

Experts Agree

North Viets Keep Will to Fight

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Saigon

At a time when both Hanoi and Saigon need endurance more than any other quality, Western and Vietnamese experts here see no sign that North Vietnam is losing either the will or the capacity to go on fighting.

This judgment is remarkable for its unanimity, but even more so because it takes full account of the war weariness and the economic stagnation which, the experts say, are the two most serious home problems facing the North Vietnamese leadership.

There is general agreement that ever since the Americans stopped bombing the north in 1968, private "revolts" against the discipline and austerity of North Vietnamese life have been on the increase. In January, a Hanoi newspaper reported a particularly extravagant case in which a 37-year-old musician called Thuan was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for disseminating "imperialist culture and counter-revolutionary propaganda."

His crimes included forming a band which, when playing at wedding and engagement parties, would slip in the odd piece of "yellow music" (Hanoi's name for the Western-influenced pop mu-

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sic of Saigon); building up a young following and holding "yellow music" parties for them "in places decorated so as to look mysterious"; and defending art for art's sake and saying that there was no freedom in North Vietnamese society.

HINTS

The account of the case included intriguing hints about the dissatisfaction of the North Vietnamese intelligentsia, but most newspaper reports record more obvious kinds of shortcomings. Early this year a shocked reporter from Hanoi came across a village whose main occupation was the illegal distilling of rice brandy. Half the villagers were so busy with this enjoyable and profitable business that they were scarcely bothering to cultivate the collective rice fields. Worst of all, party members were involved.

Doubts that North Vietnam has a serious problem of growing social indiscipline on its hands were removed last October by the publication of a decree setting out new punishments for crimes "against Socialist property." The death penalty was ordered for the most serious crimes, but even "lack of a sense of responsibility and causing serious damage to Socialist property" can in the gravest cases earn up to 15 years in prison.

ECONOMY

There is little doubt that a main cause of these problems is the wretched performance of the economy. Last year even Le Duan, first secretary of the North Vietnamese Communist Party, talked of "the alarming situation caused by the unbalanced state of our economy."

The experts say that North Vietnamese production was reduced by half during the American bombing and that it has scarcely picked up at all, even though the bombing ended two and a half years ago.

There seems little hope that rationing of food and other necessities can end soon and there have been recent warnings that the need to increase exports could mean that there will be less tea and tobacco and other locally-produced goods for sale at home.

Hanoi's problem is lack of trained managers. The North Vietnamese have admitted that agriculture, where three-quarters of the work force are now women, has been particularly badly hit by the loss of trained men to military service.

REBUILDING

Bad management has been just as damaging in industry, where a tremendous effort is being made to rebuild what the bombing destroyed. A

large part of precious investment funds and foreign aid seems to have been wasted. Construction has been too slow and too expensive and there are many reports of projects left unfinished.

The experts in Saigon say that one reason why North Vietnam can live with these problems and still go on fighting for several years is that Hanoi leaders are in general agreement among themselves. The disputes of the past — notably over how the economy should be run and war fought — seem to have quieted down and Le Duan has become the chief spokesman of the Politburo's collective will.

Le Duan, the man who has said that revolution is as much an art as a science, typifies the concern for keeping in touch with realities which has generally marked Vietnamese Communism from its early days. Significantly, in a major speech last year, he praised Lenin's new economic policy which helped Russia to recover after the revolution by easing up on pure Communist principles.

RESULTS

It is felt that the Politburo under Le Duan is more interested in results than ideology and more concerned with people than principles. The Vietnamese Communists are excellent exponents of iron fist in velvet glove tactics and there is no doubt of the strength of their iron fist. While demanding that more care be given to the families of dead soldiers and those fighting "at the front" (Hanoi's euphemism for outside North Vietnam) the government has recently increased its efforts to mobilize all manpower and to recruit young men for the front.

Given this control, there is no shortage of recruits, even if 100,000 North Vietnamese soldiers are killed each year, because a large part of the North Vietnamese population is extremely young. Officials in Hanoi told a French journalist last year that half the population was aged 16 or under.

But most experts agree that Hanoi's main strength lies in its constant appeal to nationalism, which works. Even the men who abandon the north do not easily forget how they once felt. A political officer who recently defected to Saigon recalled his emotions when he set off south down the Ho Chi Minh trail:

"I was very optimistic. We had dared to fight the French and we had won. Why shouldn't we beat the Americans too? I felt that the Vietnamese people were heroes and I was very proud to be alive at this moment in history."