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**From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons:  
Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic  
Anticommunism**

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## From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism

Forty years after the end of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese American anticommunism remains in the news. The *Orange County Register*, for example, regularly covers anticommunist protests organized by Vietnamese communities in Southern California. In April 2014, it reported from the city hall of Irvine that “several hundred outraged Vietnamese Americans” successfully demonstrated against a proposal to add the Vietnamese city of Nha Trang to Irvine’s friendship city program.<sup>1</sup> Seven weeks later, it fielded a report from the Chinese consulate in Los Angeles about five hundred protesters expressing “a general condemnation of the Communist governments of China and Vietnam.” The protesters issued “fiery anti-Communist chants such as ‘down with red China’” and trampled on the Chinese flag.<sup>2</sup> As is often the case, the online versions of both reports featured a number of photos of protesters raising the yellow-and-red-striped flag of the former Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Visually eye-catching and symbolically potent, photos of protesters holding high these flags have been reproduced in countless news reports about ethnic politics in Little Saigon communities.<sup>3</sup>

Its newsworthiness notwithstanding, Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism is not well understood in American mainstream culture or well

explained in the Asian American Studies scholarship. Opening with a survey of existing research, this article contends that this scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to the historicity of diasporic anticommunism. As a corrective, it argues that contemporary anticommunism cannot be understood apart from a longer anticommunist tradition and also from dramatic changes in postwar Vietnam. After giving an overview of this tradition, the article explores the impact of the abrupt demise of South Vietnam in 1975 and the incarceration of South Vietnamese officials and military officers in reeducation camps. It shows that these episodes crucially shaped diasporic anticommunist ideology, and fueled anticommunist activism in Vietnamese American communities since the early 1990s.

### Diasporic Anticommunism in Scholarship

As with the mainstream news media, academia has shown a healthy interest in diasporic anticommunism. The editors of an encyclopedia on Asian Americans, for example, deemed the topic significant enough to merit its own entry among only eight entries about Vietnamese Americans.<sup>4</sup> There is no entry about anticommunism for any other ethnic group. Among the works listed in the bibliography is an article from a collected volume on anticommunism among ethnic refugees in the United States, such as Poles, Ukrainians, Cubans, and Hmong. The title of the article, “Better Dead Than Red,” implies that Vietnamese anticommunism is a form of extremism. It asserts that anticommunist emotions “were still raw for many Vietnamese” during the 1970s and 1980s, and discusses popular support within the community for homeland liberation groups as well as violence against Vietnamese refugees perceived to be sympathetic to communism. The article also highlights a series of protests in Westminster, California in 1999 that were organized against the Hi Tek TV & VCR store, whose owner displayed a flag of Vietnam and a poster showing Hồ Chí Minh. It ends by detailing developments in the 2000s focusing on human rights as the new target of anti-communist activists.<sup>5</sup> The Hi Tek episode is also explained in the reference work noted above, and receives its own entry in another encyclopedia about Asian Americans.<sup>6</sup> On the whole, scholars have interpreted it as a climax and a symbol of anticommunism in Orange County and other Little Saigon communities.<sup>7</sup>

Despite devoting significant attention to anticommunist protests in the Vietnamese American community, Asian American Studies scholarship, for the most part, has not offered a clear explanation for the phenomenon. This lacuna is symptomatic of a fundamental problem in Asian American Studies scholarship about diasporic anticommunism: it treats the subject matter as an ahistorical phenomenon. Too often, anticommunism in the United States has been caricatured as unyielding and unchanging, and criticized as negative and detrimental to Vietnamese communities across the United States. Twenty-eight years after the Vietnam War, for instance, the Asian Americanist Linda Vō asserted that “those most vocal and [who] garner the most media attention do not necessarily represent the needs or voice” of the community. She also notes that the adoption of “fervent anti-Communism ideologies is mandatory” among Vietnamese Americans.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde has suggested that fear “of retaliation forces Vietnamese Americans [who do not support anticommunist activities] into a silent majority” more than thirty-five years after the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup> Less critical in tone, Kim Nguyen nonetheless ascribes “the visibility” and “rhetorical positioning of the protesters” to a “narrow anti-communist understanding of the Vietnam War onto the Vietnamese American body.” She points to the support of Vietnamese Americans for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and concludes that the “hyper-conservatism that distinguishes Vietnamese Americans from all other ethnic groups serves certainly the purposes of reinvigorating allegiance to past imperialist endeavors” of the United States.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Kim Nguyen lumps together diasporic anticommunism and pro-war sentiment and interprets them in the context of American history and politics. Similarly, Yén Lê Espiritu is critical of diasporic anticommunism by inflating its link to American imperialism. Although she finds that “the refugees’ public denouncement of the current government of Vietnam is understandable, even expected,” Espiritu does not explain how Vietnamese history or politics have affected them at all. Instead, she interprets anticommunism through the lens of American politics and imperialism. The “‘anticommunist’ stance,” argues Espiritu, “is also a narrative, adopted in part because it is the primary language with which Vietnamese refugees, as objects of US rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the

US social and political landscape.”<sup>11</sup> In this view, Vietnamese refugees, the “anticommunist model minorities,” have helped to justify American imperialism by relentlessly attacking communism on the one hand and praising American freedom on the other hand. Taking a different tack, Phuong Nguyen has argued that the anticommunist ideology in Little Saigon was “victim-based” and helped to fuel a form of “refugee nationalism” in the diasporic community. While his analysis is critical of the homeland liberation movement, it does not explore the deeper roots of this form of nationalism or this kind of ideology.<sup>12</sup>

These approaches are not completely uniform, but they share a tendency to simplify the content of diasporic anticommunist ideology.<sup>13</sup> They typically place diasporic anticommunism against the background of US history and the foreground of US politics, but leave out almost entirely the history and politics of Vietnam. As a consequence, a good deal of this scholarship has come to view diasporic anticommunism as ideologically extreme, intellectually incoherent, psychologically irrational, politically frozen in time, and culturally damaging to the community. Unwittingly, pathology becomes a dominant lens to interpret anticommunism as opposed to anthropology or political science or history. Yet it is precisely the *historicity* of anticommunism in the United States that should be examined and studied. For too long, much of Asian American Studies scholarship has concentrated on the effects of diasporic anticommunism rather than its causes, on its manifestations and symptoms rather than its origins.

This is not to say that this scholarship is without complexity. “Anti-communism in Little Saigon,” observes Douglas Padgett in his research about Vietnamese Buddhism in Orange County, “is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon.”<sup>14</sup> Based on fieldwork in the San Diego community, Thuy Vo Dang concludes that “anticommunism is not only a political ideology for Vietnamese Americans but a ‘cultural discourse’ that underlies most of the community practices of first-generation-dominated organizations.”<sup>15</sup> Back in Orange County, Karin Aguilar-San Juan happened to conduct research during the Hi Tek protests and noted the presence of former political prisoners at the protest site. Aguilar-San Juan observed the effort of the protesters to “find common ground with Americans” through anticommunist exhibits, and noted “infuriated refugees—many of whom spent years in Vietnamese

reeducation camps before escaping to the United States—[who] made loud and clear in banners and rallies their opinion that ‘freedom of speech is not free.’”<sup>16</sup> Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, while recognizing the active presence of former reeducation camp prisoners and the importance of their background, present a more critical view of protesters. These prisoners, the scholars note, had “encountered the violence of the communist state in Việt Nam, and thus their identities have been carved out of their experiences during and after the war.”<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the carceral background of many protesters points to a crucial connection between their Vietnamese past and their American present. These scholars did not historicize Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism, but their studies suggest the complexity of anticommunism in Vietnamese American communities.

Political scientists may be the most sensitive scholars to the historicity of diasporic anticommunism. Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya have called attention to broader historical changes that affected Vietnamese politics in Orange County during the 1990s. “It is no coincidence,” they state, “that the period saw a surge in grass-roots political acts” as “demonstration activity . . . reached two peaks, in 1994 and 1998, as the Clinton Administration lifted the trade embargo and moved toward normalized relations.”<sup>18</sup> In another study about the same demonstration, Như-Ngọc Ông and David Meyer analyze anticommunist protests as a part of a process of political incorporation in Little Saigon. Examining records of the City of Westminster, they discover that protests occurred “only occasionally from 1975 until the late 1980s,” and it was only after “increasing concentration of Vietnamese populations and the rise of relevant political issues to be addressed,” especially during and after bilateral talks on normalization, that protests increased in frequency.<sup>19</sup> By contextualizing these local protests in larger historical and transnational developments, these findings help to move scholarship toward a more sophisticated understanding of anticommunism in Orange County and elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> They are supported by a growing number of works about other subjects that seek to understand transnational forces and interactions across the Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, scholarship has paid more attention to shades and nuances within the anticommunist spectrum. Most recently, the ethnographer Hao Phan conducted interviews with twenty-two Vietnamese Americans in northern

Illinois. He notes that there is “political diversity among Vietnamese Americans despite the fact that the whole community is anti-communist.” He attributes this spectrum of opinions to two factors: life experiences in Vietnam before migration and the current political situation in Vietnam. Anticommunism, Hao Phan concludes, “is not a theoretical matter but the direct result of painful life experiences” in postwar Vietnam. The more hardships a refugee or immigrant experienced in postwar Vietnam, the more anticommunist he or she tended to be. The attitudes of refugees and immigrants towards communism are also affected by the action, reaction, or lack of action on the part of the Vietnamese government regarding issues of human rights and Sino-Vietnamese relations.<sup>22</sup> Hao Phan’s research is notable for its analysis of the present *and* the past, and how they interacted with each other. It is a step in the right direction for the study of diasporic anticommunism.

#### SITUATING DIASPORIC ANTICOMMUNISM IN VIETNAMESE HISTORY

The remainder of this article seeks to make two arguments. First, I argue that diasporic anticommunism in the last forty years is not a new phenomenon but the latest manifestation of Vietnamese anticommunism. During the twentieth century, anticommunism, including the diasporic variety, developed from a combination of factors. Diasporic anticommunism is not necessarily identical to the anticommunist ideology from an earlier time. Nonetheless, the connections between the past and the present were fluid and continuous. The lines are not perfectly linear, but they are not broken or dotted either.

This article offers an overview of anticommunism from colonialism to the end of the Vietnam War. It will show that Vietnamese anticommunism had multiple roots and developed from the complex history of colonialism, revolution, and national division. Although there had been anticommunists among Vietnamese since at least the Russian Revolution, Vietnamese opposition to communism rose out of the competition among different political parties, communist and noncommunist, during the 1930s and early 1940s. It took a sharp turn after the August Revolution, and yet another turn after the Geneva Accords of 1954. Anticommunism became an ideological mainstay

of the Sài Gòn government. This history of anticommunism is necessarily shortened in the overview, but it should provide an important context for understanding postwar diasporic anticommunism.

Shifting to the postwar era, the article analyzes the impact of national loss and reeducation-camp incarceration. The fall of Sài Gòn, I contend, had a profound psychological effect on Vietnamese whose nationalist identity was tied to the Sài Gòn regime. Moreover, this shock was worsened by extreme poverty and political discrimination under the new regime. Military officers and government officials of the RVN were arrested and imprisoned shortly after the fall of Sài Gòn. This experience arguably sharpened their anticommunism and turned many into anticommunist activists after they arrived in the United States.

It is not possible to understand diasporic anticommunism without exploring the experiences of these political prisoners. Not all of them became anticommunist activists in America; and some activists were never sent to reeducation camps. Nonetheless, the carceral experience crucially shaped the development of diasporic anticommunism. It led to the resettlement of tens of thousands of former political prisoners and their families through the Humanitarian Operation Program (commonly referred to as “H.O.” by Vietnamese Americans) during the 1990s. The arrival of political prisoners from the socialist republic renewed anticommunist activism in diasporic communities, including a marked rise in anticommunist protests.<sup>23</sup>

In spring 2014, I attended a major reunion of former reeducation camp prisoners in Little Saigon, Orange County. I talked to a number of attendees and followed up with visits or phone conversations in the next two months.<sup>24</sup> From these visits, I learned that many former prisoners played central roles in organizing, supporting, and sustaining political protest against the Vietnamese government and against businesses that were deemed communist-friendly. This was the case during the Hi Tek protests, when many former prisoners and their families kept a perpetual physical presence in front of the store. Their carceral experience, as recounted in interviews and memoirs published in the diaspora, added new political and emotive content to Vietnamese anticommunism. It strengthened diasporic opposition to US-Vietnam diplomatic ties, and fueled anticommunist protests in Little Saigon.



At this point, I should make clear what this article is *not* about. It is not about the history of diasporic anticommunist activism in the United States, such as the homeland liberation movement of the 1980s. It is not a study of diasporic anticommunist organizations, although some organizations are named in the article. Nor is it about the Hi Tek protests or another specific episode in the history of Vietnamese anticommunism in the United States. All are important topics, but they are also outside the confines of this article. Rather, this article historicizes anticommunist activism within a longer tradition of Vietnamese anticommunism, the fall of Sài Gòn, and postwar incarceration. It will demonstrate that diasporic anticommunism cannot be separated from Vietnamese history.

