

NY Times MAY 1 1975 Vietcong, After Long Struggle, Attain a Vanguard Role in the South

By JAMES M. MARKHAM

The Vietcong, the cutting edge of the Communist revolution in South Vietnam, have been many things to many men. To the American public, they were a faceless, tireless enemy in a long and fruitless war. In the images of official American spokesmen, they were—or became, as the war dragged on—mere tools of what was seen as a North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam.

To many clifed Vietnamese, "Vietcong" was a shorthand term that embraced Communist political organizers and soldiers, whether from the south, the center or the north of Vietnam. The Vietnamese words "Viet" and "Cong" mean simply "Vietnamese Communist."

In the emerald-green Vietnamese countryside, one heard, or used, the term Vietcong much less; politically loaded and somewhat pejorative, it is a declaration of loyalty to the Saigon side.

There, one was speaking about the same people—the guerrillas and political cadres who made the nighttime visits to talk politics or collect taxes—but villagers tended to speak of "them" (neutral) or "liberation forces" (sympathetic).

And in not a few areas in South Vietnam—old revolution-ary bastions like Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai on the central coast or Kien-Hoa, Dinh Tuong or Ca Mau in the delta—the Vietcong were simply the most legitimate of the various authorities that had attempted over the warring decades to put their imprint on day-to-day life.

These shadings of perception are important to an understanding of the political movement that will surely be playing a vanguard role in South Vietnam in the months and years to come.

For the Vietcong are neither, as American officials would have it, an almost imaginary group riding the backs of North Vietnamese tanks to power; nor are the southern Communists, as their own propaganda contends, the instruments of spontaneous popular uprisings against the American-backed Saigon regime.

Though outsiders have gone to some lengths to stress presumed cleavages between the northern and southern Communist movements, members of the Vietcong and the Hanoi Government sometimes privately belittle such differences.

As a quick glance at history shows, the Vietcong are derived from the Communist revolution that began in the late nineteenth century, when a Vietnamese exile in China, using the name Ho Chi Minh, helped create the Indochinese Communist party.

The party's principal united-front organization was the Vietminh, which spearheaded the struggle against the French colonialists.

By the time of the pivotal victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the Geneva agreements that split Vietnam in two, the Vietminh had edged out most of its political competitors in what became North Vietnam. A Chinese-style land reform in the North led to a social upheaval that was said

to include the execution of a number of "reactionary elements."

In South Vietnam, where the United States attempted to fill the vacuum left by the French and to build an independent state around the figure of Ngo Dinh Diem, the Vietminh had also carried out a protracted struggle against the French.

Under such leaders as the legendary Southerner Nguyen Binh, the Vietminh had wrested control of swaths of the rice-rich Mekong delta from the French. The Communists' rule in the countryside was tight and dogmatic, but they distributed land to the poorest tillers and forged loyalties in the delta and along the coast that endure to this day.

Seats Remained Elusive

But the Vietminh never quite succeeded in gaining a firm hold on some of the seats, notably, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, that made South Vietnam a heterogeneous, disputatious territory for anyone to govern. To this day the Communists have been chary of alienating these groups in the South.

In 1954, under pressure from its Soviet and Chinese mentors, the Vietminh accepted the Geneva accords, which promised elections the Communists were confident of winning, and so withdrew troops and officials to the newly created Democratic Republic of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel.

While more than 800,000 Vietnamese, many of them Roman Catholics, left North Vietnam aboard French and Ameri-

can ships for the South, as many as 100,000 people were "regrouped" from south to north. Many of them later returned to their native provinces to give new life to the revolution.

The origin of the revolution in the South after the Geneva accords has been a subject of debate, with both scholars and propagandists trying to show that it was either a defensive response to repressive policies of the Saigon Government or an artificial import from North Vietnam.

But Vietnamese history did not halt, or begin, in 1954. The Communist movement in the South, which went on the defensive in the late nineteenth century, did not disappear. Quiet organization proceeded.

On Dec. 20, 1960, Communists and other antigovernment elements formed the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, a political front organization that would be the most visible carrier of the revolution until 1969, when the Provisional Revolutionary Government was created.

The liberation front sought to assemble the various opponents of Ngo Dinh Diem into a single coalition. Southern Communists, who reportedly held simultaneous membership in North Vietnam's Lao Dong (Workers) party, played a prominent role in the front through the little-publicized People's Revolutionary party.

Heavily influenced by Maoist concepts of an armed uprising against a foreign-supported government, the Vietcong attempted, with mixed success, to

enlist the peasants of the delta and the coast into the struggle.

The arsenal of weapons in this struggle were multifold, including guerrilla warfare, proselytization of Saigon's forces, terror, selective assassinations and, above all, dogged political organization of the hamlets and villages that are the fundamental building blocks of Vietnamese society.

Northern Influence

Though the National Liberation Front had its own vices, arising in part from a growing influence of northern-born officials in its ranks, it grew into the most organized and disciplined political force in South Vietnam.

In the late sixties, with the diplomatic impact of the events in Vietnam becoming more important, the Communists apparently found that the National Liberation Front was an inadequate vehicle.

On June 6, 1969, a meeting held "somewhere in South Vietnam" officially formed the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, a clear rival to the Government of Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon.

The Vietcong government was little more than a large cabinet in terms of the number of people in it. The National Liberation Front continued to function alongside it as the political organization.

In the Paris cease-fire talks, the government was given parity with the Saigon authorities. And it signed the Paris agreement of Jan. 27, 1973 as an equal.

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Vietcong guerrillas chatting with North Vietnamese soldiers—wearing sun helmets—in Da Nang early last month, after Communists overran that city

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