers had become as corrupt as the Thieu regime soldiers they replaced and often sold their weapons. "If you have gold, you can buy anything in Vietnam now" he said.⁴⁸ A refugee arriving in Singapore in June this year said that "corruption in Vietnam is at its worst. Soldiers and officials now accept bribes openly" to look the other way while he and his companion escaped.⁴⁹

The poor economic performance of the government, which resulted in the scarcity of goods, forcing people to obtain from the black market what the *quoc doanh* (state stores)

⁴⁴ For more detail on this, see Ton That Thien, "New Confrontations in South East Asia", *Asian Affairs* (New York), Nov/Dec. 1978.

⁴⁵ *L'Express*, 3 Feb. 1979

⁴⁶ On this see, for example, "how Vietnam Profits from Human Traffic", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Jan. 1979

⁴⁷ *Le Devoir*, 3 Mar. 1980

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, 14 July 1979.

⁴⁹ *Montreal Gazette*, 11 June 1980.

failed to provide, the longing of the cadres for comfort after long years of hard jungle life, the necessity for everyone to find, somehow, the extra piastres to bring the family's monthly income to the 1,000 dong level to make life live-able, made corruption pervasive. The system itself facilitated the spread of this corruption. Based on a class-state power structure and on decentralization, it fostered abuses among the cadres. The establishment of a system of universal control and bureaucracy made it possible for these cadres to indulge in arbitrariness and to commercialize their services. On the other hand, thanks to multiple ration cards they could buy goods at low prices from special stores reserved for cadres and resell them on the black market at a profit. Furthermore, many of the cadres enjoyed considerable non-monetary advantages. All the above combined to give the cadres real incomes worth five, seven, or even ten times their nominal salaries. Those who were very corrupt did even better and could live "like kings" as a refugee who had shared in their kingly ways has told me. He, of course, was one of those who had provided the financial means for it.

The high life of the cadres was also made possible by the existence of a thriving black market fed by the parcels received by those who had relatives abroad. These parcels contained all kinds of goods, including luxuries: some 200 tons were brought in each month by Air France, Thai Airways, or special nights of Cathay Pacific from Hong Kong.⁵⁰ In addition, there were parcels received by post as well as remittances of funds. Those who were unfortunate enough not to have relatives abroad had to suffer hunger and destitution, or to resort to stealing, or, in the case of women, to prostitution, which was as visible in 1980 as before 1975. Foreign observers visiting Ho Chi Minh City in 1980 were startled to discover that "Ho Chi Minh City in 1980 continues to live like Saigon".⁵¹

The connivance of the officials and cadres - lateral as well as vertical- to ensure smooth operation and mutual protection, the continuing deterioration of the economic situation, aggravated by the war in Cambodia and the conflict with China - which promises to last very long - made the eradication of corruption difficult, if not impossible. Worse still, corruption, and moral degradation have spread to North Vietnam, once pure and intent on purifying the South. Hanoi has become a city where "the stealing of bicycles has become systematic, the stealing of parts of automobiles parked in the streets has become more and more frequent, theft occurs in certain embassies. . . . All residents of Hanoi know that it is very unwise to leave one's house without watch....." reports AFP.⁵² The black market now exists in Hanoi also. The goods are supplied by northern cadres returning from the South, or from the diplomatic store in Hanoi, or from the state stores.

The leadership of the CPV was aware 'of the situation, and launched one "campaign against corruption" after another. Premier Pham Van Dong's denunciation of corrupt and illegal practices in 'April 1976 has been mentioned earlier. In October 1977, the communist leadership called for "a vast campaign against corruption and waste", for fighting against "the diversion of state property to personal use, against corruption, illegal practices and other negative signs in the organs the state and in society which have

⁵⁰ *Le Devoir*, 21 May 1980

⁵¹ *Le Devoir*, 21 May 1980

⁵² *Le Devoir*, 31 Mar. 1980

increased in number and in gravity".⁵³ The admonitions, warnings, threats of the CPV remained largely ineffective. Thus, on 2 February this year, Le Duan, the secretary general of the 'party, again called for the determined elimination of "degenerate and corrupt" cadres.⁵⁴ In 1980 the situation was no better than in 1975.

The deepening economic deterioration and accelerated socialization alienated not only the supporters of the Revolution among the Bourgeoisie and the middle class but also the peasantry in the South and this, in turn, added to the security problem. It also caused serious division among the leadership of the CPV. Brocheux and Hemery have noted: "It seems undeniable that discontent largely overflows the urban population of Ho Chi Minh City and Cholon. The impression one gets from a visit to the South is that a significant proportion of the population feels that is subjected to a regime of politico-military occupation. There is no integration into the new Vietnamese state of non-communist political elements in the South who had fought the pro-American military dictatorship. Nor even all the communists of the South. Even if, deep in their minds, the great majority of the population of the South dreaded a face-to-face with the "northerners" in 1975, they sought comfort in the thought that, after all, between Vietnamese it would be possible to mutual understanding provided the Americans go away. Today, disenchantment has replaced hope and resentment is discernible in certain utterances; it encompasses the leaders of the NLF-PRG, and the activists of the "third force" incur the reproach of having paved the way for communism. A deep chasm separates the population from the leaders and agents of the regime, no matter who they may be."⁵⁵