### The Vietnamese Anticommunist Tradition

The anticommunist tradition among Vietnamese has been a factor at least since the late-colonial period, with the colonial authorities and the Catholic Church taking the lead in opposing Marxist ideology.<sup>25</sup> Because of the perceived association between French missionaries and colonialism in the nineteenth century, some non-Catholic Vietnamese considered Catholics lacking a fervent nationalism.<sup>26</sup> But Catholics and colonialists had different interests, methods, and reasons for opposing communism. As recently demonstrated, Catholic anticommunism had a lot to do with challenging French colonialism. A number of Vietnamese Catholics were influenced by European Social Catholicism, which began with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) that promoted social justice for industrial workers, and resulted in the Catholic Action Movement recognized by Pope Pius XI in 1927. By the 1930s, Vietnamese Catholics had started a number of progressive associations that were not always in the interest of the colonial state. They were critical of the secularism of the French state and pointed to colonial oppression of Indochinese as a reason for the spread of communism.<sup>27</sup>

Despite their differences, Catholics and colonialists both considered communism a direct threat and published many anticommunist materials. For colonial administrators, the communists were to be stopped and suppressed like any other organization that challenged colonial rule with real or perceived violence. On the other hand, the Catholic clergy viewed communism

as synonymous with atheism and, therefore, a grave threat to the Church in Indochina. Anticomunist messages were integrated into Catholic moral instructions, and Catholic children were taught that communism attacked the Church, the family, and the “moral order.” Frequent were references to “the evil of Communism,” and Catholic publications sometimes attacked positivism, utilitarianism, egalitarianism, and even “atheistic” Buddhism. Catholic anticommunist rhetoric was so effective that even the colonial authorities sometimes borrowed it for their own propaganda. One colonial leaflet, for example, had an illustration of communists burning books and beating a teacher. Another showed a Vietnamese tree being chopped down by several Vietnamese communists at the order of a Russian Marxist.<sup>28</sup>

These colorful if overwrought portrayals of communism from the colonial and ecclesiastical authorities were meant to strike terror into the hearts of ordinary Vietnamese. For many Catholics, however, anticommunism was not merely propaganda but an increasingly significant issue with palpable implications. This point was well illustrated by the killing of a priest, Fr. Pierre Khang, at the hand of communist agitators during the Nghệ Tĩnh rebellion led by communists in 1930–1931. Contemporary Catholic accounts of the killing blamed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) for threatening Fr. Pierre Khang and the Catholics in his flock, killing him and several villagers, burning down the church and forbidding parishioners from burying the dead. Not surprisingly, stories like this one were widely circulated among Catholics, and became material for stronger denunciations of communism in the growing Catholic press of the 1930s. Publications such as the Hué-based periodical *Vì Chúa* [For the Lord], whose priest-editor Nguyễn Văn Thích had written perhaps the best-known Vietnamese-language anticommunist pamphlet in the 1920s, offered many philosophical and theological critiques of communism. It discussed, for example, leftist European thinkers such as George Sorel, and Catholic responses to communism such as Pope Pius XI’s 1937 encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* [On Atheistic Communism]. In Sài Gòn, the newspaper *La croix d’Indochine* [The Cross of Indochina] became perhaps the loudest anticommunist voice of its time among Catholic and non-Catholic publications. Strongly supported by the Catholic property-owning bourgeoisie, it persistently attacked communist abolition of private property and especially targeted the opinions of the

rival paper *La lutte* [The Struggle] run by Vietnamese Stalinists and Trotskyists in a rare collaboration.<sup>29</sup>

Although ecclesiastical and colonialist anticommunist rhetoric was vocal, the impact of anticommunism was limited at that time. Revolutionary violence during the 1930s affected only a minority of Vietnamese, mostly Catholics.<sup>30</sup> However, there was also growing tension between the communists and non-Christian religious groups: the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Buddhists. Similar to new or revived religious sects in China, these groups, to quote a historian of the Vietnamese revolution, “very obviously did not believe that communism had found adequate solutions for the traumas of social disintegration.” As a result, the sects and the ICP tried to draw people from the other side during the 1930s. But their encounters did not lead to the level of conflict and bloodshed that was to occur in the 1940s.<sup>31</sup>

Among members of the urban intelligentsia, opposition to communism remained in the realm of theoretical debate rather than concrete action. The Hà Nội-based Self-Strength Literary Group [Tự Lực Văn Đoàn], which exerted the most dominant literary and cultural influence on urban youth during the 1930s, was certainly opposed to class struggle and Marxism. But it did not make anticommunism a major issue, focusing instead on advocacy for wholesale Westernization on the one hand and severe criticism of the old Vietnamese order on the other. As illustrated below, some of the budding communist and noncommunist intellectuals went to the same schools or were acquaintances and friends. They may have tried to persuade one another, but did not resort to violence.<sup>32</sup>

The poet and publisher Nguyễn Vỹ, a prominent Buddhist and noncommunist intellectual, provided an example. Hailing from central Vietnam and living in Hà Nội during the 1930s, Nguyễn Vỹ knew Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh, both future Politburo members of the Communist Party. Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh were already adherents of Marxism, and Võ Nguyên Giáp loaned Nguyễn Vỹ dozens of French-language leftist magazines and books from Marxist authors such as Lenin, Bukharin, and Maurice Thorez, leader of the French Communist Party. But the anticolonial and anti-fascist Nguyễn Vỹ was “disappointed” in communist theory and thought that Marxism, “if applied in Vietnam, would certainly destroy all moral foundations of the family, society, nation, the Vietnamese people, even

the personal self.” Võ Nguyên Giáp’s attempts to persuade Nguyễn Vỹ did not cause him to change his mind, but they remained friendly and often bantered when running into each other on the street.<sup>33</sup> Like Nguyễn Vỹ, most educated urbanites were neither Catholic nor supporters of colonialism. But they found Marxism wanting because, in the words of a scholar of Vietnamese communism, it would have “sacrificed traditional Vietnamese patriotism to proletarian internationalism.”<sup>34</sup> Or, as another scholar has put it, the communists “interpreted patriotism as outmoded tradition and internationalism as modern, a judgment with which most Vietnamese [at the time] disagreed.”<sup>35</sup> Although they could be intense at times, disagreements between Marxist and non-Marxist intellectuals were, for the most part, theoretical rather than focused on specific programs. Violent outbreaks between communist and noncommunist Vietnamese were confined mostly to prison, where different anticolonial groups such as the ICP and the Vietnamese Nationalist Party [Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng] (VNQDD), vied for control and to convert one another.<sup>36</sup>

In short, anticommunism before the 1940s was mixed in composition and causality: Catholic condemnation of communism prompted by church doctrine and some limited revolutionary violence; growing tension between communist members and other religious groups; competition for membership among communist and noncommunist political parties; and philosophical differences among the intelligentsia. Different groups had different reasons for opposing communism, and the degree of opposition varied. In the absence of a large-scale confrontation, there was no consensus about an anticommunist ideology.

The Second World War and the August Revolution, however, brought forth dramatic changes in the anticommunist outlook. This period saw the ICP exerting a greater influence on Vietnamese, but anticommunist sentiment also grew. Although the VNQDD was not in a strong position as in the early 1930s, it remained an important player among noncommunist parties.<sup>37</sup> Several Đại Việt political parties also emerged to present an alternative political and ideological challenge to the ICP. The Đại Việt parties opposed socialist internationalism, and it appeared that at least a number of their leaders admired European fascist regimes that were on the rise. They also re-emphasized Social Darwinism, a driving force among the previous

generation, as the basis for an independent postcolonial Vietnam. Although the multiplicity of the Đại Việt parties illustrated the fragmentation that plagued noncommunist nationalists in subsequent years, their emergence demonstrated ideological alternatives to Vietnamese communism.<sup>38</sup> The stage was set for a new kind of confrontation in revolutionary ideology and politics.

Moreover, the political and military situation during the spring and summer of 1945 was thoroughly volatile. In anticipation of the Allied victory over Japan, various Vietnamese groups jockeyed to gain advantage. In northern Vietnam, the VNQDĐ and the Đại Việt created a new formal alliance while independently operating several military training schools. In the south, the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo solidified power in their areas of influence while expressing support for Japan's "pan-Asianism." In Sài Gòn, the Trotskyists reconstituted themselves into a new political party and re-established contacts with the smaller Trotskyist groups in the north. Against them were ICP-associated Stalinists, who formed the Vanguard Youths [Thanh Niên Tiền Phong] and attracted hundreds of new members with a nationalistic rather than communist appeal. Using nationalistic rhetoric, the Vanguard Youths constantly attacked the Trotskyists and called for "the People's government to punish them" by assassination.<sup>39</sup> Such threats and attacks fomented the revolutionary violence that soon engulfed Vietnamese anticolonial politics and helped to create new ideas and rationale for a broader anticommunist ideology.

Much of the anticommunist ideology was shaped by fighting among Vietnamese, especially ICP-directed violence against noncommunist groups. Even before Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of independence in September 1945, most communist-led Việt Minh groups, to quote a historian of the August Revolution, "probably spent as much time selecting Vietnamese 'traitors' and 'reactionaries' for elimination as trying to kill Japanese."<sup>40</sup> Even though revolutionary violence varied from place to place, the overall cost was steep for non- and anticommunists. In the northern mountainous area, for example, the Việt Minh exercised considerable "red terror" on Vietnamese officials. In the Red River Delta, the Việt Minh preferred to "threaten or cajole government officials rather than to eliminate them," but still killed many lower-level officials.<sup>41</sup> The situation worsened after Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of

independence. Although communists were the victims of some attacks and killings, they were a lot more successful at eliminating their real and potential rivals than the other way around. One estimate puts the number of deaths of “alleged enemies of the Revolution” at several thousand from late August to September alone, and “tens of thousands” of others were detained for weeks and even months.<sup>42</sup>

As revealed by the official history of the People’s Army of Vietnam [Quân Đội Nhân Dân] (PAVN), Việt Minh teams of “national defense” and “self-defense” engaged in episodic fighting against three enemies in late 1945 and early 1946: the French, the Chinese, and noncommunist Vietnamese, including the VNQDD. Fighting the last category was especially “complicated” because it involved the police and “the people” in addition to the defense corps. Việt Minh teams relied on a variety of tactics depending on location and circumstance: “isolating” the noncommunist enemies from their comrades and supporters, “surrounding” them with revolutionary forces, “punishing” (i.e., assassinating) them even “in front of the Chiang troops,” and “protecting” areas already controlled from possible invasion by “traitors” and “collaborators.”<sup>43</sup> Access to the files at the Sûreté, the French police headquarters, allowed them to identify and arrest or liquidate colonial spies, agents, and potential foes in Hà Nội, Huế, and Sài Gòn.<sup>44</sup> Many assassinations of real and potential rivals were carried out in Hà Nội. An official history of Hà Nội’s Việt Minh security police, for instance, recounts the assassinations of a variety of people: a high-ranking member of the VNQDD; an “enthusiastic intelligence gatherer”; another male who worked for French intelligence before switching to the Japanese; a Vietnamese who “headed a reactionary political group” supported by the Japanese; a woman who ran a café-type establishment described as a “first-rate establishment for the Japanese police”; and “dozens of other secret police and evil Vietnamese” working for the Japanese. Among the most common labels assigned to the dead were lackeys [*tay sai*], reactionaries [*phản động*], and evil Vietnamese [*Việt gian*].<sup>45</sup> These terms were meant to dismiss any possible nationalist credentials of the deceased. The labels were used again later, during and after the Indochina Wars, including in postwar reeducation camps.

Although the Việt Minh took great care to keep this bloody history out of circulation during the First Indochina War, it fueled greater anticommunism

among many survivors. In southern Vietnam, assassinations and armed conflicts led to a “balkanization” of the region among the communists and the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Catholics.<sup>46</sup> In the northern and central regions, members of noncommunist political parties went into hiding. In his memoir, former South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, Bùi Diễm, a member of the largest Đại Việt Party, wrote about the “outright war between the Vietminh and the nationalists” in a chapter aptly called “The Terror.” The Đại Việt Party was overwhelmed by Võ Nguyên Giáp’s troops and secret police, and the party leader ordered members to withdraw and escape in the summer of 1946. Bùi Diễm was able to flee to a fortified Catholic area; not so lucky was his party’s leader Trương Tử Anh, who disappeared without a trace. The violence had triggered greater anticommunism among the Đại Việt and other opponents of Võ Nguyên Giáp and the communists. “I watched the destruction of the nationalists,” recalled Bùi Diễm decades later, “from a victim’s perspective.”<sup>47</sup>

In some ways, “victim” became *the* operative word for anticommunists from the 1940s onward. After the August Revolution, anticommunists continued to formulate their critiques philosophically, but also increasingly with stories and eyewitness accounts designed to strike fear in the Vietnamese. The internationalization of the war further radicalized the Việt Minh and emboldened the party leadership to begin revolutionary policies such as land reform.<sup>48</sup> Because of the ascent of the Việt Minh during the First Indochina War, an anticommunist ideology circulated in selected circles but did not blossom until after the Geneva Accords. Not long after the installment of Ngô Đình Diệm as prime minister, anticommunism found a venue for expression in South Vietnam. The first five years of Ngô Đình Diệm’s rule saw a flourishing of anticommunist publications from Sài Gòn and other southern cities. Accompanied by the Denounce Communist [Tố Cộng] Campaign, the publications focused on communist brutality and spread anticommunist propaganda on an unprecedented scale. Many featured writings by fervent anticommunist émigrés from North Vietnam, and criticized three aspects of communism: revolutionary violence and repression, class struggle, and thought control. The fact that most of these anticommunist authors were *not* Catholic highlighted a significant change from the leading role that Catholics played in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>49</sup>

This state-sponsored anticommunism was part of the nation-building competition between Sài Gòn and Hà Nội. Each side claimed the mantle of nationalism and sought to portray the other side as falsely or illegitimately nationalistic.<sup>50</sup> From the 1950s onward, the imprisonment of anticommunists became a preponderant theme in South Vietnamese literature. This theme could be found in *Tù Ngục và Thoát Ly* [Prisons and Escapes], a book that employed a simple narrative style to reach less educated readers. It opens with an introduction from an officer of the Commissioner of Refugees to the President [Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư Tị Nạn] and a preface by the president of the Association of Vietnamese Communist Victims [Hội Nạn Nhân Cộng Sản Việt Nam]. Since the introduction was written by a Catholic priest, it is probably no accident that the narrator of the story was Catholic. He recalls his experience in Việt Minh zones in central and northern Vietnam during the second half of the 1940s. Initially “invited” by the police to leave his village for his “own security,” he and others were later accused of being “reactionaries” and held in prison camps. Each camp held between two hundred and two thousand inmates, placed in barracks divided according to gender and categories of political or “economic” prisoners. Even after release, former inmates were required to report regularly to cadres. For these and other reasons, inmates spent their time devising ways to escape from the camps and head to French- or Catholic-controlled zones.<sup>51</sup>

Representations of inhumane communist imprisonment began under Ngô Đình Diệm and peaked under President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu in the Second Republic. The serialized work called *Trại Đầm Đùn* [The Đầm Đùn Camp], which was described as a “novel based on reportage” [*phóng sự tiểu thuyết*], a not uncommon genre since late colonialism, sheds light on how communism was essentialized. Of course, the Sài Gòn regime promoted other texts, including those that highlighted assassinations and armed attacks by the PAVN and the National Liberation Front [Mặt Trận Dân tộc Giải phóng Miền Nam Việt Nam] (NLF) that killed civilians. It also popularized an anticommunist saying from President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu—“Don’t believe what the communists say but look closely at what they have done”—to emphasize communist action over communist propaganda.<sup>52</sup> In comparison to the postwar era, there were not many southern Vietnamese incarcerated by the communists. Yet, anticommunist South Vietnamese



portrayed communist imprisonment to be hardly better, and sometimes worse, than death or destruction caused by armed attacks by the NLF or the PAVN.

