

A Chilling Document

The Prospect of Terror In Postwar South Vietnam

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Early last year, a South Vietnamese peasant who was walking through the grass-tufted sand-dune country outside the city of Hue tripped over a coil of rusty wire thrusting up from the sand.

The peasant reached down and gave the wire a sharp tug — and out of the sand flew a skull and the bones of a hand and forearm wrapped in the other end of the wire.

Thus another "find" had been made in the search for missing victims of the massacre of Hue, which was carried out by the Communists during their 24-day occupation of the city in the February 1968 Tet offensive.

The "Sand Dunes Find" yielded 809 bodies. These victims had been lined up beside shallow trenches in the sand, bound together with wire in "bundles" of 10 to 20 persons, including many women and small children.

They were cut down by submachine guns fired by local civilian Communist cadres who had surfaced once the city had fallen securely into the hands of 12,000 North Vietnamese troops.

To date, the bodies of nearly 6000 South Vietnamese civilians have been unearthed in Thua Thien Province, which surrounds Hue. Many victims had been tortured and buried alive.



A Vietnamese woman sobs as she waits for a digging team to uncover the body of her husband and other civilians slain by the Viet Cong during the 1968 Tet offensive near Hue. This photo was taken in November, 1969.

Details of Massacre

Details of the Sand Dunes Find and the massacre of Hue are related by this country's top expert on the Viet Cong, Douglas Pike, in a 125-page monograph entitled "The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror." It was recently published by the U.S. mission in Saigon.

Pike's writings, because of his scholarship and reputation for searing objectivity, have earned the respect of hawk and dove alike. He is an official of the United States Information Agency.

Pike's work is signed and published with the disclaimer his opinions do "not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government."

In this crisp, chilling document, Pike provides a convincing rejoinder to those in this country who dismiss as propaganda President Nixon's warning that a Communist take-over in South Vietnam after our departure would result in a blood-bath.

The massacre at Hue, says Pike, proved to be a premature curtain-raiser for what can be expected if the Communists prevail.

Pike's most dramatic conclusion: As many as 3 million Vietnamese "enemies of the revolution" may be slaughtered in a "night of the long knives."

No Heat of Battle

Pike, who spent eight years in South Vietnam, says data gleaned from Communist defectors, captives, and surviving eyewitnesses in Hue provide overwhelming evidence the slaughter of civilians there during Tet represented a calculated elimination of anti-Communists, and that the killing was not carried out in the heat of battle by troops whose adrenalin was pumping fast.

The killing was done not by

North Vietnamese troops but by more than 150 local Communist assassination squads.

"Despite contrary appearances," writes Pike, "virtually no Communist killing was due to rage, frustration, or panic during the Communist withdrawal at the end. To trace back any single killing is to discover that almost without exception it was a decision rational and justifiable in the Communist mind. In fact, most of the killings were, from the Communist calculation, imperative."

As reconstructed by Pike and other U.S. and South Vietnamese investigators, the killing in Hue was carried out in three phases.

We now know the enemy's original plan called for 16 battalions of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) to seize and hold the city of Hue for one week, then withdraw.

The killing that went on during this first phase was of the routine Communist kind, the sort of thing they do every day in hamlets, villages, and towns throughout the country.

Cadres With Clipboards

"Cadres with lists of names and addresses on clipboards appeared and called into kangaroo court various 'enemies of the revolution,'" says Pike. "Their trials were public, usually in the courtyard of a temporary Communist headquarters.

"The trials last about 10 minutes each and there are no known not-guilty verdicts."

The battle of Hue went so well for the Communists the first week they convinced themselves that they could hold the city indefinitely as an enclave. Withdrawal plans were canceled. The Phase Two killings now began.

Among the Communists' acts at this point, says Pike, "was to extend the death order and launch what in effect was a period of social reconstruction, Communist style.

"Order went out, apparently from the provincial level of the party, to round up what one prisoner termed 'social negatives'; that is, those individuals or members of groups who represented potential danger or liability in the new social order.

"This was quite impersonal, not a blacklist of names but a blacklist of titles and positions held in the old society, directed not against people as such but against 'social units.'

Killing by Family Unit

"In consonance with this, killing in some instances was done by family unit. In one well-documented case during this period, a squad with a death order entered the home of a prominent community leader and shot him, his wife, his married son and daughter-in-law, his young unmarried daughter, a male and female servant and their baby."

"The family cat was strangled; the family dog was clubbed to death; the goldfish scooped out of the fishbowl and tossed on the floor. When the Communists left, no life remained in the house. A 'social unit' had been eliminated."

Special attention during Phase Two was paid to the elimination of Hue's considerable intellectual community. "Surviving Hue intellectuals explain this in terms of a long-standing Communist hatred of Hue intellectuals who were anti-Communist in the worst and most insulting manner:

"They refused to take communism seriously . . . The intellectuals in the university, for example, in a year's course in political thought dispense with Marxism-Leninism in a half-hour lecture, painting it as a set of shallow barbarian political slogans with none of the depth and time-tested reality of Confucian learning, nor any of the splendor and soar-

ing humanism of Buddhist thought."

The Phase Three killings began once it became obvious that the North Vietnamese could not hold the city more than a few more days under the determined assault by U.S. and South Vietnamese troops.

Probably the entire Communist civilian underground had, by this time, revealed itself during the Phase Two killings. The cadres thus exposed could not go underground again as long as there were individuals around who remembered them.

Raised No Outcry

"Probably the largest number of killings came during this period and for this reason," concludes Pike.

Ever since my return from a reporting stint in South Vietnam last year, I have been mystified by the lack of interest on the part of the American press in this incredible story.

"We just can't 'sell' the Hue story," a U.S. Army public-information officer said to me one day in Saigon. Pike is equally mystified and upset. For the first time in his writings, Pike in "The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror" permits himself the luxury of emotion.

"Apparently it (the massacre at Hue) made no impact on the world's mind or conscience. For there was no agonize outcry. No demonstrations at North Vietnamese embassies around the world. Lord Russell did not send his 'war crimes tribunal' to Hue to take evidence and indict.

"In a tone beyond bitterness, the people there will tell you that the world does not know what happened in Hue, or if it does, does not care."

Finally, Pike has this to say:

"The meaning of the Hue Massacre seems clear. If the Communists win decisively in South Vietnam (and the key word is decisively) what is the prospect?

'A Night of Long Knives'

"First, all foreigners will be cleared out of the South, especially the hundreds of foreign newsmen who are in and out of Saigon. A curtain of ignorance would descend. Then would begin a night of long knives.

"There would be a new order to build. The war was long and so are memories of old scores to be settled. All political opposition, actual or potential, would be systematically eliminated . . . The pattern would be the same:

"Eliminate not the individual — for who cares about



Map shows city of Hue where Viet Cong carried out massacre against South Vietnamese.

the individual? — but the latent danger to the dream, the representatives of the blocs, the symbol of force, that might someday, even inside the regime, dilute the system.

"Beyond this would come Communist justice meted out to the 'Tyrants and lackeys.' Personal revenge would be a small wheel turning within the larger wheel of party retribution.

"The world would call it peace."