This explains why more and more of those who once sympathized with the NLF-PRG (National Liberation Front - Provisional Revolutionary Government) and had welcomed the communists' victory and cooperated with the regime at the start have given up or even rebelled after three or four years of frustration and those who could, have joined the "boat people". They included people much needed for the reconstruction and development of the country: engineers, doctors, teachers, professionals, economic, and financial experts, air traffic controllers, computer specialists, secretaries, bank clerks, interpreters, administrators, mechanics, etc. As Devillers has noted, the new wave of departures was not confined to the "Hoas" (Vietnamese of Chinese origin) but included those "who would have accepted socialism if their talent had been intelligently put to use but who could not suffer being left in a void or abandoned to the whims of mediocre or opportunistic people".⁵⁶

Devillers was referring to the people who had joined the second wave of refugees. The first wave occurred in April/May 1975 just before and after the fall of the Saigon regime. It included people who had occupied prominent positions in that regime, or were known to be staunchly anti-communists, or had been employed by the Americans, or simply were convinced that they could not find happiness in a communist state. Most of them had left in American planes or American ships. The second wave occurred in 1978/79

⁵³ *Le Devoir*, 23 Nov. 1977

⁵⁴ *Le Devoir*, 2 Feb. 1980

⁵⁵ Brocheux and Hemery, op. cit

⁵⁶ Devillers, op. cit

and was marked by the arrival of countless boats carrying tens of thousands of refugees known since then as the "boat people", which landed on the coasts of neighbouring countries, particularly of Malaysia, creating very serious problems for the authorities of those countries. It was dramatized by the unenviable fate reserved to those sailing in appalling conditions in the *Hai Hong*, the *Huey Fang*, and the *Tung An* in November and December 1978. The stories of these ships and of their human cargoes are well known.⁵⁷

What deserves mention is, however, the presence among the second wave "boat people" of many Vietnamese who had been sympathizers or supporters of the new regime, or had actively cooperated with it after 1975 and become disillusioned and given up after years of frustration. They included also former members of the SVNLF, some of them having occupied very high positions in the PRG government, for example, Truong Nhu Tang, a former minister of justice, who escaped by sea and was given asylum in France in April 1980. As of October 1979, according to the United Nations High Commissioner's Office for Refugees, there were 322,757 Vietnamese refugees in the various camps in Southeast Asia. Together with some 150,000 of the first wave, already settled in other countries, that means over 500,000 had fled Vietnam since 1975. Those people had been fortunate enough to have landed safely. Others not so lucky had perished at sea. Estimates of these less fortunate ones vary between one-third to three-quarters. According to AFP, of the 60,000 people who had fled Vietnam in April 1979, only one-quarter landed safely in Malaysia.⁵⁸

The vast refugee movement had several adverse effects on the regime. Firstly, it turned world opinion against it, as highlighted by the public positions taken by such prominent people as Jean Paul Sartre, the well-known French philosopher, and Joan Baez, the famous American singer, who had supported the revolutionaries before 1975. Naturally, such a mass flight of people brought doubt and suspicion to the quality of the government. As Mencius has said, when people decide to leave a country, it means that something is wrong with that country's government. More than adverse publicity, the mass exodus of refugees had serious negative effects on the country's economy. Whatever the political and social faults of those people, they represented a very important reservoir of professional knowledge and technical expertise sorely needed by the country for its economic development and modernization. It will take one, if not two, generations to replace such a loss of human capital. Barring some exceptions, peasants cannot be turned into highly competent engineers, accountants, or business managers within a few years or even within one generation. This is well known to economic planners and sociologists.

On the other hand, as a result of the mass flight of refugees, and what had caused it, foreign aid, much needed by the country in a crucial time, was lost. China stopped its aid in July 1978, with disastrous consequences on the supply of consumer goods and foodstuffs; and the European Economic Community countries decided, after the

⁵⁷ See "how Vietnam Profits from Human Traffic" *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 Jan. 1979.

⁵⁸ *Le Devoir*, 25 May 1979. In February, Canadian immigration officials estimated the number of Vietnamese who have fled from Vietnam since 1975 to be 500,000, and 1,000 were fleeing per day (*Montreal Gazette*, 21 February, 1979).

conference on refugees in Geneva in July 1979, to suspend their aid to Vietnam and divert the money to the relief of the refugees instead.

