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Vietnam: the last battle. John Pilger reports from Saigon

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The rain sheeted down, time washed away. I looked down from the rooftop in Saigon where, more than a generation ago, in the wake of the longest war of modern times, I had watched silent, sullen streets awash. The foreigners were gone, at last. Through the mist, like little phantoms, four children ran into view, their arms outstretched. They circled and weaved and dived; and one of them fell down, feigning death. They were bombers.

This was not unusual, for there is no place like Vietnam. Within my lifetime, Ho Chi Minh's nationalists had fought and expelled the French, whose tree-lined boulevards, pink-washed villas and scaled-down replica of the Paris Opera, were facades for plunder and cruelty; then the Japanese, with whom the French colons collaborated; then the British who sought to reinstall the French; then the Americans, with whom Ho had repeatedly tried to forge an alliance against China; then Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, who attacked from the west; and finally the Chinese who, with a vengeful nod from Washington, came down from the north. All of them were seen off at immeasurable cost.

I walked down into the rain and followed the children through a labyrinth to the Young Flower School, an orphanage. A teacher hurriedly assembled a small choir and I was greeted with a burst of singing. "What are the words of the song?" I asked Tran, whose father was a GI. He looked gravely at the floor, as nine year olds do, before reciting words that left my interpreter shaking her head. "Planes come no more", she repeated, "do not weep for those just born ... the human being is evergreen."

The year was 1978. Vietnam was then being punished for seeing off the last American helicopter gunship, the war's creation, the last B52 with its ladders of bombs silhouetted against the flash of their carnage, the last C-130s that had dumped, the US Senate was told, "a quantity of toxic chemical amounting to six pounds per head of population, destroying much of the ecosystem and causing a "foetal catastrophe", the last of a psychosis that made village after village a murder scene.

And when it was all over on May Day, 1975, Hollywood began its long celebration of the invaders as victims, the standard purgative, while revenge was policy. Vietnam was classified as "Category Z" in Washington, which imposed the draconian Trading with the Enemy Act from the first world war. This ensured that even Oxfam America was barred from sending humanitarian aid. Allies pitched in. One of Margaret Thatcher's first acts on coming to power in 1979 was to persuade the European Community to halt its regular shipments of food and milk to Vietnamese children. According to the World Health Organisation, a third of all infants under five so deteriorated following the milk ban that the majority of them were stunted or likely to be. Almost none of this was news in the west.

Austerity, grief at the millions dead or missing and an incredulity that the war was no more became the rhythms of life in a forgotten country. The "democracy" the Americans had invented and life-supported in the south, which once accounted for half of Amnesty's worldwide toll of tortured political prisoners, had collapsed almost overnight. The roads out of Saigon became vistas of abandoned boots and uniforms. "When I heard that it was over," said Thieu Thi Tao Madeleine, "my heart flies."

Still wearing the black of the National Liberation Front, which the Americans called the Vietcong, she walked with a limp and winced as she smiled. The "Madeleine" was added by her French teachers at the Lycee in Saigon which she and her sister Thieu Thi Tan Danielle had attended in the sixties. Aged 16 and 13, "Mado" and "Dany" were recruited by the NLF to blow up the Saigon regime's national intelligence headquarters, where torture was conducted under tutelage of the CIA.

On the eve of their mission they were betrayed and seized as they cycled home from school. When Mado refused to hand over NLF names, she was strung upside down and electrocuted, her head held in a bucket of water. They were then "disappeared" to Con Son Island, where they were shackled in "tiger cages": cells so small they could not stand; quick lime and excreta were thrown on them from above. At the age of 16, Dany etched their defiance on the wall: "Notre bonjour a nos chers at cheres caramades." The words are still there.

The other day, I returned to Vietnam, whose agony I reported for almost a decade. A poem was waiting in my room in the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon. Typed in English, it was a "heartfelt prayer" for "the stones [of life] getting soft", and ended with, "I'm still living, struggling ... please phone." It was Mado, though I prefer her Vietnamese name, Tao. We had lost touch; I knew of her work at the Institute of Ecology, her marriage to another NLF soldier and the birth of a son against all the odds of the damage done to her in the tiger cages.