The setting of *Trại Đầm Dùn* is an actual Việt Minh prison camp in the Thanh Hóa Province in north-central Vietnam, and the story takes place during the last years of the First Indochina War.<sup>53</sup> The book was written by Trần Văn Thái, the pen name of the northern émigré Nguyễn Văn Kỹ. He grew up in Hà Nội, worked as an editor of two dailies in the north and, after the Geneva Conference of 1954, another newspaper in Sài Gòn. He also wrote under the pen names Thanh Lâm and Hoàng Chung and, under the latter, won in 1966 a short story competition sponsored by the Office of Buddhist Chaplaincy in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). He also worked as “secretary” for the Buddhist journal *Đại Từ Bi* [Great Compassion], published under the auspices of the same office. It was this magazine that serialized *Trại Đầm Dùn* during the second half of the 1960s. It won third prize in the government-run National Award for Literature and the Arts competition in 1969, and came out in book form in the early 1970s.<sup>54</sup> Like other popular South Vietnamese publications, it was widely reprinted and distributed by Vietnamese refugees in the United States after 1975.

Not uncommon for a serialized work, *Trại Đầm Dùn* ran nearly five hundred pages. The account follows a prisoner named Toàn, who had been swept away by the August Revolution in 1945 and joined the Việt Minh as a noncommunist. By the early 1950s, however, he felt betrayed by the Revolution and decided to go back home. It is unclear where or when or how he was arrested. But the narrative indicates that he was not among the worst offenders and, therefore, was not kept in solitary confinement: a literary device so that this character could observe camp life as much as possible. The camp contained a host of different people—French POWs, French civilians, and Vietnamese. Depending on their “crimes,” Vietnamese were further categorized into different groups and kept in different parts of the camp.<sup>55</sup> With hard labor, they experienced hunger, thirst, illness, and psychological exhaustion on a regular basis. They encountered extreme hostility from guards, cadres, and the camp warden, who punished them for an array of offenses, real and imagined.

Each new arrival was assigned a number by which he was addressed. But the prisoners' backgrounds varied widely: 982, for example "seemed to be among the educated *petit bourgeois*" while 983 was a machinist from the "working class."<sup>56</sup> In age, there were some juvenile delinquents among the prisoners; in offense, there were a growing number of "landlords" detained during the early phase of land reform in 1952–1953. Other prisoners belonged to noncommunist political parties. A few, such as 982, successfully hid their political past and escaped the "counter-revolutionary" [*phản động*] label, a category that carried a virtual death sentence. Instead, they were charged with "being indecisive about the Revolution."

Compared with post-1975 experiences told in reeducation camp memoirs, the situation at Đầm Đùn was different in some important respects. At Đầm Đùn, for example, the Việt Minh kept many prisoners on death row alive because they might prove valuable for exchange in the future. As we will see, this was not at all the case after 1975. Another difference has to do with the make-up of the prisoners. The prisoners at Đầm Đùn had different backgrounds, but reeducation camp inmate populations were made up overwhelmingly of former South Vietnamese government officials and military officers. Differences aside, *Trại Đầm Đùn* foreshadows postwar accounts by illustrating material deprivation, physical abuse, the absence of rights, and the overall deception and cruelty of the communist system. An unmistakable message from the book is that South Vietnam would become a giant Đầm Đùn prison if it were to fall under communist control. There was a lot more to the anticommunist ideology in South Vietnam, but the themes of imprisonment and victimhood were intrinsic to the anticommunist propaganda.

## The Fall of Sài Gòn and the Shock of National Loss

One conclusion from the overview above is that historical developments, especially revolutionary violence, crucially shaped Vietnamese antagonism to communism. If revolutionary violence had confirmed an anticommunist belief among Catholics in the 1930s, the contrast between the Việt Minh and their noncommunist opponents in the 1940s deepened the anticommunist resolve among many other Vietnamese. In particular, revolutionary violence during and after the August Revolution marked a turning point in the anticommunist ideology. Finally, Cold War alliances, national division, and

the Vietnam War sharpened and crystallized the ideology between 1950 and 1975. These developments demonstrate that anticommunism was tied to revolution, decolonization, and warfare.

Likewise, historians of postwar diasporic anticommunism should benefit from studying the impact of the fall of Sài Gòn on Vietnamese who politically identified with the Sài Gòn government. Sài Gòn's collapse shocked *all* anticommunist South Vietnamese. The shock resulted from a series of events: the unexpectedly rapid advancement of the PAVN during the 1975 Spring Offensive; further advancement during the HỒ Chí Minh Campaign in late April; and Sài Gòn's unconditional surrender on the last day of the month. The collapse of South Vietnam was not only painful, its abruptness left many South Vietnamese in various states of disbelief, sorrow, depression, and even denial.

Ironically, one reason for the shock was the ability of ARVN to withstand earlier communist offensives, notably the Easter Offensive in 1972. Known informally as the Fiery Summer [Mùa Hè Đỏ Lửa] in South Vietnamese lexicon, this event saw DMZ-crossing attacks by the PAVN, the takeover of the northernmost province, and the siege of the provincial capital An Lộc. With the help of American bombing, ARVN eventually repulsed the siege and regained the provinces, albeit at a high cost. When South Vietnamese recaptured the city of Quảng Trị in the last phase of the campaign, the event was held up as inspirational and also symbolic of the ARVN's new-found resilience. Against this background, it was not a surprise for South Vietnamese to see another PAVN campaign in 1974–1975. What caught anticommunists by surprise was the quick collapse and surrender in less than five months of armed conflict.<sup>57</sup>

A number of published recollections and reflections capture the state of mind of anticommunist Vietnamese during the fall of Sài Gòn, the city that best symbolized post-1954 noncommunist political, cultural, and nationalist identity. “The loss of the country still stuns us,” writes one of the 1975 refugees thirty-five years later. “We did not know what to think about the sudden collapse of Vietnam; like drunkards we all seemed to be in denial.”<sup>58</sup> A refugee who worked at the Directorate of Public Health recalls that on April 29, “the heaviest, most overwhelming feeling was that of total, incomprehensible failure: I had failed. I had failed my family. I had failed my colleagues. I had

failed my country.”<sup>59</sup> “I rubbed my eyes,” recalls a former US Embassy employee who could not get out and was forced to watch Soviet-supplied tanks moving down his street: “Am I dreaming or is it reality?” He opened slightly the upstairs window and looked outside. “The very first painful scene I saw of a fallen Sài Gòn was T-54 tanks rolling toward the center” of the city.<sup>60</sup>

Most South Vietnamese were not prepared for the quickness of this conclusion. The people who had sided with the NLF were ecstatic, but the impact was devastating to the anticommunists. The fall of Sài Gòn led them to place the blame on the United States for abandoning South Vietnam, on the Soviet Union for supplying the communists, and on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) for violating the Paris Peace Accords. Since the demise of Sài Gòn also led to a dramatic downturn in the economy and political freedom in southern Vietnam, it also reinforced and hardened their opposition to communism.

The fall of Sài Gòn has come up frequently in diasporic publications, mostly in Vietnamese but also in English. The prominent anticommunist novelist Duyên Anh published an entire book devoted to his memories of that fateful day. A northern émigré in 1954, Duyên Anh was one of the most prolific writers in Republican-era Vietnam. He wrote dozens of popular novels and novellas of different genres, and edited and published several popular periodicals.<sup>61</sup> Although he never served in the military, he was arrested during a “cultural campaign” against South Vietnamese writers in April 1976 and put in jails and reeducation camps until 1981. Having been a supporter of the Sài Gòn military (and a critic of its leadership), Duyên Anh lived among many former military officers during his years in captivity. After release, he escaped by boat, resettled in France, and published anticommunist fiction, poetry, and songs. He made several visits to the United States, including a long stay in Orange County, where he published three memoirs in quick succession: two on his experience of incarceration and one on the fall of Sài Gòn. The last of these books is *Sài Gòn Ngày Dài Nhất* [Sài Gòn the Longest Day], whose title indicates the horror of the fall of Sài Gòn.

Even though the memoir was published twelve years after the event that it describes, the shock of losing South Vietnam remains palpable on the pages. Duyên Anh recalls a conversation in 1976 with Mai Thảo—another émigré

writer in Republican-era Sài Gòn and, after the war, an elder statesman of arts and letters in the diaspora. According to Duyên Anh, Mai Thảo said that the Vietnamese “need twenty top writers to create a great work called Sài Gòn the Longest Day” to which Duyên Anh responded: “then, for sure, many other [writers] have thought the same.” He elaborates, as if assuming that the book speaks for the people on the losing side:

Sài Gòn the Longest Day is from Vietnamese writers, from authentic Vietnamese souls, not from American journalists getting their dough from the CIA and from the KGB. The world, especially the third world, and especially countries where their own people fight and kill one another over communist and capitalist ideologies, by American bombs and Russian rockets, should learn from the experiences in Sài Gòn the Longest Day. The longest day resulted from twenty of the harshest years in the history of warfare. Then, after that day, [came] the longest months and years of poverty, stupidity, hatred, prisons, reeducation camps. And warfare still.<sup>62</sup>

There are several trains of thought in this passage, including an articulation of noncommunist nationalism that is anti-American and anti-Cold War. The last two sentences, however, shift the blame to the communists, connecting the demise of South Vietnam to postwar economic decline and political incarceration. “And warfare still” means that the communists had won the south yet continued to wage war against South Vietnamese. Back on that fateful day, Duyên Anh remembers hearing the announcement of unconditional surrender and standing with a close friend “on the sidewalk to watch Sài Gòn wait for the communists.” He thought,

Why surrendering without a fight? I see the same tearful question behind the haggard looks of Saigonese around me . . . There are no smiles. It’s difficult to find joy. The people who had carefully examined their personal history and found no “blood debt” [*nợ máu*] owed to the communists: even they feel tense and fearful of a “blood bath” [*biển máu*], I have never seen a sadder scene since adopting Sài Gòn as home. I feel that Sài Gòn is just as scared as I am; everyone is scared.<sup>63</sup>

“Why surrendering without a fight?” The loss of Sài Gòn was painful, but the *manner* of loss was infinitely worse for Duyên Anh and other anti-communists. For a different example, a former officer remembers years later that the men at his military base “were in shock” upon hearing news of the

unconditional surrender. Soldiers “abandoned their weapons and rushed with their wives and children out the front gate,” as the general who commanded the division became very angry because he could not accept the fact of surrender. This general drove his jeep around and “leaped from his vehicle and plunged into a crowd of fleeing soldiers, kicking, punching, and shouting in vain at them to return to their posts.”<sup>64</sup> He was clearly in denial about the order from Dương Văn Minh, the last president of South Vietnam, to give up the fight even though he and his soldiers were not yet attacked.

The abandonment of weaponry among soldiers illustrates another effect of the big shock: all of the sudden, many anticommunists were forced to hide their identity and destroy relevant evidence during or shortly after the fall of Sài Gòn. “It goes without saying,” recalls the wife of a political prisoner in a memoir, “that families of government and military employees were very scared.” She and her husband “threw military clothes into the river” and “sorted out papers and photos,” hiding some but burning most of them. “We very much regret [losing] them now,” she adds in parentheses.<sup>65</sup> In another memoir, a South Vietnamese veteran recalls taking his family to a military air base early in the morning of April 30. All helicopters had left, however, and they drove to the navy yard only to find that all ships had also departed. They returned home around 10:30 a.m., and the details of their experience are worth quoting at length.