Dissatisfaction with the regime was not confined to the bourgeoisie, the urban population, the Chinese, or the southern NLF cadres, but spread also to the peasantry. Understandably enough, the southern peasants resisted collectivization right from the start. There were protests in 1977, and these protests were serious enough to force the authorities to pay attention to them. There were even demonstrations, as in Long An province, just south of Saigon, in November 1979. This fact is significant, as this province had been known to be one of the first to give active support to the Revolution during the Vietnam War and, for that reason, had been given the revolutionary name of "Dong Khoi" (United in Uprising). According to the five-year plan, as mentioned earlier, two-thirds of the land were to be collectivized, and 90 per cent of the population to be working on collective farms by 1980. By the end of 1979, however, only 31 per cent of the peasant families and 24 per cent of the cultivable land had been touched by collectivization.⁵⁹ In 1978 the programme was "suspended". By then, the New Economic Zones had practically ceased to exist officially. Only 18,000 people were sent to those zones that year compared to 1.3 million in 1976/77. This was very far from the original target of 4 million.

It is interesting to note that apart from the usual reluctance of peasants everywhere in the world to give up their land, the peasants of South Vietnam fiercely opposed collectivization because they had been the beneficiaries of earlier land reforms undertaken by the present government as well as by the fallen Saigon regime. Before 1975, the insurgents (the present government) had liquidated or forcibly expropriated the landlords in the areas under their control, seized their land, and distributed them to the peasants. In the areas under the control of the Saigon government, the peasants were promised that the land they tilled would be theirs once the Revolution had been victorious. Not only liars but revolutionaries must have long memories! On the other hand, Ngo Dinh Diem and his successors had also carried out various land reforms. Under the slogan "land to the tiller", the Thieu government had distributed unoccupied land to hundreds of thousands of peasant families, which received three hectares each. Naturally enough, all the peasants now wanted to hang on to land they considered to be rightfully theirs and resisted any attempt to dispossess them.

This resistance was all the more successful as, with the outbreak of the war against Cambodia in 1977, and still more, with the expectation of a third "war of liberation" (against China) in 1978, the new authorities could not afford to alienate the peasants. With the actual start of this war in 1979, it was impossible for the Hanoi authorities to push the peasants harder because they had learnt from experience that, in such a war, the massive support of the peasants is vital. The communist leadership had become the victims of their own success (as insurgents), and of the Saigon regimes. The land reform programmes had been criticized and ridiculed by Western correspondents and writers, but have now, in retrospect, achieved their aims posthumously, so to speak. Lastly, the Chinese government has become, in fact, a protector of the Vietnamese peasants, and it is

⁵⁹ Brocheux and Hemery, *op. cit*

not without reason that the Hanoi authorities have bitterly accused the Chinese government of having prevented them from building socialism. History is full of surprises!

Peasant opposition was not the only cause of worry for the new authorities. There was also the problem of internal security. Although the new government was firmly established and its power seemed irreversible in the foreseeable future, it was not able to suppress armed resistance completely. In February 1976, there were armed fights in the northern suburbs of Saigon itself, and at Bien Hoa, only twenty miles from the capital. This fighting brought home to the authorities and the population the existence of underground movements operating against the new government. The fighting in February was done by the Catholics. But in January 1978, Hanoi Radio disclosed the existence of another, more important, movement in the delta, in An Giang province, on the Cambodian border. An Giang had been the stronghold of the Hoa Hao Buddhist sect, but many members of the former ARVN (Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam) were also known to have sought refuge in the area, because it was a kind of sanctuary. The broadcast said that in the twelve months prior to November 19th, the armed forces of Cho Moi district "captured 250 puppet army remnant soldiers, killed 35 other and successfully induced 15 other to surrender, seizing 50 guns of various kinds, 500 rounds of ammunitions and grenades, and four radios" (for a district of 250,000 people). The broadcast quoted the commander, captain Dang Huu Trinh, to the effect that "the remnants of the puppet army here total tens of thousands, and fairly large numbers of diehard officers have evaded re-education".⁶⁰ The figure tens of thousands is itself very significant.

In March 1980, according to AFP, a non-communist diplomat traveling from Saigon to Dalat disclosed that traffic was forbidden on that road at night (a fact reminiscent of the pre-1975 years, only with the communist authorities now doing the forbidding), and that he had heard shooting in the neighbouring hills. His Vietnamese guide explained that the shots came from an operation by government troops against the FULRO (the hill tribes) whose ranks had been swelled by deserters from the army or by those fleeing from the new economic zones.⁶¹ In April, Nguyen Huu Tho, interim president, told the AFP correspondent in an interview that there was an "unorganized rebellion in the highland provinces of Gia Lai, Kontum, Darlac and Lam Dong, along the Khmer-Vietnam border, between the 12th and the 15th parallels".⁶²

In May it was disclosed that a conference on security had taken place in Ho Chi Minh City "recently", under the chairmanship of Pham Hung, the Minister of Interior, and had adopted a resolution calling for "fighting against reactionary groups working clandestinely along the frontiers and the coasts, against the armed activities of the reactionaries, against spies, against traffickers and the organisers of illegal departures".⁶³ It was the second time in a month, noted the AFP correspondent, that the authorities

⁶⁰ *Los Angeles Times* and *Montreal Gazette*, 23 Jan 1979

⁶¹ *Le Devoir*, 31 Mar. 1980

⁶² *Le Devoir* 21 May 1980

⁶³ *Ibid.*

admitted the existence of "reactionary armies" in Vietnam.

