

The Siege of Hanoi: III

Reading, Writing and Raids

By Telford Taylor

The long-continued war, and especially American bombing in North Vietnam, have naturally had a profound impact on the educational system. For some time the big new Polytechnic, and other buildings of the University of Hanoi, have been closed, as well as most of the city's secondary schools. Faculties and students have left the city, but the educational process for North Vietnam's six million students continues in the provinces, under a system described by the minister as "dispersed concentration"—a phrase by which he meant to describe student-faculty study groups of ten to twenty persons.

How much this dispersal has affected the quality of education, I have no means of judging. For college students, there has been a trend toward an Antioch-like system of alternating periods of academic work and of "practical services" to be performed in the region to which the study group was sent. Of course, education is not the only enterprise which the Vietnamese have been obliged by the bombing to disperse. It is probable that the disruption has been much less keenly felt in a nation which never has been highly centralized, and where much of the administration has always been carried out at the village level, than

would have been the case in more metropolitan countries.

In view of the recent time of student unrest, and demand for increased student authority, in Western countries, I was of course interested to know whether there had been anything comparable in North Vietnam.

In North Vietnam the channels for the exercise of student influence follow the Communist pattern, and lie outside the educational hierarchy. There is no direct student participation in educational administration, but in the Communist (Lao Dong) party students and teachers stand equal, and it is within the party that students evaluate teachers and discuss budgetary and other questions.

Like the United States, North Vietnam has had its problems with the draft — surprisingly comparable in some respects. Secondary school students who qualify by competitive examination for higher education are exempted from military service until they have completed their studies, after which some are selected for permanent exemption. However, not more than two children from any single family may be given educational deferments, with the curious result that if the two eldest qualify, the younger children, no matter how promising, are barred. Military education for career officers is given in

separate colleges of military science.

Keenly aware of the scientific requirements of what Winston Churchill once called the "wizard war," and of their own lack of adequate facilities, the North Vietnamese annually send about 10,000 students abroad. Of these, I was told, 6,000 are in the Soviet Union, and the rest in other countries of the "Socialist camp"—presumably East Germany, Czechoslovakia and the other East European countries.

When I inquired about educational relations with China the Minister of Higher Education, with a fine show of blandness, replied there were no North Vietnamese students there, because the Chinese "cultural revolution" had brought about a situation requiring "internal reforms." For centuries past, of course, China has been the wellspring of Vietnamese culture, but extrapolation of the minister's statement suggests that this is no longer the case. And so one result of war and revolution—and perhaps by no means the least important for future years—is the rapid "Westernization" of North Vietnam, under Soviet scientific influence.

Telford Taylor, professor of law at Columbia and former chief U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg war crime trials, was in Hanoi during the December bombings.