Between 11:30 a.m. and noon, a secret communist in the neighborhood went to each house and told people to hang up the NLF flag because the Revolution was successful and the “Americans and puppets” [Mỹ ngụy] had run away. I went out and indeed saw several houses already flying either the [North Vietnamese] flag or the NLF flag. I couldn’t understand where they found those flags so readily! Back in the house, I felt very confused and did not know what to do. I also became sick with the flu and lay motionless in bed. My wife was scared, pacing back and forth and telling me to destroy any weapons and identification papers related to [the military]. . . . I forced myself to get up and go through papers and correspondence with the US Embassy, letters from Generals Chiếu, Quang, and Thuần, and letters from Cabot Lodge, Bunker, and General Govern (*sic*), etc. I burned them [and destroyed] my Astra pistol and .22 long rifle and hundreds of bullets and the [field telephone].<sup>66</sup>

This experience of self-erasure was common for military officers and government officials still in Vietnam after April 30. They destroyed countless materials that attested to their identity as South Vietnamese, such as IDs, photographs, letters, uniforms, and weapons. In the case above, national loss was heightened by the inability to leave Sài Gòn, the sight of communist flags, and the rushed erasure of identity.<sup>67</sup> Compounding the shock of loss were the fear of arrest and the hurried effort to get rid of identification. This combination produced a numbing feeling among South Vietnamese officers, and officials and their families.

Most attempts to erase one's identity failed because the security police were able to determine the identity of, and arrest, almost all remaining officers and officials. In the case of the aforementioned officer, his young son had taken several colorful New Year cards from generals and put them away without the parents knowing. When the security police searched the house sometime later, they found the cards, which were gathered as evidence to send the officer to a detention center and, later, a reeducation camp.<sup>68</sup> Nguyễn Thanh Nga, one of the few women to write this type of memoir, recalled leaving Đà Nẵng when it fell to the PAVN in March 1975. She headed to Sài Gòn and, after the fall, left for a predominantly Catholic area of Biên Hòa to join an armed resistance group led by a Catholic priest. A few months later, she was captured by the Đà Nẵng security forces who tailed her sister to the hiding place.<sup>69</sup>

The shock at the loss of South Vietnam was sharpened by constant surveillance and frequent arrests, normally accompanied by beatings and other forms of violence. For the losing side, then, the profound collective loss tied together the fate of the South Vietnamese. National loss is often portrayed as spiritual death. "I lived like a body without a soul," writes a former prisoner, "at once anguished, pained, ashamed, and hopeless."<sup>70</sup> He continues:

I felt as if we were living a nightmare [after the fall]. Only two months before, my family had a peaceful life in Đà Lạt. On Sunday mornings, in the chilly air of the misty city, I drove my wife and kids to church and then to Phở Huỳnh near the train station, a restaurant well known for *phở* . . . In a short time, all good things disappeared [and] I had nothing left other than two empty hands.<sup>71</sup>

The examples from former political prisoners show the link between the fall of Sài Gòn and their subsequent suffering, including the reeducation camp experience. Some did not accept the communist victory. For a small number, the abrupt loss of South Vietnam motivated them to join or organize armed resistance in the 1970s and 1980s. Nguyễn Thanh Nga, for example, recalls her participation in an anticommunist group shortly after the fall of Sài Gòn. The group was led by the Catholic priest Trần Ngọc Hiệu, who had served as a military chaplain. Calling itself National Restoration [Phục Quốc], the group was based in Hồ Nai, a post-1954 settlement of northern Catholics about forty kilometers from Sài Gòn. Nguyễn Thanh Nga was assigned by the priest to recruit more members, and “the number of young men joining the movement grew and enthused us” before the organization was infiltrated and destroyed a few months later.<sup>72</sup> Another example is Võ Đại Tôn, a former colonel who left for Australia in 1975, then put together a resistance political organization and attempted to infiltrate Vietnam in the early 1980s. Hiding in a Laotian jungle on April 30, 1981, he recollected the humiliation of the fall of Sài Gòn, especially the hour when the South Vietnamese leader “Dương Văn Minh announced unconditional surrender to the Communists and ordered all of us soldiers to put down our arms . . . leading Vietnam to absolute poverty and decline in the face of progress” elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> Utterly disgraced by the surrender, Võ Đại Tôn channeled the humiliation into a desire to return to Vietnam and agitate the people to resist the postwar regime. His experience is suggestive of a link between the fall of Sài Gòn and diasporic support for the homeland liberation movement of the 1980s.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, only a very small minority of anticommunists engaged in active resistance. Many others turned the initial shock to an emotive call to oppose the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). For many, the victorious communists continued to oppress the Vietnamese people after the end of the war. “April of 1975,” states the preface of a collection of poetry by a former prisoner living in Canada, saw “a maddening storm that sank the country into darkness, when countless families were broken up, when young men and talented people and officers of the Republican military were sent to prisons.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, unconditional surrender was dishonorable and unacceptable to nationalist Vietnamese, and many anticommunists emphasized



that they opposed the decision to surrender. One memoirist, for example, recalls a fellow prison inmate stating that “ARVN units of paratroopers, marines, and rangers’ discipline and fighting spirit [were] still intact” when President Dương Văn Minh ordered them to lay down their arms. “They had lived as fighters,” insists the prisoner, “and they wanted to die as fighters.”<sup>76</sup> A former marine notes that “over 90 percent of marine officers were imprisoned under the Việt Cộng” and remembers fellow officers who died in the camps where he was kept: “[They] continued to fight” after April 1975 because of honor, duty, and the nation.<sup>77</sup> In the minds of many anticommunists, anticommunism did not stop after April 1975 just because the military was ordered to surrender.

The missed opportunity to prove their martial worth on the battlefield became motivation and rationale to resist communism in other, non-martial ways. An example is the poem “Every Rhyme Remembers the Month of April,” in which the writer, a former prisoner, compares writing poetry to shooting communists in the battlefield:

The poetic line is written into a bullet  
That leaves the heart and targets the enemy.<sup>78</sup>

In other words, anticommunists turned memories of the fall of Sài Gòn into motivation for the struggle against communism. After the shock of national loss subsided, anticommunists interpreted the event by weaving together two lines of thought. First, the decision to surrender unconditionally was unacceptable because they viewed themselves, and not the Vietnamese communists, to be the legitimate claimant to the mantle of Vietnamese nationalism. Second, the decision to surrender came from one person and did not represent the decision of the South Vietnamese military. This military had fought the communists for over two decades, but it did not get a fair chance to fight and demonstrate its worth because of Dương Văn Minh. It was very difficult for the anticommunists to accept defeat, but it was doubly difficult for them to accept defeat *without* having engaged in a battle for Sài Gòn. The decision to surrender was shameful, and the manner of loss was dishonorable. Shame and dishonor, in turn, further motivated anticommunists to oppose the Communist Party and the postwar government.

## Anticommunism in Reeducation Camps

### THE EXPERIENCE OF DEHUMANIZATION

The pain of national loss was followed by another wave of horror: the arrest and incarceration of South Vietnamese military officers and government officials. Incarceration was only one of many policies designed to revolutionize the postwar south. Other measures included rapid collectivization of the economy, anti-bourgeois cultural campaigns, classification of southerners according to family background, and expulsion of ethnic Chinese, leading to the “boat people” exodus. However, because incarceration affected the most politically prominent and influential groups of the Sài Gòn regime, it produced the greatest impact on postwar anticommunism. The shock of national loss and the suffering from incarceration provided a one-two punch that strengthened diasporic anticommunism and the determination to oppose the VCP at all costs.

Because it affected hundreds of thousands of families, the reality of reeducation camps was well known in southern Vietnam. Details also reached refugees in the United States, adding to their sadness and depression. Substantial research is still needed to shed light on diasporic anticommunism in the 1970s and 1980s, specifically on the link between incarceration and support for homeland liberation groups such as the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam [Mặt trận Quốc gia Thống nhất Giải phóng Việt Nam]. At this time, evidence from the diaspora indicates that incarceration had a profound effect on Vietnamese refugees. In music, for example, composers such as Phạm Duy and Việt Dzũng wrote many songs about incarceration. Some of these songs were recorded and distributed widely in the diaspora.<sup>79</sup> Other people published prose and poetry that illustrate the horror of postwar incarceration. In the case of the poet Nguyễn Chí Thiện, who was imprisoned in North Vietnam long before 1975, his poetry became lyrics for Vietnamese songs about the harshness and injustice of incarceration.<sup>80</sup>

Incarceration is also described in a number of memoirs from former prisoners, some of which have been quoted and cited in this article. Some prisoners were eager to write these memoirs as soon as they escaped from Vietnam. The first major memoir to be published in the United States, *Đại Học Máu* [Blood University], was written by Hà Thúc Sinh. He began

writing it as soon as he landed in a Malaysian refugee camp in 1980, completed it four years later in San Diego, and saw its publication shortly thereafter. At more than eight hundred pages, this memoir details the daily life of detainees in three southern reeducation camps during the first three years after the Vietnam War.<sup>81</sup> It remains a classic account of the camp system in postwar Vietnam. More memoirs followed in the 1980s and especially the 1990s and 2000s including many published online.<sup>82</sup>

A survey of these memoirs shows that ex-prisoners wrote about many matters related to incarceration, but they mostly emphasized the cruelty of camp personnel because it reflected the cruelty of the communist system. The memoirs describe both systemic dehumanization and cruelty committed by individuals, using such words as “nightmare” [*ác mộng*], “darkness” [*đen tối*], and “hell” [*địa ngục*] and refer to camp wardens, officers and guards variously as “animals” [*thú vật*], “devils” [*quỷ*], and “red devils” [*quỷ đỏ*]. Some accounts show flashes of humor, including ridicule of behavior by the camp authorities and macabre jokes about the situation of the prisoners. But the overall tone of these memoirs is serious and condemnatory. The memoirists highlight dehumanization to demonstrate that Vietnamese communists were lacking in human decency, punitive and unjust in practice, and totalitarian on the whole.

Dehumanization is most vividly portrayed in cases of corporeal deprivation, especially hunger and thirst; injuries and ailments; and poor medical care. Hunger was a constant preoccupation. “Hunger was horrific in Communist prisons,” writes a former marine, adding that a “prisoner’s mind was always thinking about different ways to survive.”<sup>83</sup> “We were never full during all of the time [kept] in the north,” writes another marine. He specifies that each prisoner was allowed two hundred grams of cooked flour for breakfast, 250 grams for lunch, and another 250 grams for dinner: a very small sum for men engaged in hard labor.<sup>84</sup> Prisoners ate any animal they could catch at camps and work sites, including insects and reptiles. One writer even witnessed a fellow inmate finding half a dozen newly born field rats and swallowing them raw. Surprisingly, he did not get sick.<sup>85</sup> But others were not so lucky, and many memoirs note that inmates contracted dysentery, diarrhea, and other illnesses as a result of eating poisonous plants by mistake.

Humiliation went hand in hand with physical deprivation. One writer remembers the trip taken to the north in a ship, during which prisoners were kept in the brig. It was very tightly packed, and they could not stretch out or lie down. At meal time, ramen noodles and Chinese-made dried food were thrown from above. There was little space for urination and defecation, and the stench of body waste was unbearable. The experience was too brutal for at least one prisoner, a military physician, who killed himself before the ship landed.<sup>86</sup> Another memoirist writes about a different trip to the north on the same ship in 1976. He noted that the ship had been used for transporting coal, so the faces of detainees were blackened not long after boarding. He suggested to other detainees that they should try to take over the ship and go to the Philippines. They all shook their heads, and said their health had weakened considerably after one year in captivity.<sup>87</sup>

Torture was also used to break the will of “stubborn” prisoners. Torture was widespread in reeducation camps, especially during the first few years after the war. Because escape was considered among the worst offenses, captured escapees were punished severely in several ways, usually starting with a beating. Vương Mộng Long describes graphically one such beating after his second attempt to escape. In 1978, he and three other prisoners escaped from a camp in Yên Bái Province, which ended with the death of one prisoner in the jungle. The rest were captured and kept in one camp unit for the first three days before they were transferred to another unit. On the first day, a “very young guard” found a “reactionary poem” on Vương Mộng Long and struck his face with an AK-47, knocking out one of his teeth. The guard returned the next day and broke one of Vương Mộng Long’s ribs. After the transfer, Vương Mộng Long endured daily beatings of “more or less two hours” by four young guards. He was left in a public room until the evening, and looked so lifeless that rumors of his death made their way to other camps and even to his family in the south.<sup>88</sup>

Vương Mộng Long’s experience reflected the extremely harsh treatment meted out by the camp personnel. At a camp in Long Khánh, which had been used as an ARVN base during the war, several prisoners tried to escape during the first six months in detention. They were caught and hung upside down in Conex containers. These heavy and sturdy steel containers had been

used by the US Army to ship materials because they proved effective against damage, breakage, and pilferage. Now converted to hold human beings, the containers were completely dark when shut, and extremely hot during the dry season. Detainees in the Conex containers were also beaten nightly.<sup>89</sup> This example suggests that punishment was most severe and frequent during the first few years after the war as a way to deter prisoners from escaping from detention centers and reeducation camps. But this form of punishment continued years later, though less frequently.