There was also fighting in Tay Ninh province, close to the "Parrot's Beak", Tay Ninh is the home of the Cao Dai sect. This area, which had been a sanctuary for the insurgents before 1975 because it was surrounded on three sides by Cambodian territory, was the scene or a great deal of fighting in 1977-79 in the Vietnam-Cambodian war. It was known that many remnants of the AR VN had taken refuge there because, when hard-pressed, they could cross into Cambodia, as the insurgents had done before 1975.

The Buddhists, too, were actively opposing the government. According to Thien Quang, a monk who escaped in July 1979, after a demonstration of 3,000 Buddhists had been broken up in March 1978, loyal Buddhists fanned out into the countryside to find and link up with the various anti-communist groups. He said that there was a beginning of united religious struggle of Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Hoa Hao, as well as armed resistance groups against the new government.⁶⁴ While the importance of this resistance is not known, it is undeniable that armed resistance against the government existed. Furthermore, the disclosures of the existence of an internal security problem occurred at the same time as the disclosure on 13 March of a plot in Hanoi against the party, this time from inside its ranks, with the dismissal of the Minister of Interior as a consequence. We shall have more to say about this later on.

The deterioration of the internal security situation was no doubt bound up with the war against Cambodia and the subsequent virtual military occupation of that country. This, in turn, had much to do with the conflict with China. Lack of space does not permit a full consideration of this question in this paper. We shall confine our observations to the effects that such a conflict has had on Vietnam's internal situation.

The first and most obvious of those effects is the necessity for the Vietnamese leadership to put the country on a war footing (full mobilization was formally decreed in March 1979). Vietnam has had to maintain some 20,000 troops in Cambodia, 30,000 to 40,000 in Laos, and 200,000 to 300,000 in North Vietnam against China. Considering that Vietnam's armed forces numbered 600,000, that left little for the maintenance of security in South Vietnam, where of the 1.2 million troops of the former Saigon regime, only 300,000 had reported to the authorities, the remaining being still on the loose.⁶⁵

Apart from the internal security problem, the putting of the country on a full mobilization footing had very adverse consequences on the economy of the country. It means that 600,000 of the fittest young men of the country were kept under arms instead of being used for productive work. It means also that the rest of the population, already undernourished, had to tighten its belt still further in order to maintain this huge military force, as well as the Heng Samrin government of Cambodia. If one keeps in mind that 73 per cent of Vietnam's national budget was earmarked for military spending, one realizes

⁶⁴ *New York Times*, 14 July 1979

⁶⁵ See Ton That Thien, "Vietnam: April 30 and After", in *South East after the Restoration of peace in Indochina* (Guelph, Ontario, Canadian Council for South

how crushing the burden must be for an already hard-pressed people.⁶⁶

As mentioned above, foreign aid, meaning Soviet bloc aid almost exclusively, amounted to US\$700 million a year. Since 1975, however, it was no longer free but reimbursable.⁶⁷ As a consequence, Vietnam had to divert more of the goods it produced for export to the Soviet Union and the East European countries: in the first six months of 1977, for example, exports to these countries increased by 157 percent.⁶⁸ Of the US\$7.5 billion planned for the five-year plan, the Soviet Union pledged support to the extent of US\$2.4 billion, and the East European countries, US\$700 million.⁶⁹ But much of the foreign aid received was reserved for the strengthening of defence, and for industrial and technical development.⁷⁰ Incidentally, this explains why, in a technologically backward state, the only highly mechanized body is the army.

American aid, which could have made a tremendous contribution to the reconstruction and development of Vietnam, was not forthcoming because the relations between the two countries could not be normalized before the invasion and the occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam in 1979, and since then the prospects of Vietnam getting US\$3.25 billion, or even a small part of it, have become still more remote as Washington has insisted on the evacuation of Cambodia by Vietnam as a precondition of normalization, while Hanoi has made it clear that its presence in Cambodia is "irreversible" and that the Vietnamese armed forces would leave Cambodia "only when China ceases to threaten Indochina".⁷¹ China's "threat to Indochina", that is, to Vietnam, promises to be a very long-lasting affair. China's policy has been to weaken Vietnam by bogging it down in Cambodia, and by keeping it off balance by maintaining constant pressure on Vietnam's northern borders and, occasionally, by staging a "punishing" military operation to remind Hanoi that a confrontation with China can be very costly to Vietnam.⁷² This is quite clear after what has happened to Lang Son. This city had been a flourishing one of 50,000 on the Sino-Vietnamese border. It was occupied by the Chinese troops during the Seventeen-day border war in February/March 1979. After the withdrawal of the Chinese, it was little more than a pile of rubble. And it would not be rebuilt, a government official told Kamm "If we rebuild it, the Chinese will come and destroy it again."⁷³

The situation will surely get worse, if fighting flares up again, for then, the fighting will surely be on a larger scale, and the Vietnamese will end up bigger losers because the

⁶⁶ Disclosure by Vietnamese cadres, Brocheux and Hemery, op.cit.