Through the throng of tourists and businessmen in the Caravelle lobby navigated diminutive Dany, now 57. Tao was waiting in a taxi outside. Five years ago, Tao suffered a stroke and lost the use of her voice and much of her body, but these have now returned and although she needs to take your arm, she is really no different from when she told me her heart "flies". We drove past the sentinels of the new Vietnam, the hotels and apartment blocks under construction, then turned into a lane where wood smoke rose and children peered and frogs leapt in the beam of our headlights.

The walls of Tao's home are a proud montage of struggle and painful gain: she and Dany at the Lycee Marie Curie; the collected exhortations of Ho; the letters of comrades long gone. It all seemed, at first, like flowers preserved between the pages of a forgotten book. But no: these here the very icons and inspirations of resistance that new generations must recreate all over again, for while battlegrounds change, the enemy does not. "Each time we are invaded," she said, "we fight them off. At the same time we fight to keep our soul. Isn't that the lesson of Vietnam and of history?"

I was once told a poignant story by a Frenchman who was in Hanoi during the Christmas 1972 bombing. "I took shelter in the museum of history," he said, "and there, working by candlelight, with the B52s overhead, were young men and women

earnestly trying to copy as many bronzes and sculptures as they could. They told me, 'Even if the originals are destroyed, something will remain and our roots will be protected.'

History, not ideology, is a living presence in Vietnam. Here, the experience of history forged a communal ingenuity and patience to the extreme human limits. The NLF leadership in the south was an alliance of Catholics, liberals, Buddhists and communists, and most of those who fought in the northern army were peasant nationalists. With its structures and disciplines, communism was the means by which Vietnam's protracted wars of independence were fought and won. This is appreciated by Vietnamese today who idly refer to "the communist period" as if the party was no longer in power. What matters here is Vietnam. Visit the museums in Hanoi and it is clear that the word Ho Chi Minh never stopped using was "independence": "the right you never surrender". In retirement, President Dwight Eisenhower wrote that had his administration not delayed (sabotaged) the national elections agreed at the United Nations conference on Indochina in Geneva in 1954, "possibly 80 per cent of the population would have voted for Ho".

I thought about this on the journey back from Tao's. More than 20 years of war would not have happened. As many as three million people would have lived. No babies would have been deformed by Agent Orange. No feet would have been blown off by the cluster bombs that were tested here. On the overnight train to Danang, I could tell the bomb craters that joined together, leaving not even Pompeii's of war, except perhaps on a distant rise the gravestones of the anti-aircraft militia. They were often young women like Mado and Dany. In Hanoi, I took a taxi to Kham Thiem Street which I first saw in 1975, laid to waste by B52s which had struck every third house. A block of flats where 283 people died is now a monument of a mother and child. There are fresh flowers; the traffic thunders by.

Sitting in a café with these unnecessary ghosts, I read that Britain's military chief, General Sir David Richards, had called for Nato "to plan for a 30 or 40 year role" in Afghanistan. Nato is said to spend \$50 million for every Taliban guerrilla it kills, and cluster bombs are still a favourite. The general expressed his care for the Afghan people. The French and Americans also said they cared for the "gooks" they killed in industrial quantities.

When I was last in Vietnam 15 years ago, making a film, my only brush with officialdom was the Ministry of Culture's concern that the footage I had shot at My Lai, where hundreds of mostly women and children were slaughtered, might offend the Americans. In Saigon, the War Crimes Museum has been re-named the War Remnants Museum. Outside, tourists are offered pirated copies of the Lonely Planet guide, with its tendentious devotion to an American sense of "Nam".

Perhaps the Vietnamese can afford to be generous, but the reason, I think, runs deeper. Since Dai Thang, "the great victory", the policy has been to end a seemingly endless state of siege. Colour and energy have arrived like breaking waves; Hanoi, with its mist-covered lakes and boulevards once pocked with air-raid shelters, is now a gracious, confident, youthful city. There is the kind of freedom that ignores, navigates and circumvents the old Stalinist strictures. The newspapers take officials to task and damn corruption, but then, occasionally, there is the bleakest of headlines: "Alleged agitator to face trial". Cu Huy Ha Vu, 53, has been charged with "illegal actions against the state". Such is an ill-defined line you dare not cross.

