

The North: Amid the Gains of War, Strains

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Ho Chi Minh, in a poetic passage of his final testament, told the Vietnamese, no matter what hardships you have to go through before the war ends, our mountains will always be, our rivers will always be, our people will always be. The American invaders defeated, we will rebuild our land ten times more beautiful."

Ho's words were characteristically Vietnamese, sentimental and tough. But North Vietnam is now safe with the realities of reconstruction in what must be an uneasy peace. Apart from the material damage at home, the rebuilding of the shattered economy, there are the political strains of peace. While the country has to reorganize itself on a new basis it will have to continue to bear severe responsibilities for the rest of Indochina.

Of the two Vietnams, the north has, by almost any measure, the lesser of the problems. South Vietnam was already war weary in 1965 when U.S. bombers began to pound the north in earnest and North Vietnamese casualties began to rise as troops were for the first time sent south in large numbers. Second, and more important, North Vietnam has been spared the divisions and peculiar agonies of civil war. Finally it has escaped the psychological strains and social upheaval brought about by a vast and culturally alien foreign presence.

All the same, reconstruction in the north is a daunting prospect. Along the transportation routes to the south, barely a bridge remains standing, scarcely a mile of road or railroad has escaped damage. According to the North Vietnamese government, five provincial cities have been razed. Four of these—Ninhbinh, Thanhhoa, Hoihinh and Donghoi—stood along the southern supply lines. Hongai, the fifth, was a port and the center of North Vietnam's coal industry.

Vinh, 185 miles south of Hanoi and a major staging area for men and supplies, has also been destroyed, while reports from both the North Vietnamese and foreign visitors say that 75 percent of Nambinh, the country's third largest city with some 120,000 inhabit-

ants, has been devastated. So have large areas of Haiphong, including the recently built and enlarged port, and parts of suburban Hanoi.

The bombers had been to these cities before—they were extensively attacked between 1965 and 1968. Although the North Vietnamese had begun to rebuild energetically by 1970, supported by a steady flow of Soviet and Chinese aid, it is uncertain how far civic reconstruction had got before the raids began again. There can be no doubt that a large number of industrial enterprises, naturally at the top of Hanoi's list of building priorities, have been destroyed for the second time.

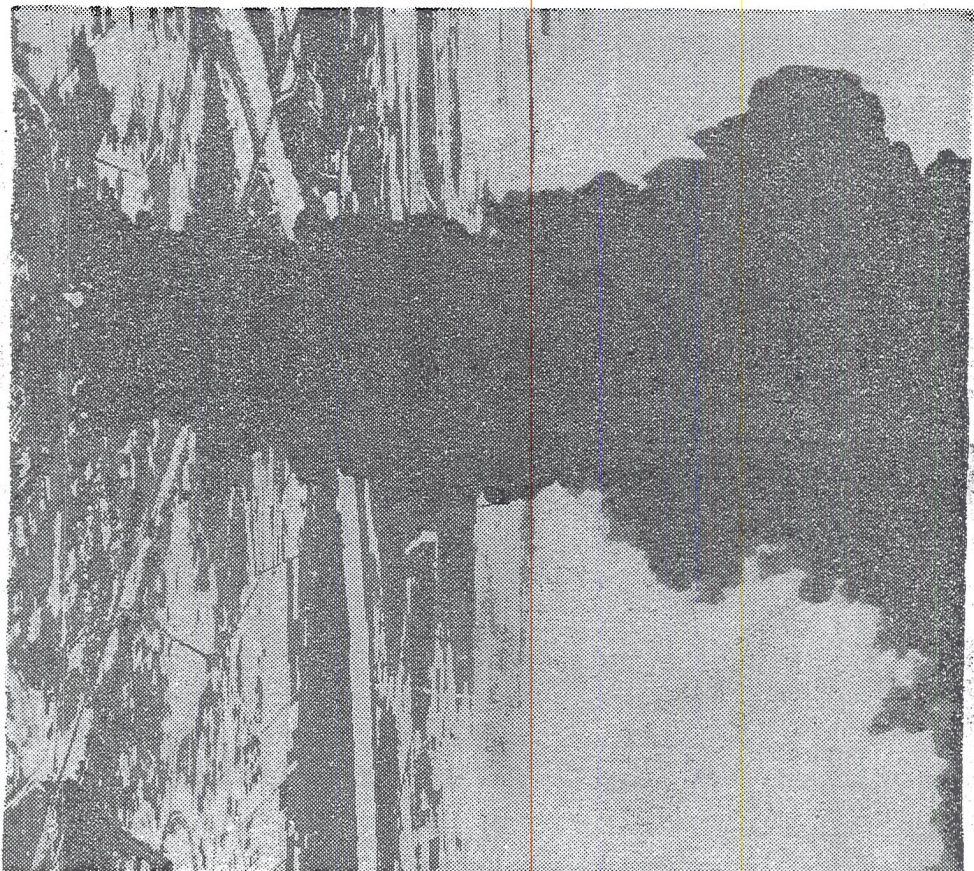
Transport stations were among the first plants to be rebuilt and equally high on the U.S. Air Force's list of targets. The Haiphong cement works, finally rebuilt by November 1971, was destroyed a few months later.