⁶⁷ Statement by Tran Phuong, Nivolon, op.cit.

⁶⁸ See David Horn, "Soviet-Vietnamese Relations and the Future of South East Asia", *Pacific Affairs* 51, no. 4 (1978/79); 585-605.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Statement by Hoang Tung, *Le Devoir*, 2 Feb. 1980.

⁷¹ Statement by Vietnam's Nguyen Co Thach, during his visit to Indonesia, in June - *Le Monde*, 25 June 1980.

⁷² On the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, see Paul Quinn-Judge, "Le Vietnam face a la Chine", *Le Monde diplomatique*, Dec. 1978; Nayan Chanda, "Pressions conjuguées des Etats-Unis et de la Chine", *Le Monde diplomatique*, Mar. 1980; Devillers, "Phnom Penh et la bande des quatre", *Le Nouvel observateur*, 5 Feb. 1979; Horn, op.cit.; Buu Kinh, "Vers un nouvel équilibre asiatique", *Politique étrangère*, no.5 (1978); and Ton That Thien, "New Confrontation in South East Asia", *Asian Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 1978.

⁷³ Kamm, op.cit.

fighting will again take place on their territory. There will be more destruction, and therefore still less economic progress. That is the meaning of the message to Vietnam when Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese Vice-Premier, talked about teaching the Vietnamese a "lesson". It may not have moved the Vietnamese leaders, but the lesson was surely brought home to the Vietnamese people and cadres, who had no illusion as to what confrontation with China means to them. As a Vietnamese cadre said, "With the Japanese, the French, or the Americans, we knew that war could last a long time. But with China, we know that it will never end unless we cease to exist."⁷⁴

The conflict with China had another unexpected consequence: it disclosed to public opinion the fact that the CPV was seriously divided. In July 1979, the world was startled by the news that Hoang Van Hoan, a founder of the party and a close companion of Ho Chi Minh, a former ambassador of Vietnam to China, a former vice-minister of defence, a member of the political bureau since 1956, and a former vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of Vietnam's National Assembly, had fled to China. Hoan had been ousted from the Central Committee and the Politbureau at the party's fourth plenum in December 1976. Thus, dissensions within the party apparently dated back to three years earlier; but, in fact, they went back much further.

At a press conference in Peking on 9 August 1979, Hoan disclosed that since the death of President Ho Chi Minh, he "had many confrontations with Le Duan both in the Central Committee and the Political Bureau". Hoan said also that four other people were under house arrest.⁷⁵ Other sources said that eight out of the seventeen members of the Central Committee had been dropped, among them Chu Van Tan who, together with Vo Nguyen Giap, was one of the founders of the Liberation Army.⁷⁶ Then, on 10 March Tran Quoc Hoan, Minister of the Interior, who had been dismissed from his job in January, was excluded from the party, and three days later, on 13 March, it was disclosed that there had been a plot against the party. For the first time, the outside world learnt that the unity of the CPV, considered to be unique in the communist world, was only a myth.

Hoan had also some very revealing things to say about the leadership of the CPV, the first such statement from within the ranks of the party's leadership. On internal policy Hoan said that after waging arduous battles for more than thirty years the Vietnamese people at last won victory in 1975, and their ardent wish was to lead a tranquil life, build up the country, and pave the way for a better future, but "the fruits of revolution and the most promising conditions have been destroyed by Le Duan and company, and the hope of the people has been dashed to pieces", that "Le Duan and company have thrown our people back into thralldom and reduced them to a life of unprecedented hardships and devoid of any democratic freedom - a life of humiliation and repression". On foreign policy, Hoan said that under the control of Le Duan and company, "Vietnam today is no longer an independent and sovereign country but one subservient to a foreign power economically, politically, militarily and diplomatically" (i.e., to the Soviet Union) and that if such a state of affairs were allowed to continue, "it would not be long before

⁷⁴ *Le Devoir*, 23 Oct. 1979.

⁷⁵ *Beijing Review*, 17 Aug. 1979.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, 19 June 1978.

Vietnam turns into a source of raw materials, a processing plant and a military base serving the interests of a foreign power".⁷⁷

We have probably not heard the last of this battle inside the CPV, for on 1 February 1980 Le Duan called for the replacement of "those who do not follow the line laid down by the party"⁷⁸, and at the press conference mentioned above, Hoan said that "there are great numbers of people both in the National Assembly and outside who disagreed with the dangerous and erroneous policies of Le Duan", and that after he had fully recuperated from his illness he would undertake "certain activities".⁷⁹ One of such activities, one may surmise, would be to organize active resistance to Le Duan inside Vietnam, naturally with the support and help of China. The history of Vietnam in the coming years promises to be a stormy one and the Vietnamese leadership will have to cope with increasing pressure from both the outside and the inside.

Vietnam's past was bleak, and its present is even worse. What of the future! Sadly enough, it looks bleaker still because there is little likelihood that the root causes of Vietnam's troubles will disappear in the foreseeable future. The CPV leadership will continue to cling stubbornly to their ideas and methods, and the cadres will remain just as incompetent and corrupt.