Prisoners could also be beaten for lesser offenses. As early as the first two months in a camp in Long Khánh, a prisoner was held in a solitary cell for verbally “expressing his opposition” to the government. Each evening, he could be heard screaming as he was beaten by the guards.<sup>90</sup> Five years later, two other prisoners from the same camp were punished for spilling some rice on the ground while moving it to a new location. For fifteen minutes, they were beaten by two cadres, who used martial art techniques learned from a prisoner.<sup>91</sup> At a camp in Cà Mau Province, natural heat during the dry season caused hay to catch fire and destroy some newly harvested rice. The camp cadres suspected inmates of vandalism and interrogated and punished them with a round of beating.<sup>92</sup> While most of the men beating the inmates were young, uneducated and held low ranks in the camp, older or higher-ranked cadres sometimes initiated or joined in. In some cases, cadres even killed prisoners for the slightest provocation. A memoirist recalls a cadre who shot and killed an inmate at a work site because the man did not respond quickly enough to his order.<sup>93</sup>

Another punitive measure was detention in a cell, usually without food or water. In one form or another, all reeducation camps had a “discipline house” [*nhà kỷ luật*] for inmates who had committed violations. After his second escape, Vương Mộng Long was thrown into the discipline house. His hands and feet were shackled. At noon he was fed the only meal of the day: a bowl of cooked “thumb-size dried cassava,” a starchy root, that was covered with dust.<sup>94</sup> Vương Mộng Long did not specify the length of his punishment, but it was not uncommon for captured escapees to be held in a discipline house for months. Prisoners learned from experience that not seeing someone again after six months meant that he had died in the discipline house. In a rare case, a prisoner was taken out of an underground

discipline room after a year; his “legs were paralyzed,” and he had developed kidney stones. He was “skin covering bones,” but still alive.<sup>95</sup>

Besides holding captured escapees, Conex containers were also used as a discipline house in some of the southern camps. “The Conex,” describes a former prisoner, “was considered a kind of an improvised cell.”<sup>96</sup> Left in the open and without shade, the containers were very hot during the day and very cold at night. This memoirist recalls that a former ARVN captain was thrown into one such container and died several weeks later. Camp authorities announced that he committed suicide, but the prisoners believed that torture and deprivation led to his death. In some cases, Conex containers were used as temporary jail cells. One prisoner, a non-ARVN young man who joined an anticommunist militant group, was held in one in 1977. Upon capture, he and sixteen other members of the militant group were transported to a detention area and thrown into two Conex containers. They were held inside these containers for forty-five days before being transferred to a large reeducation camp.<sup>97</sup> For the most part, Conex containers were a convenient means to isolate inmates who had committed serious offenses.

The brutal treatment of prisoners strengthened the prisoners’ anticommunist sentiment. Torture and other forms of punishment convinced the inmates that “reeducation” was no more than a cover for punishment, for exacting revenge. Very often, and especially during the first few years of incarceration, camp authorities berated prisoners for supporting the “imperialist Americans” and fighting against the revolution. The inmates were required to write “confessions” of “crimes” that they had committed against the revolution and, during political lectures and study sessions, to speak about those self-incriminating crimes. It did not take long for prisoners to recognize that between verbal humiliation and physical punishment, the camp authorities set out to control both the mind and the body of each prisoner. The experience of vengeful violence reinforced the prisoners’ belief that communists resort to force because they are incapable of reason and do not respect human dignity. The fact that most camp cadres and guards had received no more than rudimentary schooling also suggested to prisoners that the communist system placed violence over knowledge and blind obedience over justice. It fortified their conviction that it is morally righteous to oppose communism absolutely. Hà Thúc Sinh’s memoir, for example, mentions the trial and execution of

a fellow prisoner who spoke out against the reeducation policy during a public lecture. After confining the prisoner in a Conex container, the camp authorities staged a trial before all the inmates. They gave a long speech detailing the prisoner's "crimes," sentenced him to death, and executed him a few minutes later. Hà Thúc Sinh ends the chapter stating that "the dead are free of debt, but the living must remember [what happened] so they can avenge" those executed. The living are obligated to fight the injustice of the communist system; otherwise, the living "are worse than dogs."<sup>98</sup>

Though the war ended in 1975, communist violence in reeducation camps showed the prisoners that the war did not really end. A memoir by Tô Văn Cấp focuses on eight prisoners who had died from beating, torture, illnesses, and during attempted escapes. Commemorating the heroism of South Vietnamese officers who died in battle during the war and that of officers who died in postwar incarceration, Tô Văn Cấp writes:

My comrade-in-arms and my superiors passed away in different ways. Some died bravely for the nation in battle and were buried in coffins decorated with flowers and the flag, with friends bidding them farewell and their families caring for their graves. [Others] had fulfilled their military duty but [after the war] were led into the jungle by the enemy to die, without their military units and their families, without a grave to help their children find their corpses, without a cigarette, a candle or incense. . . . However you departed, you honored the martial spirit of [the marines].<sup>99</sup>

In other words, those who died during the war and those who died in postwar reeducation camps were one and the same. Reeducation camps aimed to change the prisoners' allegiance to South Vietnam, but the opposite occurred. Prisoners strengthened their political identity and appropriated the deaths of other prisoners in the fight against Vietnamese communists.

It is true that some memoirs distinguish the behavior and personality of camp personnel. Đỗ Văn Phúc names three cadres and notes a fourth who had a more caring attitude toward prisoners. Đỗ Văn Phúc praises them for their basic humanity, stating that their perspective changed after interacting with southerners. "Many of the communist cadres and soldiers," concludes Đỗ Văn Phúc, "had opened their eyes and realized the truth"; they only continued their jobs for "benefits."<sup>100</sup> Đỗ Xuân Tê writes about a camp commander who got along well with an inmate who had fought against him

on the battlefield. Although the commander came from a peasant background, he was respected by many prisoners for the “humane behavior toward soldiers on the other side.”<sup>101</sup> Chánh Trung recalls some long conversations with the camp commander who expressed his dissatisfaction with the communist system. The commander claimed that both communist and ARVN soldiers were “victims of imperialist America and the imperialist Soviet Union,” and criticized the communist leadership for lying to the prisoners about the duration of their detention.<sup>102</sup>

Nonetheless, the “better” camp authorities were easily outnumbered by those who behaved cruelly. Overall, former prisoners report that corporeal punishment was pervasive. The fact that violence was widespread demonstrated to them not only the punitive nature of the communist system but also its inherent corruption because the system was based on intimidation rather than intellectual persuasion. Moreover, some of the “better” camp authorities admitted to the prisoners that they themselves had been deceived by the VCP. This admission further convinced the prisoners that they may have lost the war in 1975 but they stood on the right side of history. Some writers, for example, quote Nguyễn Văn Thiệu’s statement, “Don’t believe what the communists say, but look closely at what they do” to emphasize communist ruthlessness *and* the superior morality of the Sài Gòn regime.

#### THE EXPERIENCES OF INFORMERS AND FAMILIES

Psychologically, the inmates were subjected to a variety of measures aimed at making them conform to the new policies. An important example is the use of informers and infiltrators, though it varied from camp to camp. This method could be traced to the late colonial era, when various Vietnamese political parties vied for members. Communist and noncommunist Vietnamese were often thrown into the same French prisons, where they tried to convert one another.<sup>103</sup> After the fall of Sài Gòn, a number of noncommunist Vietnamese in the south turned out to have worked for, or had been a member of, the NFL or the Communist Party. They were called *nằm vùng*, which means literally “laying low in the area.” Some had even worked in the South Vietnamese government or military.

For this reason, a number of prisoners had encountered informers and infiltrators before incarceration. In late April 1975, for example, Đỗ Văn



Phúc and his family evacuated to Sài Gòn as the North Vietnamese army approached their coastal town Vũng Tàu. They returned home after the fall of Sài Gòn and learned that a neighbor had been an underground communist agent during the war and had just been put in charge of the block.<sup>104</sup> Nguyễn Thanh Nga recalls that the communist government was able to persuade “some former ARVN officers to form a phony recruiting group” for a resistance movement in order to “arrest those who wanted to join” it.<sup>105</sup> It did not take long for Nguyễn Thanh Nga and others to realize the extent of surveillance under the communist regime. The experience of surveillance and spies continued in camps. Đỗ Văn Phúc, detained for a time at a southern camp in Suối Máu, and five other inmates gathered in the kitchen one evening to discuss writing a petition asking for release because all of them had left the South Vietnamese military before 1975. Another inmate must have overheard their conversation while baking bread for the camp’s overseers. The next day, before they could hand the petition to the camp commander, Đỗ Văn Phúc was charged with “agitation” and thrown into an overheated Conex container. He had no doubt that the baker had informed the camp authorities.<sup>106</sup>

Informers were called *ăng ten*, a word derived from the French “antenne” (antenna). Prisoners were wary of other prisoners who held positions such as “group leader.” Leaders were first chosen by prisoners themselves when the camp system started. Later, however, guards and cadres selected them. Sometimes called the “orderly” [Trật Tự], handpicked group leaders typically posed no threat to the authorities and tended to be pliable. They were usually granted some benefits, such as receiving more goods from their families and conjugal visits with their wives. They were expected to report violations to the camp authorities, and could be ordered by the authorities to beat up their fellow inmates. Even when group leaders were not among the *ăng ten*, prisoners regarded them as “little wardens” and merely pretended to respect them.

Prisoners were also constantly worried about the welfare of their family members back home, especially their wives and children. Prisoners who were moved to northern Vietnam did not have any contact with their families for the first few years. Even after re-establishing contact, mail was infrequent, and letters from family were cautiously worded to avoid censorship and confiscation. During the first years after the war, family members of

the prisoners had no news about their whereabouts. If the inmates were kept in the dark about their families, the families received vague answers, or none at all, from the authorities. In one case, a young wife found out where her husband was detained. In August 1975, she went to the camp with the wives of other prisoners, but the guards refused to let them visit. She returned two months later, this time with only one other woman, but was also turned away. Two guards called their husbands “reactionaries” and “counter-revolutionaries,” and even threatened to shoot the women. On their third visit nine months later, the prisoners had been moved. It took another year before she received a letter from her husband from a reeducation camp in the north. Another five years passed before she made the first successful visit to a camp in Nam Hà.<sup>107</sup>

For prisoners held in the south, family visits were more frequent because travel was easier. But they also encountered hostile attitudes from the authorities, and arbitrary regulations regarding visits. According to Nguyễn Kim Hoàn, her husband was a former ARVN officer who eluded arrest by moving his family to a Catholic village in the southern province of Sóc Trăng. Due to the lack of teachers in the area, they were given positions teaching math at a local high school. In 1976, a year later, the state security sent soldiers and police to arrest Nguyễn Kim Hoàn’s husband on November 20, the Charter Day of Teachers [Ngày Nhà Giáo Việt Nam]. Although her husband was detained in the south, it took Nguyễn Kim Hoàn a year and many petitions to track down the location of his detention in Cần Thơ. One year later, he was moved to Camp Cồn Cát on an island of the province Hậu Giang. Although Nguyễn Kim Hoàn could visit him monthly, each trip now took her three days and she had to make arrangements with other teachers to substitute for her. The trips were also more exhausting and more dangerous than before. After arriving by public transport, she had to walk through a long stretch of road to the reeducation camp. After these exhausting journeys, she was only allowed to meet her husband for fifteen minutes. The guards glowered at visitors and prisoners with coldness, and would heap verbal abuse on anyone straying from even the most minor regulations. Food and supplies were inspected carefully. Sweet potatoes, for example, were halved, and small containers of salt-and-sesame were stirred up to make sure that nothing was hidden in them.<sup>108</sup>

In some camps, authorities created more regulations after a visit, such as requiring prisoners to consume all food from families within a week or it would be thrown away.<sup>109</sup>

Association with the former regime worsened the already dire economic situation of the prisoners' families. Just as northerners had been subjected to classification before 1975, southern Vietnamese were classified according to their family background. Families of communist revolutionaries could receive benefits from the state, including job preferences. Conversely, spouses and children of "counter-revolutionaries" such as reeducation camp prisoners were low in the new political hierarchy, and often faced discrimination. A woman, for example, was dismissed from her factory job when it was discovered that her imprisoned husband had worked in the South Vietnamese Bureau of Psychological Warfare [Nha Chiến Tranh Tâm Lý].<sup>110</sup> Many families were forced by the government to move to the countryside, where few economic resources were available to them. As the wife of one prisoner recalls, camp authorities forced her husband to write and ask her to move back to his birthplace in the country, even though she knew that he wanted her and their children to remain in Sài Gòn. Not only were they forced to relocate, but she also had to write a "petition" to the government stating that she "voluntarily return home [in the country]."<sup>111</sup>

Memoirs by family members of the incarcerated also stressed the heavy psychological toll that they experienced in poverty. Because resources were scarce, some wives and children were abandoned by relatives, who had their own to care for. The prisoners understood that postwar policies such as collectivization, the creation of new economic zones, and classification of families were blatantly discriminatory and gave rise to a host of intractable problems for the people. Some memoirs note the similarities between life inside and outside of the camps, as if those experiences were two sides of the same coin. After a prisoner was granted a rare ten-day leave to see his family, he returned to tell his fellow inmates that "food has become the common topic of conversation" and "the main concern nowadays is how to obtain rice and other items."<sup>112</sup> The shared suffering of the prisoners and their families showed them that the communist system oppressed not only prisoners, but other southerners and, ultimately, the entire country.