The Thainguin iron and steel works, North Vietnam's only domestic source of steel, was among the last enterprise to be restored to full production. According to a U.S. Air Force spokesman, it was put out of action last June. Textile mills in Namdinh and Vietri, the coal mines, paper and fertilizer factories and engineering works up and down the country suffered a similar fate.

In spite of valiant and ingenious efforts to disperse and protect machinery and to continue production, Hanoi has been unable to save the centralized heavy industry which was being developed as the cornerstone of North Vietnam's long-term economic strategy.

Instead, small scale local industry and handicrafts, neglected by the government before 1965, have become the chief means of industrial production and are likely to remain, so for the first years of peace while North Vietnam gets its big plants going again.

Physical destruction is easy to measure. With the generous aid North Vietnam may receive, communications and buildings will be fairly simple to repair. It will take longer to replace the forests ruined by shrapnel, to discover the weak points in bomb-damaged dikes or to deal with the thousands of



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The spoiled cities: Oily smoke billows after raid on Hanoi.

unexploded bombs that are strewn throughout the countryside of North Vietnam as well as the south.

Other economic effects of the war may prove harder to deal with. Industrial reconstruction will be hampered by a serious shortage of good workers. In a primarily agricultural country like North Vietnam this is always a problem, and the North Vietnamese press has long complained of underused, mistreated machinery and inferior goods.

The war has reduced the number of

ished. So has the black market, which was never tolerated. And in the countryside, the area of cultivated land has declined as cooperative bosses with too many demands on their time and limited manpower have allowed fields to lie fallow.

North Vietnamese society may have escaped the massive uprooting that has gone far toward destroying traditional rural life in the south, but it has not come out of the war unchanged. The bombing united most North Vietnamese in their struggle to survive, but one of the most effective methods of survival has led to a definite loosening of central control.

Hanoi dealt with the air war by a de-liberate policy of decentralization. The provinces were told to aim for self-sufficiency, and provincial party committees were given power to make their own economic decisions under very general guidelines from Hanoi. Now, while North Vietnam's peacetime plans still stress the need for local planning and initiative, the government has shown signs of alarm at the burgeoning of narrow regional interests.

During the war the population became far more mobile. Thousands of people were evacuated, thousands more teen-agers traveled around the country as "assault youth teams" to repair bomb damage and keep supplies moving. Men from the army have experience of the south, Laos and Cambodia. In their absence women and young people have been pushed into prominence, and their traditional social roles radically changed. The North Vietnamese government may welcome these developments for they will speed up political and economic change. But at the same time, old ties with village and families have been weakened and society may be less orderly and internal discipline harder to enforce.

An altogether new problem facing the North Vietnamese leadership will be that of the army. Demobilization will bring its own difficulties: veterans, many disabled, will have to be reabsorbed. The hero's welcome may soon wear thin in the face of continued privation that will be called for in the name of reconstruction.

And there must be limits to the extensive demobilization. Hanoi is not

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going to risk losing what has been gained, and the question of how far a North Vietnamese presence will be needed to back up the gains of the war—expanded control over Laos and Cambodia as well as the theoretical benefits from the peace settlement—in the rest of Indochina will be one of the chief concerns—and possible causes of friction—within the leadership.

Gen. Giap will obviously be at the center of this debate. His position in the Politburo was in fact recently strengthened by the elevation of Col. Gen. Van Tien Dung to full Politburo membership. Gen. Dung, who once commanded the crack 320th Division, collaborated closely with Giap in modernizing the North Vietnamese army after 1954 and will no doubt be at hand again when Giap wants to push through his plans for further modernization, outlined last year.

Because it is so hard to know with certainty about divisions of opinion in the North Vietnamese Politburo, many would-be analysts have confused differences over policies with struggles for power. As with other groups that have been tightly knit by a common danger, there could be a slackening with the arrival of peace and a willingness to fight out policy battles a bit more furiously.

In the struggle to restore the North Vietnamese economy, the debate must continue between the economic pragmatists, among whom Le Duan, the party's First Secretary, seems to be numbered, and those leaders who, like Truong Chih, believe that economic development must not be pursued at the expense of ideological purity.

Of course there will be an intensive ideological campaign, supported by all of the leadership and there are already signs of it in the pipeline. But it may be increasingly hard to reconcile the urgent need to produce and reconstruct with strict Marxist-Leninist economic principles.

Whether the purists will find their arguments strengthened or weakened by new and possibly dangerous influence that might grow out of expanded contacts with the south will be one of the most interesting questions of the peace. Certainly those influences will lead to complexities that Ho Chi Minh only dreamed of. □