There is no indication that the leaders are prepared to abandon or modify their approach-doctrinaire Leninism and militant militarism - because they had been used to it for half a century, and especially because it had carried them to victory, glory, and power. Besides, by choice as much as by necessity, they had become acquainted with little else: they had neither need nor time for other things. For over thirty years, they single-mindedly pursued only one aim - the seizure of power by military and revolutionary means. The overcoming of tremendous odds and victory over two very powerful nations had strengthened their conviction that they had adopted the right ideas and the right methods, and they refused to entertain even the suggestion that they might be wrong, or that there could be anything better. This is one of the points made by Hoang Van Hoan, the defector, at his press conference in Beijing mentioned above.

There is perhaps more to the CPV's arrogance and stubbornness than proven success. The Vietnamese people have a strong penchant for the absolute, and reasonableness and readiness to accept compromises are not among their national traits. Foreign generals and diplomats have probably been struck by this. Besides, the present leaders of the CPV are from Nghe-An and Ha-Tinh provinces, north of the 16th parallel, or Quang-Nam and Quang-Ngai south of this line. For centuries these were the frontier zones of Vietnam, where the settlers, who had to be both farmers and soldiers, had to fight hard to survive-hence a special breed. Those provinces are thus known to have produced a large crop of people who are single-minded, stubborn, and tough. They would make good leaders in times of crisis, but bad managers in times of normalcy.

⁷⁷ *Beijing Review*, 17 Aug. 1979.

⁷⁸ *Le Devoir*, 2 Feb. 1980.

⁷⁹ *Beijing Review*, 17 Aug. 1979.

One would not be surprised, therefore, to learn that the CPV leaders will not only adhere to their present doctrinaire Leninist approach but will make it still more thorough, as indicated by the adoption by the sixth plenum of the Central Committee, in the autumn of 1979, of the text of a projected new constitution. This new constitution will give the Party that is, the Politbureau and the Central Committee, the exclusive exercise of state power. Commenting on the change, *Nhan Dan* said, "Compared to the constitutions of 1946 and 1959 the projected new constitution contains a novelty, which asserts that the Communist Party is the only force directing the State of the proletarian dictatorship in Vietnam. It is a very important article. . . . Its aim is not only to make formal a *de facto* situation . . . but also to confirm a necessity of principle, to pose a key problem regarding the nature of the State of the proletarian dictatorship in the process of building socialism. . . ." ⁸⁰

On the other hand, long years of hard revolutionary and military life have given those men a militant frame of mind, and they view the prospect of new wars with equanimity, especially as an opportunity to prove their fine qualities of revolutionary and military leadership. As Gwynne Dyer has pointed out in connection with the prospects of war with China, the leadership of the CPV and army "seems almost to welcome the new struggle, at least at the subconscious level. With full mobilisation and all priority to the war effort, the country can again be run as they have learned to run it during thirty years of war. They need not risk failure by attempting difficult new tasks like peaceful economic development." ⁸¹ To them, war is not something repulsive, a means of the last resort, to be discarded and forgotten as soon as victory has been achieved, but something lofty, an intrinsic part of a society's life, a fine element of a nation's culture. To Gen. Van Tien Dung, "War is the highest and most comprehensive test for a nation and a social system. Our forefathers have established a unique military tradition of using a great cause to defeat cruelty, wisdom to overthrow tyranny, and a small force to oppose a large one. This can be said to be the concentrated manifestation of Vietnamese culture and the source of our invisible strength." ⁸² There is a Hitlerite ring to such a kind of speech, and many historians and sociologists will find it hard to accept this interpretation of Vietnam's history and culture.

General Dung is not the only one to extol the virtues of war. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, writing in 1976, made it clear, only one year after the return of peace at the end of thirty years of exhaustive wars, that the nation needed a larger and modern military machine, and "in building the economy we must closely associate the economy with national defence. National construction must always be coupled with national defence. This has become a law of survival and development of our nation." ⁸³ It is thus not surprising, as has been mentioned above, that 73 per cent of Vietnam's budget was absorbed by military spending, and that its army was highly mechanized and modern while the country's economy was in shambles and its people suffering from hunger and destitution.

If no change can be expected in the CPV leadership, no change should be expected

⁸⁰ Quoted by Brocheux and Hemery, op.cit.

⁸¹ Gwynne Dwyer, "Viets Have Fought So Long They Can't Stop the War", *The Gazette*, 29 Nov. 1979.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Montreal Star*, 2 June 1976.

among the cadres either, specially the problem of incompetence and corruption. This problem was not solved in 1980 and is not likely to be solved in the foreseeable future. Corruption and incompetence will remain distinctive features of socialist Vietnam for many years. It is interesting to note that the CPV leadership faces the same problem as Mr. Diem once did. The government officials and cadres were the latter's main supporters, and when they turned out to be corrupt or became corrupt, he still had to keep using them, not only because they were his main political base, but also because they were the only ones available, unless he decided to draw from the ranks of the opposition or the enemy.