SOUTH VIETNAMESE NATIONALISM DISMISSED  
AND RIDICULED

Throughout detention, but especially at the start, wardens and cadres stressed that detainees were not prisoners. “Communist states do not have prisons,” asserted one cadre in Hà Thúc Sinh’s memoir, and “the revolution has never called [those detained] prisoners.”<sup>113</sup> A different cadre announced that detainees would be kept much longer than fifteen days. Hearing detainees whisper the word “prison” to one another, he hurriedly stated that they were “not prisoners” because “prisons have cells [and] tiger cages.”<sup>114</sup> Instead, inmates were called “camp members” [*trại viên*], “reeducation members” [*cải tạo viên*], and “reeducation students” [*học sinh cải tạo*]. Camp leaders sometimes referred to inmates as “students” and to themselves as “teachers” [*thầy*], demanding respect from prisoners.<sup>115</sup> More frequently, and especially during political lectures, cadres used several terms to humiliate and belittle prisoners. On occasion, they call prisoners “criminals” [*kẻ có tội*]. More often they were called “reactionaries” [*phản động*] and “counter-revolutionaries” [*chống cách mạng*]. Most offensive to the prisoners were “henchmen” [*tay sai*], “puppets” [*ngụy*], and “puppet soldier [and] puppet government” [*ngụy quân ngụy quyền*]. “Hired soldiers for American imperialists” [*lính đánh thuê cho đế quốc Mỹ*] was another common phrase. Prisoners were expected to refer to themselves with these terms when writing confessions and discussing study materials.<sup>116</sup>

South Vietnamese officers and officials were thus seen by the guards as imperialist rather than nationalist, “American” or foreign rather than Vietnamese. According to a political lecture, the South Vietnamese were “created and built up by imperialism, became effective instruments against our people, [and] were public enemies of the people.”<sup>117</sup> Cold War politics sometimes came up during denunciations. During torture, for instance, Võ Đại Tôn was called not only “a hunting dog for the American imperialists” but also “subservient to reactionary Thailand,” probably because he tried to enter Vietnam through Thailand in 1981. In addition, his torturers called him “a beggar for imperialist China” because he was arrested almost three years after the Third Indochina War between Vietnam and China.<sup>118</sup> The association of South Vietnamese with foreign powers was intended to disparage the nationalist identity of the prisoners.

Prisoners were also instructed to admit to being “against the Party, against the revolution, against the fatherland, and against the people.”<sup>119</sup> Occasionally, they were reminded of these “crimes” when the people themselves attacked them. Some memoirs record episodes of physical assault by ordinary Vietnamese in the north. For example, when Văn Thanh Hòa and other prisoners were taken to Hải Phòng on June 12, 1976, they were met by a group of people who through rocks and cursed at them.<sup>120</sup> Mai Văn Tấn remembers the attempt to escape from the Sơn La Camp, which had been a prison camp built by the French. He and three prisoners were in the jungle for fourteen days before local security forces captured them. After being turned over to the wardens, the escapees were led back to the camp on foot through several ethnic minority villages. The villagers assaulted them verbally and hit them with their hands and wooden sticks. The guards only intervened when two escapees were bleeding from the head.<sup>121</sup> Vương Mộng Long was likewise paraded across a market so that “the local people could express their hatred of ‘wicked puppet soldiers.’” Escapees from another camp unit sustained more severe injuries as civilians cracked the ribs of one prisoner, hit another with poles that broke his collarbone, and injured an eye of a third prisoner. The degradation continued when they were tied up in a stall for water buffalos. Some civilians went up to them and pushed their faces into animal waste, causing them to nearly pass out.<sup>122</sup>

Mai Văn Tấn suggests that the camp guards encouraged and even planned these attacks, and Văn Thanh Hòa has no doubt that the gathering at the port of Hải Phòng was organized by the government. In this respect, it is striking to note that similar treatment had been meted out to prisoners of communist camps as far back as the 1940s.<sup>123</sup> Like others, Mai Văn Tấn and Văn Thanh Hòa blamed the attacks entirely on the communist authorities without considering the possibility that the attackers, all northerners, might have linked them to the bombing and other difficulties during the war. On the other hand, the brutal treatment of prisoners fueled their belief that the VCP was vengeful to its enemies, deceptive to ordinary Vietnamese to gain their support, obsessed with the protection of its power, and entirely reliant on force. Contact with the local people and the generally impoverished north reinforced their belief. They came to pity northern Vietnamese. Many memoirs begin with a critique of the VCP as persecutors of former enemies and

southerners, but end with a broader critique of communism as an oppressor of *all* Vietnamese: southerners *and* northerners, enemies *and* supporters of the socialist revolution. In their eyes, the VCP's failure to create a prosperous postcolonial Vietnam meant that the communist leadership was concerned with its own power rather than with the well-being of the Vietnamese people and nation. For the prisoners, it was not justice or openness but deception, as exemplified by the planned assaults of prisoners by ordinary northerners, that characterized the *modus operandi* of the VCP.

Many memoirs also point out the lack of formal education among most cadres and guards as evidence that communist legitimacy was based on revolutionary violence rather than advanced scientific knowledge. One memorist recalls that his camp commander had a "sixth grade or seventh grade" education, which was decidedly "low" in the eyes of the prisoners, all of whom had at least a high school diploma, and a significant number were educated at a university, professional school, or military academy. Yet the prisoners still considered this commander more educated "than the rest of his comrades."<sup>124</sup> One prisoner, for example, felt "frustrated and angry" not only because his side lost the war but also because the winners were uneducated: they were, he said in tears, "so weak, so stupid."<sup>125</sup> The belief that postwar Vietnam was controlled by "uneducated" and "ignorant" victors further depressed and angered the prisoners.

The prisoners also believed that Vietnamese communists were false or pseudo-nationalists. In Hà Thúc Sinh's words, prisoners saw that the communists

possessed a false pride and a superiority complex. As a result of propaganda, distortion, fabrication, and indoctrination, communist soldiers and generals believed in their skill, power, and ability to instruct the "puppets." What irony for those frogs sitting at the bottom of the well . . . What did they know about the sky?<sup>126</sup>

Hà Thúc Sinh's comment suggests that the prisoners were empowered by the recognition that the guards and cadres were not well educated. The prisoners believed that guards and cadres resorted to force, violence, and revolutionary credentials to mask their lack of education and technical knowledge: hence a feeling of "false pride" or false superiority. For the

prisoners, this recognition—that they and not the camp authorities were the legitimate claimants of Vietnamese nationalism—helped them endure hardship. Since South Vietnamese nationalism was routinely dismissed, their opinion of the camp authorities reinforced their moral righteousness and strengthened their nationalism. The suffering and humiliation of incarceration worsened the experience of national loss, but it also gave prisoners newfound rationale and determination to oppose Vietnamese communism. As a writer points out, the carceral experience “showed that *[prisoners] could never accept Vietnamese communists and co-exist with them.*”<sup>127</sup> These anti-communist convictions did not stay in Vietnam, but traveled with many former prisoners to the United States and other parts of the world.

### A New Critical Mass and the Politics of Nationalism

On April 25–26, 1992, the Federation of Associations of Former Vietnamese Political Prisoners [TỔNG HỘI CỰU TÙ NHÂN CHÍNH TRỊ VIỆT NAM] (FAFVPP), held two consecutive conferences in the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston. The theme of the conferences was “Freedom, Democracy, and Human Rights for Vietnam,” and there were about five hundred participants, mostly former political prisoners, from many Vietnamese organizations in the United States and Canada. Also present were Al Santoli, an author and a veteran of the US Army in Vietnam; Shepard C. Lowman, a former US diplomat in Sài Gòn who later worked in the State Department Bureau of Refugee Programs; and Lowman’s Vietnamese wife, Hiệp Lowman, a board member of the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association [HỘI GIA ĐÌNH TÙ NHÂN CHÍNH TRỊ VIỆT NAM] (FVPPA).<sup>128</sup> US Representative Robert Dornan, whose Californian district included Little Sài Gòn in Orange County, did not come but sent a letter to the conference stating: “I will be with you in that fight until the day I die.” Dornan agreed to be the emcee at a similar conference four weeks later in Orange County, an event in which James Webb, a Vietnam veteran and former Secretary of the Navy, was also scheduled to appear. Two other conferences were slated for the following month, in Vancouver and Calgary.<sup>129</sup>

These conferences illustrate a new force in Vietnamese diasporic politics: political prisoners from reeducation camps. In the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnamese refugees were preoccupied with survival and adjustments in their adopted

countries, and their anticommunism was best characterized by behind-the-scene support for homeland liberation organizations.<sup>130</sup> Then, only a small number of prisoners escaped by boat after release from reeducation camps and resettled in North America. Some wrote memoirs to publicize their ordeal. Others created informal networks for mutual support. Still others organized small-scale appearances at public events, such as the Human Rights Day demonstration in San Francisco in December 1987. By the late 1980s, former political prisoners had established a number of regional and national organizations in the United States, and several of them worked closely with the FAVPP and others to help political prisoners in Vietnam gain release and emigration. In April 1989, the FAVPP, the National Congress of Vietnamese in America [Nghị Hội Người Việt Toàn Quốc tại Hoa Kỳ], and three regional branches that later became FAFPPA came together to create the Coordinating Committee for the Reception of Vietnamese Political Prisoners [Ủy Ban Phối Hợp Tiếp Đón Tù Nhân Chính Trị].<sup>131</sup> Eight months later, on December 16, 1989, the first political prisoner, forty-year-old Protestant minister Lê Thiện Dũng, arrived in Oklahoma City with his wife and two children. Among the people greeting them at the airport were the president of FAVPP and representatives of the Coordinating Committee.<sup>132</sup>

By the end of the H.O. program, approximately seventy thousand former prisoners and their families had resettled in the United States. Organizations such as the FAFVPP and FAVPP were among the first to provide moral and material support to former political prisoners. On July 28, 1990, for example, they jointly organized a banquet at a Vietnamese restaurant in the Washington area to welcome and honor the first wave of H.O. arrivals.<sup>133</sup> They also helped to identify problems facing new arrivals, such as work and welfare, and offered remedies and solutions.<sup>134</sup>

Quickly, too, many of the new arrivals joined or created formal and informal networks of former political prisoners. The Center for Former Political Prisoners [Trung Tâm Sinh Hoạt Cựu Tù Nhân Chính Trị] was founded in San Jose as a “gathering place for anticommunist activities in the Bay Area.”<sup>135</sup> In New York City, new arrivals created two organizations that met regularly for mutual support and anticommunist discussions. In Seattle, they initially ran into difficulty sustaining a local chapter of a continental organization for former prisoners.<sup>136</sup> Several former prisoners from San Jose



and Vancouver, Canada, came to Seattle to help reorganize the local branch, and participate in an anticommunist demonstration organized by Chinese, Tibetan, and Vietnamese immigrants on the occasion of the US-hosted Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference in November 1993.<sup>137</sup> The Seattle chapter's new leadership organized local anticommunist events as similar organizations appeared in other and even smaller Vietnamese communities. In St. Louis, for example, twenty former prisoners and supporters gathered in January 1993 to found a local association uniting former reeducation camp prisoners as well as "all victims of Vietnamese Communism." They also wanted to "build and nourish the spirit of opposition to the Communist enemy." Since the 1990s, the association welcomed dozens of families that resettled in St. Louis, and participated in annual events such as the Vietnamese new year and the US veterans' parades. It also organized or participated in a host of demonstrations, such as a protest against the visit of a representative from the Vietnamese government in 1996 to promote economic ties; a protest against a visiting Vietnamese performance troupe at Washington University in 1997; and a demonstration against the flying of the Vietnamese flag at a local market in 2002. Some of these protests drew hundreds of participants, an impressive number for a small Vietnamese American community.<sup>138</sup>

In other words, it did not take long for reeducation camp prisoners to participate actively in Vietnamese politics at the local and national levels. As Vietnam shifted direction in its economy and international relations during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the homeland liberation movement ceased to draw support from diasporic Vietnamese. The arrival of former prisoners provided new energy as they took the lead in anticommunist activism. The demonstrations against the Hi Tek video store were by far the best known and best attended in the United States, but they were hardly the only ones.

In the end, Vietnamese anticommunism in America since the 1990s traces back to at least the political competition between communist and noncommunist Vietnamese during decolonization. Anticommunism intensified during the Vietnam War, and took another turn after the fall of Sài Gòn. Just as communists saw anticommunist Vietnamese as "the other," the imprisonment of South Vietnamese government officials and military officers in reeducation camps diminished any hope for national reconciliation.

On the contrary, the postwar experience validated wartime beliefs about the inhumanity of Vietnamese communism. The carceral experience convinced prisoners and their families that the VCP was not capable of change in any meaningful way because any change would merely serve the interest of the Party and not the nation. Once resettled abroad, these reeducation camp prisoners supported anticommunist activities by establishing political networks, organizing public protests, and contributing to diasporic publications and media. They ultimately shaped Little Saigon anticommunism.

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#### ABSTRACT

*This article re-examines Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism in the context of twentieth-century Vietnamese history. It offers an overview of the Vietnamese anticommunist tradition from colonialism to the end of the Vietnam War, and interprets the effects of national loss and incarceration on South Vietnamese anticommunists. These experiences contributed to an essentialization of anticommunism among the prisoners, who eventually provided a critical mass for anticommunist activism in the United States since the early 1990s.*

KEYWORDS: *Anticommunism, Incarceration, Little Saigon, Memoirs, Reeducation camps, Vietnamese diaspora*

#### Notes

1. Kimberly Pierceall, "Hundreds crowd Irvine City Hall to protest Vietnam friendship city proposal," April 9, 2014, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/city-608938-vietnamese-irvine.html>.

