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An Earlier Bloodbath

By Max Gordon

The Nixon charge of a "bloodbath" in North Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Conference has been widely debated but silence shrouds the bloodbath which did occur in the South at the time. This is curious and unfortunate, since the conditions which gave rise to the savage repressions of the Diem regime have persisted in Saigon and the peril of repetition is not small.

Reports of murder and torture in South Vietnam's jails have not been lacking throughout the war. And recently, the Provisional Revolutionary Government has let it be known that it has seen official Saigon instructions to prison authorities to do away with unregenerate political prisoners before any settlement which would free them. The information has stirred Amnesty International to try to protect these prisoners, reportedly numbering well over 100,000, from being transformed into voteless corpses.

The Pentagon Papers tell us that former Vietminh cadres—Communist and non-Communist activists in the independence war against France—were virtually wiped out in the "Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign" initiated in the summer of 1955. They

had placed all reliance upon peaceful political competition to culminate in the mandated 1956 unitary elections. The Pentagon account maintains that some 50,000 to 100,000 were tossed into "detention camps" in 1955-56. While giving no figures on deaths, the account says many were killed. Others have estimated the killings at 75,000 or more.

An Indian in the service of the International Control Commission set up to police the Geneva Agreements, B. S. N. Murti, reported that even before this the peasantry had been subjected to police and troop terror. Most rural hamlets (estimates have run as high as 90 per cent) had associated themselves with the Vietminh in the anti-French war. Diem dispatched troops to break the Vietminh hold. Murti, who was there, reports that peasants were shot down and arrested "indiscriminately."

This indiscriminate terror, Murti tells us, was only the first stage of the Diem repression. It was followed by a more deliberately planned effort to "weed out undesirable elements." The targets were ex-Vietminh cadres in positions of local leadership. Large numbers were imprisoned "without any trial." Murti writes that the International Control Commission, though barred by Saigon from moving into affected areas, did manage to investi-

gate some arrests and concluded that there was a deliberate plan to sabotage the antireprisal provisions of the Geneva Agreements.

The "Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign" was the third stage of Diem's expanding repressions, and was also marked by "large numbers" of murders and arrests of both Communists and non-Communists. In the North, Murti observed, there were no such reprisals against the other side because France's sympathizers had been few and these had gone south under the Geneva proviso for voluntary departure.

Philippe Devillers, leading French historian of modern Indochina, reported that the Diem regime in effect outlawed those who had fought for Vietnamese independence against France. In 1957 still another series of "manhunts" was launched against both Communists and all others who disagreed with Diem's oligarchic rule. Round-ups were frequent and brutal. Large numbers were sent to concentration camps and torture was common. Devillers maintains that there are "serious reasons" for supposing that these repressive measures were "encouraged" by American advisers in Saigon. "The *de facto* integration of South Vietnam into the American military defense structure," he has written, "implied that the regime ought to

be . . . purged of anything which might, however remotely, serve the Red Cause."

In the end, Diem's bloodbaths and detention camps brought war to America and all Indochina. As the Pentagon account and other serious studies of Vietnam have concluded, these repressive measures gave birth to an indigenous southern rebellion against the Saigon Government which matured into full-scale war.

After eighteen years of relentless, costly, bloody effort, Washington has failed to change the nature of Saigon regimes as alien-imposed, politically isolated autocracies. In case of a truce, Thieu is thus likely to attempt the same measures as Diem—the physical extermination of those capable of organizing an effective political opposition. Washington is hardly likely to oppose him in this any more than it had opposed Diem. This, after all, has been its primary objective in many years of warfare. It is left to America's antiwar elements to spur popular domestic and worldwide pressures on Washington and Saigon in order to prevent a new wave of bloodbaths in the South.

Memo on other comments
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