Since, as soon as they had seized power, the communist leadership rejected practically the whole population of South Vietnam - considered to be, one way or another, "the lackeys of imperialism" - they had to use only their cadres, and there were not enough of them for the multiple tasks to be done. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, there are only about 7,000 cadres for a population of 3.3 million. If these cadres prove incompetent or corrupt, the CPV leaders have to choose between continuing to use them or finding others, which means turning to the cadres of the old regime. They will have to opt for the first solution because their own cadres are at least politically more reliable. Indeed they are, because they have a vested interest in the preservation of the regime. But they will undermine it from the inside too. This is a process for which French journalists once coined a very colourful word when speaking of the anti-communist regimes in Vietnam. The word, very difficult to translate fully, is *pourrissement* (the closest is "rotting"). In any case, even if the CPV leaders decided to use the old cadres, these will not be available. The most experienced and competent of these have already fled abroad, those staying behind in 1975 are preparing to flee, or have been so alienated or become so physically exhausted that they would be of little use. And so the state machine will continue to clank and puff along until it breaks down completely, or breaks up under pressure - internal or external, or a combination of both.

The internal pressure will come from the various religious groups and the remnants of the ARVN, but, in time, we should expect their ranks to be swelled by increasing numbers of the SVNLF and, eventually, from inside the party itself, as the case of Hoang Van Hoan reminds us. And this, in a situation in which the peasants will have a vested interest in the downfall or the incapacitating of the regime - the same thing which made the seizure of power by the present leadership possible before 1975. By themselves, however, the internal pressures cannot bring down this regime. The decisive push will have to come from the outside. In the coming years, this outside source can only be China.

Unlike France or the United States, China poses a real threat to Vietnam because it has the possibility, the power, and especially the will, to hurt Vietnam. Not only is it huge in size and population (9 million square kilometres and one billion inhabitants against Vietnam's 300,000 and 50 million), but it is also Vietnam's immediate neighbour. The amount of resources it will have to deploy to keep Vietnam off balance will be insignificant in relation to its total resources; in military terms, this means 100,000-200,000 troops on 800 kilometres of common borders with Vietnam, while the latter will

have to deploy all of its 600,000 men on three fronts - China, Laos, Cambodia-Thailand - totaling more than 3,000 kilometres, and to spend over 70 per cent of its national budget on defence. China will not be crippled by public opinion or fifth columnists at home. China has patience and knows how to exploit the time element in any conflict; after all, it was Vietnam's teacher in protracted warfare, and if it has helped Vietnam for thirty years in the latter's liberation wars, it can do the same for new allies, or for itself. Above all, China has good reasons to want to hurt Vietnam, and intends to do so because, in its eyes, Vietnam is the "surrogate of the Soviet Union".

Of the options open to China to hurt Vietnam most with the least risk to itself, getting Vietnam bogged down in Cambodia is the best one.⁸⁴ Cambodia is a large country presenting difficult military problems to an invader: lack of roads (a very adverse factor in the monsoon season), deep forests and deep mountains around its borders, and above all a population basically hostile to Vietnam. It will be difficult for Vietnam to subjugate Cambodia completely, and in the present state of international relations, such a conquest will not be popular: even Sweden, a staunch supporter of Vietnam, has already condemned Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, and among the communist states, some like Rumania and Yugoslavia have adopted the same attitude. An attempt by Vietnam to subdue Cambodia completely will also be very costly: even if the Soviet Union continued to shoulder a large share of the military burden (US\$3.3 million per day), Vietnam still loses the precious aid of other countries and, in addition, will have to divert its already scarce resources to prop up the Heng Samrin regime. And it will involve Vietnam in a war on two fronts, if not three (if we include Laos), or even four if we include Thailand, for the latter cannot be expected to remain indifferent to the total control of Cambodia by Vietnam. In the past, it has always opposed such control, and one should expect it to continue to do so in the future.

Since Hanoi considers its position in Cambodia "irreversible", and has decided to maintain its troops there "as long as the Chinese threat exists",⁸⁵ and since China has made it clear that it will continue to help Cambodia to fight Vietnam so long as Vietnamese troops remain there, the deadlock is complete. The war will therefore continue, with increasing strains on Vietnam's economy, and eventually, on its internal stability. If war against China and Cambodia is traditionally popular in Vietnam, it will remain so only if Vietnam wins. Nothing succeeds like success, but nothing also fails like failure. If the war drags on for too long, and the strains on the Vietnamese population become unbearable, at some point one should expect the population to rise up against the regime, especially if there is help from the outside. If the United States and other countries do not extend such help to the Vietnamese, the Chinese almost surely will. Therein lies the great danger awaiting the present Hanoi regime.