2. Chris Haire, "Protest highlights tensions between Vietnam and China over sea rights," *Orange County Register*, (May 27, 2014, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/china-615972-vietnamese-chinese.html>).
3. A recent example is Chris Haire, "Vietnamese Political Prisoner Arrives in US after Release," September 19, 2015, <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/vietnam-683714-released-saigon.html>. Although the event was not a demonstration, this article is accompanied by a photo of flags and protesters taken during the aforementioned protest in Irvine, California.
4. Thuy Vo Dang, "Vietnamese American Anticommunism," in Xiaojian Zhao and Edward J. W. Park, eds, *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 1151–1154.
5. C.N. Le, "'Better Dead Than Red': Anti-Communist Politics Among Vietnamese Americans," in Ieva Zeke, ed., *Anti-Communist Minorities in the US: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 189–209.
6. Long S. Le, "Truong Van Tran Incident," in Jonathan H. X. Lee, Kathleen M. Nadeau, eds., *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, 3 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 1215–1216.
7. For example, Kim Nguyen, "'Without the Luxury of Historical Amnesia': The Model Postwar Immigrant Remembering the Vietnam War Through Anticommunist Protests," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34:2 (2010): 134–150. For a study of a different and later protest with important references to the Hi Tek protest, see Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, "Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 15:3 (October 2012): 241–269.
8. Linda Võ, "Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diaspora," *Amerasia Journal*, 29:1 (2003): xv and xvi.
9. Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 146. Valverde calls anticommunism a "reign of terror" that has included "assassination, arson, threats, physical violence, vandalism, and protest – all more akin to developments in the Cuban American community than to those of any other Asian American group." This view not only inflates an uncritical parallel to Cuban American history, but also reveals a lack of differentiation between the "reign of terror" before the 1990s and anticommunist activism thereafter.
10. Nguyen, "'Without the Luxury of Historical Amnesia,'" 142 and 145.
11. Yén Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 96.

12. Phuong Tran Nguyen, "The People of the Fall: Refugee Nationalism in Little Saigon, 1975–2005" (PhD dissertation, University of Southern California, 2009), 130–170.
13. A review of the critical scholarship is Long Le, "Exploring the Function of the Anti-communist Ideology in the Vietnamese American Diasporic Community," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement*, 6 (2011): 1–25. Le offers the following observation about the scholarship of critical scholars: "Is there a need to explain the anti-communist ideology? And is there a need to transcend the anti-communist ideology? For critical scholars such as Yen Le Espiritu, Nguyen Vo Thu-Huong, Linda Vo, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Lan Duong, the answers are 'no' and 'yes,' respectively. Meanwhile, other critical scholars such as Karin Aguilar-San Juan and Roy Vu, the answer (sic) are 'yes' and 'no'" (7).
14. Douglas M. Padgett, "Religion, Memory, and Imagination in Vietnamese California" (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2007), 71. Anticommunism, Padgett continues on the same page, "exposes the fractures in the social surface of Vietnamese Orange County, particularly with regard to gender and generation, but, in more confusing ways too . . . religious lines as well."
15. Thuy Vo Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community," *Amerasia Journal*, 31:2 (2005): 66.
16. Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 80. Not insignificantly, it is the first reference to former political prisoners in a major scholarly study of Little Saigon.
17. Duong and Pelaud, "Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics," 261.
18. Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya, "Enclave, Place, or Nation? Defining Little Saigon in the Midst of Incorporation, Transnationalism, and Long Distance Activism," *Amerasia Journal* 36:3 (2010): 13. See also Collet and Furuya, "Contested Nation: Vietnam and the Emergence of Saigon Nationalism in the United States," in Christian Collet and Pei-te Lien, eds., *The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 56–73.
19. Như-Ngọc T. Ông and David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Incorporation: Vietnamese American Protests in Orange County, California, 1975–2001," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3:1 (2008), 91–92.
20. Transnationalism is also a theme in some of the critical scholarship on diasporic anticommunism. One scholar, for example, examines musical production and collaboration between Vietnamese nationals and Vietnamese Americans, and discusses political monitoring of this transnational exchange by the Vietnamese government on the one hand and Vietnamese American anticommunist activists on the other hand. Similar to the writings of most

- critical scholars, however, this criticism of protests against traveling performers focuses exclusively on the effects of anticommunism without exploring their causes. See Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*, 29–64.
21. One example is the subject of remittances sent by Vietnamese immigrants to families and friends in Vietnam. Besides thematic focus, these studies seek information and data from many interviewees and informants, a practice that is missing in much of the Asian American studies scholarship on diasporic anticommunism. See Hung Cam Thai, *Insufficient Funds: The Culture of Money in Low-Wage Transnational Families* (Alto Palo: Stanford University Press, 2014); and Ivan V. Small, “‘Over There’: Imaginative Displacements in Vietnamese Remittance Gift Economies,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7:3 (2012), 157–183. Longer historical context, especially dollarization, can be found in Allison J. Truitt, *Dreaming of Money in Ho Chi Minh City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 62–82. A related subject is the circulation of goods and investments initiated by Vietnamese workers in the former Soviet bloc; see Christina Schwenkel, “Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany,” *Critical Asian Studies* 4:2 (2014), 235–258.
  22. Hao Phan, “The Disjunctive Politics of Vietnamese Immigrants in America from the Transnational Perspective,” *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 4:1 (2015): 84 and 94. Hao Phan also complicates the transnational model by employing the concept “ideoscapes” from the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. He argues that the diversity of opinions among Vietnamese Americans marks a “disjunctive” character in diasporic anticommunist politics.
  23. This development has been noted also in a recent entry: Phuong Nguyen, “Vietnamese Americans in Little Saigon, California,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): <http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-19>. “The arrival of over 200,000 former political prisoners during the 1990s,” writes Nguyen, “intensified anti-communist sentiment in Little Saigon, for these families had endured the worst brutalities under the post-1975 regime and thus had the greatest incentive to see that it never gained a foothold in the United States.”
  24. This reunion occurred on May 11, 2014 in Westminster, California. It was organized by and for “former political prisoners of Tân Lập Vĩnh Phúc,” to quote the Vietnamese-language announcement found in local ethnic publications. Some reunions had been held in previous years, typically in late April or early May to commemorate the fall of Sài Gòn.

25. Long Le has suggested that this tradition may be traced back further to Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh at the start of the twentieth century; see Le, “Exploring the Function of the Anti-communist Ideology,” 13.
26. A counter-point to this view is made in Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam* (Alto Palo: Stanford University Press, 2008).
27. Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church From Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 148–162 and 177–207. Among the organizations were the Young Catholic Workers [Thanh Niên Lao Động Công Giáo], Eucharistic Crusade [Nghĩa Binh Thánh Thể], and The Association of Children of the Holy Mother [Hội Con Đức Mẹ]. Their memberships were consisted of workers, youths, and women, respectively. An account of Pius XI’s recognition and promotion of Catholic Action in Europe is Massimo Faggioli, *Sorting Out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 48–52.
28. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 84–88.
29. The section on Fr. Pierre Khang and the Catholic press during the Popular Front is drawn from Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, plus information from Hương Vinh, “Linh Mục Giuse Maria Nguyễn Văn Thích (1891–1978)” [Reverend Joseph Marie Nguyen Van Thich (1891–1978)], in *Những Nẻo Đường Việt Nam* [Roads of Vietnam] (2007): <http://www.congiaovietnam.net/index.php/index.php?m=module2&v=chapter&id=18&ib=20&ict=242>.
30. Besides attacking Catholics, the Nghe Tinh Soviet movement also burned pagodas and attacked houses of people categorized as “reactionary landlords.” See Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 155. Its eventual failure led to a shift in strategy within the ICP, including its strategy about propagandizing communist ideas; see Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 118–127.
31. Alexander Barton Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 182–200. The quotation is from 183.
32. See Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 100–175.
33. Nguyễn Vỹ, *Tuấn Chàng Trai Nước Việt* [Tuan, Young Man of Vietnam] (Sài Gòn, 1970), 381–394.
34. Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 188.
35. Samuel L. Popkin, “Colonialism and the Ideological Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution: A Review Article,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44:2 (February 1985), 353.

36. Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 200–239.
37. An account about this period is Hoang Van Dao, *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang: A Contemporary History of a National Struggle: 1927–1954*, trans., Huynh Khue (Pittsburgh: Rose Dog Books, 2008), 156–207.
38. See François Guillemot, “Vietnamese Nationalist Revolutionaries and the Japanese Occupation: The Case of the Dai Viet Parties (1936–1946),” in Li Narangoa and R. B. Cribb, eds., *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895–1945* (London: Routledge, 2003), 221–248. On the political philosophy and early history of the largest Đại Việt party, see Quang Minh, *Cách Mạng Việt Nam Thời Cận Kim: Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng 1938–1995* [The Vietnamese Revolution in the Modern Era: The Great Vietnamese Nationalist Party, 1938–1995] (Westminster, CA: Văn Nghệ, 1996), 11–191.
39. Ngô Văn, *Việt Nam 1920–1945, Cách Mạng và Phản Cách Mạng Thời Đô Hộ Thuộc Địa* [Vietnam 1920–1945: Revolution and Counter-Revolution during Colonial Rule] (Montreuil, France and Amarillo, TX: Chuong Re / L’Insomniaque, 2000), 307. The author was an active Trotskyist at the time.
40. David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 234. Marr notes on the same page that “no rules appear to have been distributed for determining which enemies of the Revolution were capable of redemption and which not.”
41. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 235.
42. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 519.
43. *Lịch Sử Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam: Tập 1* [History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, Book 1] (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1977), 213–217. The Vietnamese terms for “national defense” and “self-defense” teams are *vệ quốc quân* and *tự vệ*, respectively.
44. Christopher E. Goscha, “Intelligence in a Time of Decolonization: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at War (1945–1950),” *Intelligence and National Security* 22:1 (February 2007), 105.
45. *Công An Thủ Đô: Những Chặng Đường Lịch Sử* [Police in the Capital: Stages in Their History] (Hà Nội: Công An Nhân Dân, 1990), 18.
46. David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 127–151.
47. Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 49.
48. Recent scholarship indicates that radical land reform was a Vietnamese initiative and not a direct result of pressure from Mao or Stalin. See Thai-Alex D. Vo, “Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1955,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10:1 (2015), 1–62. It has been argued that the radical turn began earlier than the commonly attributed year of 1950; see

- Tuong Vu, “‘It’s Time for the Indochinese Revolution to Show Its True Colours’: the Radical Turn of Vietnamese Politics in 1948,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40:3 (2009), 519–542.
49. See Tuan Hoang, “The Early South Vietnamese Critique of Communism,” in Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17–32. Diệm’s anticommunist campaign is discussed at length in Nu-Anh Tran, “Contested Identities: Nationalism in the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1963” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013). The larger context about Diệm is provided in Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 124–157.
  50. For a conceptualization about the competition of nationalism, see Nu-Anh Tran, “Contested Nationalism: Ethnic Identity and State Power in the Republic of Vietnam, 1954–1963,” ISSI Fellows Working Papers Series (Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, 2012), esp. 9–11. On cultural divergence between the two Vietnamese states, see Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 234–306.
  51. Thanh Thảo, *Tù Ngục và Thoát Ly: Hồi Ký Ba Năm Tám Tháng* [Prisons and Escapes: Memoir of Three Years and Eight Months] (Sài Gòn, 1957); Tuan Hoang, “The Early South Vietnamese Critique of Communism,” 22–23.
  52. The Vietnamese original of Thiệu’s saying: *Đừng nghe những gì Cộng Sản nói, mà hãy nhìn kỹ những gì Cộng Sản làm*.
  53. Trần Văn Thái, *Trại Đầm Đùn* [The Đầm Đùn Camp] (Sài Gòn: Nguyễn Trãi, 1973; reprint, Houston: Xuân Thu, no date).
  54. Information about the author is gathered from the front matter, introduction, and preface of the book. Information on the journal *Đại Từ Bi* comes from Thích Giác Toàn, “Lược Sử Báo Chí Phật Giáo Việt Nam từ Năm 1951 đến Năm 1975” [Historical summary of Vietnamese Buddhist journalism from 1951 to 1975]: <http://thuvienhoasen.org/a21838/luoc-su-bao-chi-phat-giao-viet-nam-tu-nam-1951-den-nam-1975>.
  55. Trần Văn Thái, *Trại Đầm Đùn*, 14.
  56. Trần Văn Thái, *Trại Đầm Đùn*, 103.
  57. The campaign began in December 12, 1974, and near the DMZ but only 75 miles from Sài Gòn in Phước Long Province. In the planning of the DRV, it could be seen as a dress rehearsal or a test of South Vietnamese defense and American response. The PAVN’s success in capturing the provincial capital on January 6, 1975 led to the Politburo’s decision for a full attack in the northern provinces. A detailed account of ARVN during this time is George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–1975* (New York: Encounter Books, 2013).



58. Nghia M. Vo, "A Pilgrim," in *The Vietnamese Mayflowers of 1975, Expanded Edition*, edited by Chat V. Dang, et al. (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2010), 247.
59. Nguyen Le Hieu, "Flashback from Yesteryears," in *The Vietnamese Mayflowers of 1975*, 393.
60. Phạm Gia Đại, *Hồi Ký: Những Người Tù Cuối Cùng* [Memoir: The Last Prisoners] (Santa Ana, CA: Self-published, 2011), 23.
61. See the profile of his life and works before 1975 at Nguyễn Vy Khanh, "Nhà văn Duyên Anh," the website *Bạn Văn Nghệ* (September 30, 2012): [http://www.banvannghe.com/D\\_1-2\\_2-74\\_4-2496/nha-van-duyen-anh-nguyen-vy-khanh.html](http://www.banvannghe.com/D_1-2_2-74_4-2496/nha-van-duyen-anh-nguyen-vy-khanh.html)
62. Duyên Anh, *Sài Gòn Ngày Dài Nhất* [Sài Gòn the Longest Day] (Los Alamitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1988), 5. Mai Thảo was another target of the same cultural campaign against writers, but managed to elude the security police, escaped by boat in 1977, and resettled in Orange County.
63. Duyên Anh, *Sài Gòn Ngày Dài Nhất*, 125–126. The reference to people without "blood debt" means Vietnamese who did not oppose communism as Duyên Anh.
64. Edward P. Metzger et al., *Reeducation in Postwar Vietnam: Personal Postscripts to Peace* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 51.
65. Tam Đãng, "Theo Dấu Chân Anh, Người Tù Cải Tạo" [Following Your Footsteps, the Reeducation Camp Prisoner], in *Chuyện Người Vợ Cải Tạo, Tập I* [Stories of Wives of Reeducation, Volume I] (Westminster: Viễn Đông, 2004), 302.
66. Ngô Đình Châu, *Những Ngày Tháng Khó Quên: Bút Ký của Một Người Sống Sót Sau Hai Cuộc Chiến* [Unforgettable Days: Memoir of a Survivor of Two Wars] (Fairfax, VA: self-published, 2000), 144–145.
67. The anguish over the self-destruction of identity could be discerned from photographs of personal identification found in many memoirs and related publications in the diaspora. It is not uncommon to find pictures of military or civilian IDs, certificates, and reproductions of old photos showing the writer in military clothing. It is as if the writers made sure to establish to the public their previously abandoned identity.
68. Ngô Đình Châu, *Những Ngày Tháng Khó Quên*, 146.
69. Nguyễn Thanh Nga, *Đóa Hồng Gai: Hồi Ký của Một Nữ Cựu Tù Nhân Chính Trị* [The Thorn Rose: Memoir of a Female Political Prisoner] (Garden Grove, CA: self-published, 2001) 23–25.
70. Bảo Thái, *Dấu Ấn Chân Tù* [Footprints of Imprisonment] (Abilene, TX: self-published, 2002), 22.
71. Bảo Thái, *Dấu Ấn Chân Tù*, 23 and 25.
72. Nguyễn Thanh Nga, *Đóa Hồng Gai*, 22–23.

