

The 'bloodbath' in Vietnam just a myth

A year ago, in a packed lecture hall at Brandeis University, there took place the last teach-in of the Vietnam War. I assume it was the last, because amidst speeches about President Ford's request for more military aid to South Vietnam, a student came racing down the aisle with exciting news, just off the radio.

The Saigon government had surrendered. The revolutionaries had won, after 30 years of struggle, of unimaginable sacrifice.

Everyone stood up and applauded. The war was over. No more body counts. No more bombings.

We know little about what happened in Saigon in the days of the disintegration of the South Vietnamese army, the American evacuation, and the triumphant entrance into the capital of the revolutionary soldiers. President Ford urged us to forget.

Now a book has appeared, written by an Italian journalist working for a German magazine, "Der Spiegel." He was in Saigon those tumultuous days, and stayed on for three months, to check on whether there would be a "bloodbath" as Kissinger, Mr. Nixon and Mr. Ford had predicted, to see what a revolution meant to the everyday life of the He spoke to hundreds of Vietnamese, filling 14 notebooks and 20 tape cassetts. This was Tiziano Terzani. His book is called "Giai Phong!" ("Liberation!").

It seems there was an underground in Saigon, working for the revolution. Groups of students had secretly put aside rice, medical supplies, weapons and mimeograph machines. They worked out of a Buddhist university in a working class neighborhood where most of the people were sympathetic.

All throught April, 1975, one city after another had fallen. There was no will to fight among the government troops.

Rumors of a "bloodbath" by the advancing armies spread panic in Saigon and brought thousands of Vietnamese crowding hysterically around the American Embassy, seeking evacuation. Secretary of Defense Schles-

HOWARD ZINN

singer spoke of 200,000 killed if the communists won. The American armed forces newspaper, "Stars and Stripes," in one of the last issues to arrive in Saigon, carried a headline: "At Least a Million Vietnamese Will Be Slaughtered."

None of that happened. The revolutionary troops turned out to be young, good-natured, and helpful. They were not vindictive. To the north, they had watched the Hue garrisons march 60 kilometers to an evacuation point on the coast, and did not fire a shot at them.

The harshness toward former Saigon officials was not in bloody reprisals, but in compulsory "reeducation" programs. A far cry from B52 bombings, the burning of villages, "tiger cages" for prisoners.

To the end, US officials behaved shamefully. They even tried to make propaganda out of the last-minute airlift of Vietnamese children. A Vietnamese government memo read: "The American ambassador is convinced that the evacuation ... will help sway American public opinion ... When the

children arrive in the United States the press, television and radio will give ample publicity to the matter and the impact will be enormous."

One of those Air Force planes exploded, killing 206 Vietnamese children.

Terzani reports hundreds of families reunited by the liberation, reminding us how artificial was the separation into "North" and "South." There was no bloodbath. The policy was reconciliation. A peasant leader explained: "The Americans were the ones who taught the Vietnamese to torture and kill other Vietnamese ... we have all been oppressed ... One must understand. One must forgive."

Is this too romantic a picture of the liberation, which Terzani gives us in his book? Perhaps. Revolutions can become tyrannical, lose their early spirit. Perhaps they need continuous rejuvenation, as Karl Marx and Thomas Jefferson both said in different ways.

But the liberation of Vietnam from foreign imperialists and domestic landlords is a good first step. The American Revolution, too, was only a beginning.

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