Bill Clinton came to lunch at my hotel in Hanoi. He runs an AIDS charity that does work in Vietnam. In 1995, he "normalised relations" between Washington and Hanoi and made the first US presidential visit in modern times five years later. That meant Vietnam was allowed to join the World Trade Organisation and qualify for World Bank loans provided it embraced the "free market", destroyed its free public services and paid off the bad debts of the defunct Saigon regime: money which had helped bankroll the American war. The reparations agreed by President Richard Nixon in the 1973 Paris Peace Accords were ignored. Normalisation also meant that foreign investors were offered tax-free "economic processing zones" with "competitively priced" (cheap) labour.

The Vietnamese were finally being granted membership of the "international community" as long as they created a society based on inequity and exploited labour, and abandoned the health service that was the envy of the developing world, with its pioneering work in paediatrics and primary care, along with a free education system that produced one of the world's highest literacy rates. Today, ordinary people pay for health care and schools, and the elite send their children to expensive schools in Hanoi's "international city" and poach scholarships at American universities.

Whereas farmers in difficulty could once depend on rural credit from the state (interest was unknown), they must now go to private lenders, the usurers who once plagued the peasantry. And the government has welcomed back the Monsanto company and its genetically-modified seeds. Monsanto was one of the manufacturers of Agent Orange, which gave Vietnam its chemical Hiroshima. Last year, the US Supreme Court rejected an appeal by lawyers acting for more than three million Vietnamese deformed by Agent Orange. One of the justices, Clarence Thomas, worked as a corporate lawyer for Monsanto.

In his seminal, *Anatomy of a War*, the historian Gabriel Kolko says that the party of Ho Chi Minh enjoyed "success as a social movement based largely on its response to peasant desires". He now says that its surrender to the "free market" is a betrayal. His disillusion is understandable, but the need to internationalise a war-ruined country was desperate, along with building a counterweight to China, the ancient foe. Unlike China, and despite the new Gucci emporiums in the centre of Hanoi and Saigon, the Vietnamese have not yet gone all the way with the brutalities of "tiger" or crony capitalism. Since 1985, the rate of malnutrition among children has almost halved. And tens of thousands of those who fled in boats have quietly returned without "a single case of victimisation", according to the EU official who led the assistance programme in 1995. In many parts of the country, forests are rising again and the sound of birds and the rustle of wildlife are heard again, thanks to a re-greening programme initiated during the war by Professor Vo Quy of Vietnam National University in Hanoi.

For me, keeping at bay the forces that pour trillions into corrupt banks and wars while destroying the means of civilised life is Vietnam's last great battle. That the party elite respects, perhaps fears, a people who, through the generations, have devoted themselves to throwing off oppressors is evident in the state's often ambivalent responses to unauthorised strikes against ruthless foreign employers. "Are we in a Gorbachev phase?" said a journalist. "Or maybe the party and the people are watching each other for now. Remember always, Vietnam is different."

On my last day in Saigon, I walked along Dong Hoi, no longer a street of hustlers and beggars, bar girls and shambling GIs looking for something in the cause of nothing. Then, I would stroll past the Hotel Royale and look up at the corner balcony on the first floor and see a stocky Welshman, his camera resting on his arm. A greeting in Welsh might drift down, or his take-off of an insane colonel we both knew. Today, the balcony and the Royale are gone, and Philip Jones Griffiths died two years ago. He was perhaps the most gifted and humane photographer of any war. Single-handed, he tried to stop a "search and destroy" operation that would kill a huddled group of women and children, eliciting from an American artillery offer the memorable response: "What civilians?" One of his finest photographs is a Goya-like picture of a captured NLF soldier, terribly wounded and surrounded by the large boots of his captors, yet undefeated in his humanity. Such is Vietnam.

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