73. Võ Đại Tôn, *Tắm Máu Đen: Bút Ký 1981–1991* [Bathing in Dark Blood: Memoir, 1981–1991] (Greenacre NSW, Australia: self-published, 1992), 13. Tôn was captured in October 1981 and spent over ten years in prison before being released back to Australia due to international pressure on Vietnam.
74. The more historically informed works on the homeland liberation movement include Nguyen, “The People of the Fall”; and Tuyen Ngoc Tran, “Behind the Smoke and Mirrors: The Vietnamese in California, 1975–1994” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2007). Tran correctly notes that the “fall of Sài Gòn did not end anti-Communist rhetoric or agitation,” and that the liberation movement “hinged on the premise that Vietnam still needed saving” (155). However, neither work considers the psychological and historical impact of the abrupt nature of the fall of Sài Gòn.
75. Lê Khắc Anh Hào, *Đoạn Trường Lưu Vong* [The Pain of Exile] (Vancouver: Hải Triều, 2004), 5.
76. Tran Tri Vu, *Lost Years: My 1632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1988), 65.
77. Tô Văn Cấp, “Những Chiến Hữu Thủy Quân Lục Chiến đã Chết trong Các Trại Tù Việt Cộng” [The Marine Comrades Who Died in Vietnamese Communist Prisons], in *Không Chấp Nhận, Không Sống Chung: Những Cây Bút Cọp Biển, Tuyển Tập 3* [Neither Acceptance Nor Co-Existence: Sea Tiger Writers, Selected Collection III] (Anaheim, CA: Tổng Hội TQLC/VN Tại Hoa Kỳ [The Association of South Vietnamese Marine Corps in the US], 2005), 147. Two previous collections focus on Marines who had died in battle during the war, and this one on the experience of reeducation camps. 307.
78. Lê Khắc Anh Hào, *Đoạn Trường Lưu Vong*, 50. The Vietnamese title is “Vần Thơ Nào Cũng Nhớ Tháng Tư.”
79. See Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký 4: Thời Hải Ngoại* [Memoir, Volume 4: The Diasporic Period], chapter 13: <http://www.phamduy.com/en/van-nghien-cuu/hoi-ky-4/5692-chuong-13>. An analysis of this kind of music is Nguyen, “People of the Fall,” 123–127, 134–137, and 151–153; see also Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*, 36–38.
80. Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký 4*. A sample of diasporic prose and poetry from the 1970s and early 1980s that touches on incarceration (among other themes) could be found in Hoàng Ngọc Ẩn, ed., *Tuyển Tập Thơ Văn 90 Tác Giả Việt Nam Hải Ngoại 1975–1981* [Selected Poetry and Prose from Ninety Vietnamese Writers Abroad, 1975–1981] (Missouri City, TX: Văn Hũu, 1982).
81. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu* [Blood University] (San Jose: Nhân Văn, 1985).

82. An example of second-wave memoirs is Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục: Hồi Ký của Một Người Tù Sống Sót sau 10 Năm trong Các Trại Khổ Sai của Cộng Sản Việt Nam* [The Pit of Hell: Memoir of a Surviving Prisoner after Ten Years in Hard Labor Camps of Communist Vietnam] (place unknown: Viet-land, 2008). Citations come from the edited online version: [http://michaelpdo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CTDN\\_PDF.pdf](http://michaelpdo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CTDN_PDF.pdf).
83. Đặng Văn Học, “Hồi Ký trong Tù” [Prison Memoir], in *Không Chấp Nhận, Không Sống Chung*, 147.
84. Nguyễn Ngọc Minh, “Vét Đập Đô Lương, Khai Quang Lòng Hồ Sông Mực (9/1977)” [Digging the Do Luong Dam and Reclaiming the Song Muc Lake in September 1977], in *Không Chấp Nhận, Không Sống Chung*, 205.
85. Đặng Văn Học, “Hồi Ký trong Tù,” 147. Đặng Văn Học remembers his own hoerror while watching the scene, and notes that his fellow inmate was not sick afterward.
86. Mai Văn Tấn, “Những Biến Động ở Trại Nam Hà (1980, 1981) [Major Events at the Nam Ha Camp in 1980 and 1981], in *Không Chấp Nhận, Không Sống Chung*, 277–280.
87. Văn Thanh Hòa, *Máu và Nước Mắt* [Blood and Tears] (Westminster, CA: self-published, 1991), 23–24.
88. Vương Mộng Long, “Viên Ngọc Nát: Hồi Ký của Thiếu Tá Vương Mộng Long” [The Crushed Pearl: Memoir of Major Vuong Mong Long] (September 16, 2012): <http://vantuyen.net/2014/07/13/vien-ngoc-nat-vuong-mong-long/>.
89. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 21.
90. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 20.
91. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 78.
92. Huy Vũ, “Những Trại Tù Cải Tạo đã In Dấu Chân Tôi” [Reeducation Prisons with My Footprints] (no date), 9: <http://huongduongtxd.com/tucaitao.pdf>.
93. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 21.
94. Vương Mộng Long, “Viên Ngọc Nát.”
95. Đặng Lai, “Bảy Năm Tình Lận Đận” [Seven Years of A Troubled Romance], in *Chuyện Người Vợ Cải Tạo, Tập I*, 135–136.
96. Nguyễn Huy Hùng, *Hồi Ức Tù Cải Tạo Việt Nam* [Recollections of Imprisonment in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps] (no date): <http://www.chinhviet.net/ZOldWeb/15HoiKy/08HoiUcTuCaiTao/0010/08SuoiMauTamHiep.html>.
97. Trần Văn Long, “Hồi Tưởng Ngày Mất Nước Và Quảng Đồi Tù Ngục Cộng Sản” [Remembrances of the Day of National Loss and the Period of Communist Imprisonment] (March 2015): <http://pham-v-thanh.blogspot.com/2015/03/hoi-tuong-ngay-mat-nuoc-va-quang-oi-tu.html>.
98. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu*, 501.

99. Tô Văn Cấp, “Những Chiến Hữu Thủy Quân Lục Chiến đã Chết trong Các Trại Tù Việt Cộng,” 325.
100. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 79–80.
101. Đỗ Xuân Tê, “Viên Trại Trường và Người Tù Cải Tạo” [The Camp Commander and the Reeducation Prisoner], April 20, 2014: <http://nguyentrongtao.info/2014/04/20/vien-trai-truong-va-nguoi-tu-cai-tao/>. Because of his wartime injuries, the commander was allowed to retire as disabled veteran.
102. Chánh Trung, *Những Bước Chân Tù (Tức Bác Sĩ Bất Đắc Dĩ)* [Steps of Imprisonment: Or Being an Unwilling Physician] (San Jose: self-published, 1989), 61.
103. Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille*, 229–230.
104. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 14.
105. Nguyễn Thanh Nga, *Đóa Hồng Gai*, 23; the leader of her own group, who was a Catholic priest, was arrested and executed in November 1976. See also Lữ Giang, “Thủ Đoạn Chính Trị” [Political Trick], June 24, 2009: <http://vietcatholic.net/News/Html/68561.htm>.
106. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 45.
107. Bảo Trân, “Lá Thư Không Bao Giờ Gửi” [Never Sent Letter], in *Chuyện Người Vợ Tù Cải Tạo, Tập III* [Stories of Wives of Reeducation Camp Prisoners, Vol. III] (Westminster, CA: Viễn Đông, 2005), 178–189.
108. Nguyễn Kim Hoàn, “Những Năm Tháng Kinh Hoàng” [Horrific Times], in *Chuyện Người Vợ Tù Cải Tạo, Tập III* [Stories of Wives of Reeducation Camp Prisoners, Vol. III] (Westminster, CA: Viễn Đông, 2005), 115–133.
109. Jolie, “Bao Nhiêu Nước Mắt” [A Lot of Tears], in *Chuyện Người Vợ Tù Cải Tạo, Tập I*, 428.
110. Bảo Trân, “Lá Thư Không Bao Giờ Gửi,” 184.
111. Huỳnh Hoa, “Xa Cơn Giông” [Away from the Storm], in *Chuyện Người Vợ Tù Cải Tạo, Tập III*, 169.
112. Tran Tri Vu, *Lost Years*, 228. This prisoner’s leave was sponsored by his uncle, a Party member and a “propaganda commissar.” The practice, however, was not common even among prisoners with relatives in the postwar government or military.
113. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu*, 43–44.
114. Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục*, 18.
115. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu*, 37.
116. Đinh Thanh Lâm, *Một Đời Xót Xa* [A Sorry Life] (Westminster, CA: Nam Việt, 2008), 137.
117. Chánh Trung, *Những Bước Chân Tù*, 29.
118. Võ Đại Tôn, *Tắm Máu Đen*, 178.

119. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu*, 44.
120. Văn Thanh Hòa, *Máu và Nước Mắt*, 24–25.
121. Mai Văn Tấn, “Những Biến Động ở Trại Nam Hà,” 284–285.
122. Vương Mộng Long, “Viên Ngọc Nát.” After his second capture in 1978, Long and two other escapees were also paraded at the market. This time, however, the people “only looked at us curiously and did not chase after us with stoning and denunciation.”
123. See Thanh Thảo, *Tù Ngục và Thoát Ly*, 32.
124. Nguyễn Văn Đông, “Những Đấu Trí Đầu Tiên” [Initial Mental Games], in *Không Chấp Nhận, Không Sống Chung*, 512.
125. Tran Tri Vu, *Lost Years*, 65.
126. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu*, 191.
127. Phạm Văn Chung, “Vào ĐỀ” [Preface], in *Không Chấp Nhận, Không Sống Chung*, 11. Emphasis in the original.
128. The information on Shepard Lowman comes from “Vietnamese Americans Mourn the Loss of Shepard Lowman”: <http://aapress.com/ethnicity/vietnamese/vietnamese-americans-mourn-loss-of-shepard-lowman/>. FVPPA’s leadership consisted mostly of Vietnamese American women, including its president Khúc Minh Thơ. Hiệp Lowman was a board member.
129. Đào Văn Bình, *Ký Sự 15 Năm* [Reports from Fifteen Years] (San Jose: self-published, 2000), 28–37. In 1989, the author was among the founders of the Association of Former Vietnamese Political Prisoners (Hội Cựu Tù Nhân Chính Trị Việt Nam), which later morphed into the FAFVPP. The majority of prisoners in Canada had escaped by boat or migrated thanks to sponsorship by family members.
130. See Tran, “Behind the Smoke and Mirrors,” 101–145, which examines the roles of mutual aid associations in refugee resettlement in addition to the homeland liberation movement.
131. General Office Files, Organizational Meetings, “Coordinating Committee for the Reception of Vietnamese Political Prisoners, 1989–1990, 04 August 1989,” Folder 063, Box 137, Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. (The collection will be referred to as FVPPA Collection.)
132. “Coordinating Committee for the Reception of Vietnamese Political Prisoners, 1989–1990, 04 August 1989.”
133. Đào Văn Bình, *Ký Sự 15 Năm*, 9 and 12. The event was called *bữa cơm Đồng Tâm*, Banquet of Unified Hearts: see the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) Application File for General Office Files - Events and Speeches – “Annual Dinner and Cultural Show, July 28, 1990,” Folder 042, Box 166, FVPPA Collection.

134. General Office Files, Organizational Meetings, “Problems Facing Former Political Prisoners and Proposals for Solutions, 11/27/1990,” December 12, 1990, Folder 072, Box 137, FVPPA Collection.
135. Đào Văn Bình, *Ký Sự 15 Năm*, 56–65.
136. Đào Văn Bình, *Ký Sự 15 Năm*, 104–107.
137. Đào Văn Bình, *Ký Sự 15 Năm*, 139–143. A local study is beyond the scope of this article, but the extent of effort by “outsiders” to assist former prisoners in Seattle suggested another aspect of the renewal and re-energization of the anticommunist ideology in Vietnamese American communities during the 1990s.
138. Information and quotations about the St. Louis community come from Nguyễn Thanh Trà, “Khu Hội Cựu Tù Nhân Chính Trị Thành Phố St. Louis” [The Association of Former Political Prisoners in St. Louis]: <http://www.chinhviet.net/tonghoi/chinhviet/0704/449KhuHoiCuu.htm>.