So far, in spite of its efforts, Hanoi has not been able to suppress the Cambodian guerrilla movement completely. In fact, this movement seems to have gained in strength and effectiveness, as their recent activities prove. On 12 June, a train was attacked in broad

⁸⁴ See Ton That Thien, *op.cit.* in *Asian Affairs*,

⁸⁵ Statement of Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnam's Foreign Minister in Kuala Lumpur on 11 May, 1980, *The Gazette*, 12 May, 1980.

daylight only 60 kilometres from Phnom Penh.⁸⁶ According to the UPI correspondent in Phnom Penh, the return of the monsoon season – the guerrillas' season - was accompanied by a recrudescence of Khmer Rouge activities. Raids, ambushes, and the destruction of bridges by dynamite made movement difficult; it was dangerous to leave the main roads or to travel after sundown; at Kampong Kdei, north of Tonle Sap lake, there was fighting between Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops and peasants reported the presence of Khmer Rouge around their villages. A few kilometres from there, a Vietnamese military convoy was immobilized at a blown-up bridge. Military posts were set up every 10 kilometres along the roads. At least 24 trucks transporting aid had been intercepted, and a little before that, a convoy of 20 truck had been seized by the guerrillas. Phnom Penh itself and other cities have been infiltrated by the guerrillas. On 21 May 1980, the Vietnamese and Soviet embassies were machine gunned and a Molotov cocktail was thrown at Hotel Monorom. Ammunitions depot at Kampong Cham was blown up. And, a very significant fact, 2,000 Vietnamese troops have deserted in the previous twelve months and sought refuge in Thailand.⁸⁷ One has the impression of reading a report dealing with Vietnam before 1975, but this time, the Cambodian guerrillas are playing the role once played by the Vietnamese NLF which now represents "the forces of order". In addition to the Khmer Rouge, there is the FNLKP (Front of Liberation of the Khmer People), headed by a former minister of Sihanouk, Son Sann, about whom we shall certainly hear more in the coming years or months, because the FNLKP, like the Khmer Rouge, has been reported as receiving aid from China.

Son Sann, like many of the Khmer Rouge, operates from bases along the Thai border, just as the Vietnamese NLF had done along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border before 1975. The Vietnamese forces can never destroy the Cambodian guerrillas completely so long as these sanctuaries or near-sanctuaries continue to exist. Since Hanoi desperately needs a total victory to support its claim to the "irreversibility" of the situation in Cambodia, the temptation is very great for Vietnam to achieve this aim by attacking those troublesome sanctuaries, as the Americans and Thieu had done before 1975 to bring the Vietnam War to a close.

If such attacks were a possibility that disturbed Thailand and other countries, particularly the United States and those of Southeast Asia, it has now become a reality, for on 23 June, Vietnamese troops penetrated in force into Thailand in several places in the Anranyaprathet area, and serious fighting broke out between Vietnamese and Thai troops for two days. Elements of two Vietnamese regiments took part in the operation, and Thai authorities reported that 10,000 troops, supported by T -54 tanks, were deployed opposite the Mak Mung and Nong Chan refugee centres. Thai authorities said that this was clearly "more than a localised incident and it was carefully thought out by Vietnamese authorities".⁸⁸ This is clearly an operation aimed at intimidating the Thais, as well as the other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for it was timed for the eve of an ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur. This view is confirmed by the declaration of two Vietnamese taken prisoners who said that the operation was intended to be a major

⁸⁶ *The Gazette*, 13 June 1980.

⁸⁷ *Le Monde*, 17 June 1980.

⁸⁸ *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 26 June 1980.

two-day sortie in which the troops would push three miles into Thailand and withdraw after having made their point"⁸⁹ And the point was to force the Thais to stop giving aid to the refugees who would swell the ranks of the Khmer Rouge. These, according to Nguyen Co Thach, Vietnam's Foreign Minister, were escorted back into Cambodia by Thai troops - hence the Vietnamese operation. And Thach said that Vietnamese troops would continue to move against guerrilla concentrations to the south of Aranyaprathet.⁹⁰

It is not possible to discuss here all the aspects of Vietnamese-ASEAN relations. Only one facet will be mentioned: the incident highlights a situation fraught with danger for the stability of Southeast Asia and for world peace. If Thailand is attacked, the United States, and especially China, would come to its aid. One might expect the Southeast Asian countries to do the same. American assistance will probably be limited to providing Thailand with war material and economic aid. But China will surely go beyond that and provide troops if necessary. In any case, as in 1979, in the case of Cambodia, it will always have the possibility of opening up a second front on Vietnam's northern borders to lessen the pressure on Thailand. If North Vietnam is attacked by China, the Soviet Union, under the terms of the treaty signed with Vietnam in Moscow in November 1978, will have to come to the latter's assistance, and at least seek to lessen Chinese pressure on Vietnam by creating diversionary action on the Sino-Soviet borders. The Soviet Union may not want a global war, but a limited war may get out of control easily.

Whether a new war will be limited or global, the consequences will be the same for Southeast Asia. The situation in the area will be destabilized, and the economic progress of the countries there halted or slowed down considerably as a result of unavoidable increased military spending. For Vietnam, it will mean more hardship and more misery. Its people will be subjected to the fourth war in thirty-five years. All that does not seem to worry the leaders of Vietnam very much. This is most disturbing indeed.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *The Gazette*, 26 June, 1980.