

# VIETNAM SINCE LIBERATION

*The following is an interview with Nguyen Khac Vien, manager of Hanoi Foreign Languages publications and of the review **Vietnamese Studies**, and one of the most widely known Vietnamese intellectuals outside Viet Nam itself. In it he discusses frankly the social and political problems faced in the difficult task of Viet Nam's reconstruction and economic advance following thirty years of war. The interview — or dialogue — was conducted by Enrica Collotti-Pischel during vien's lecture tour of Italy in 1978. It was originally published in **Rinascita**, the Italian Communist Party's popular theoretical journal. Our translation (by A.M. Elliott) is from the British Communist Party's theoretical journal, **Marxism Today** (Feb. 1979).*

I wanted to put questions about the campaign which is now developing about "human rights" in Viet Nam. It is important that the Vietnamese revolutionaries should give an answer on this point. Every possibility of mobilisation and of solidarity with Viet Nam is affected, objectively speaking, if the means do not exist with which to refute this campaign in an effective, sincere and explicit way. We are speaking of the rights of the people and of citizens rather than "human rights" in the abstract. French newspapers have spoken of 800,000 political prisoners in Viet Nam. Is that true?

Note that the French journalist took care to qualify what he said: "There are said to be 800,000 political prisoners". He is protecting himself in advance. They always do that when they want to report a rumour which hasn't been checked. The reader remembers the figure given and doesn't remember the form of words used. The qualified form of words is forgotten and the figure remains.

Are there political prisoners in Viet Nam? I realise that the problem isn't an easy one from

the theoretical point of view. I should be glad if you would clarify the problem. It is important.

The real problem is this: the Americans had created in Viet Nam an army of over a million men and a police force of 150,000. At the time of the liberation all the ordinary soldiers and all the rank and file of the police force were able to rejoin their families at once, although among them there might to men who had killed, tortured, and burned down villages. We did this because we did not regard them as being directly responsible for what had been done. But there were some tens of thousands of officers who had given orders, for instance, that persons in detention were to be massacred or tortured. We could not set those men free immediately, partly because they had been given special training by the secret services and would have been capable of organising a counter-revolutionary network, of causing a civil war to break out, of organising a new army with the disbanded soldiers and policemen, in order to launch them against us. That was why Gerald Ford, who was American

President at that time, had said that there would certainly be a blood-bath in Viet Nam. It was expected that the secret services' network, through those specially-trained officers, would unleash a civil war, which is always the danger which hangs over revolutionary forces, over any revolutionary force. Ford was counting on that clockwork device.

Furthermore, we knew that among those officers of the Saigon army there was a section which, as distinct from the private soldiers, had not been forcibly conscripted but had joined the army as a result of circumstances: the South Vietnamese regime lived on the flow of American economic and military aid and lived well above the level which the effective income of our country permitted. In order to live in privileged conditions, many people agreed to enrol as officers even though they were not really in agreement with the regime. Moreover, you yourself know that in the fascist period not all Italians were fascists, even in the relatively privileged classes: but certain orders have to be obeyed. The revolutionary forces must be able to distinguish between persons who have been ensnared by the social and psychological conditioning of the regime and can be restored to normal life, and the real counter-revolutionaries, the trained criminals. We have held the latter in re-education camps so as to make a thorough investigation of their past, so as to study their behaviour. To the extent that the investigations have proved that they can be restored to ordinary life they have been set free. Some thousands of persons now remain who are real counter-revolutionaries, died-in-the-wool criminals or persons whose position has not been clarified up to now.

**Are these persons now being held in camps? Do you think that there can be a further phase of re-education for them? Or are they in prison?**

This is a question which, on the one hand, concerns ideology and, on the other, concerns the general situation. There still exist counter-revolutionary networks organised by the American secret services, set up by the Americans in the past 20 years and still receiving foreign aid. They organise conspiracies, from time to time they murder a comrade, a cadre, they hoard goods, or blow up an office or a bridge. As long as this

situation lasts, we can't set these individuals free, but we do consider that to the extent that tension lessens it will be possible to restore them, too, to ordinary life. But do bear in mind that there have not been, and there are not, executions.

Side by side with this, there is the entire population which has been driven out of the villages as a result of the American bombing: ten million peasants were driven from the villages and deprived of a living. In Saigon, which had 500,000 inhabitants in 1954, the population had grown to 3,500,000 in 1975 and all of them living on American aid: 2,000 million dollars a year. After 1975 there was no more American aid. The parasitic economy had no possibility of continuing to exist and work had to be found. Only productive work can provide the wherewithal with which to live and for anyone who has become accustomed to living a parasitic life, work comes hard.

In Italy we can very well understand the problem of crime in an environment like Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City with such a vast population reduced to living in slums, driven out of a traditional rural society, dumped into a parasitic society and subjected for 20 years to calls for anti-communist violence. We are only too well aware of what the problem of outcasts is like in our own big cities, in a country where there has not been a war, where villages have not been destroyed and where there does moreover exist an industrial apparatus and broad scope for political and democratic participation. We can imagine the comparison with the cities of South Viet Nam. We are well aware that crime always has a social origin in the lack of work, the lack of moral and political motivation, and the lack of education. In Viet Nam, and especially in Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City, is it a case of "ordinary", sporadic crime? Are there, by the side of this ordinary, individual crime, real and specific criminal organisations, of a Mafia type for example? We know that the secret societies which used to be typical of the old Viet Nam and the old China may at one time have had a revolutionary character, but that now, almost everywhere, they have assumed the character of criminal organisations, operating in an organised way over a wide area.

You know that in a city like Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City there isn't any industrial activity,

or there is scarcely any. It is a city of officials, office workers, people employed in the services sector, small dealers, or gangs of criminals, outcasts. Already before the liberation there was a vast series of criminal organisations, black-marketeers and delinquents of every kind. After the liberation, with the disbanding of Thieu's army and the cutting off of American aid, many members of the police and many soldiers, who were left in freedom but who remained unemployed, became bandits, criminals, gangsters, and naturally had no difficulty in finding weapons in a country where, at the time, when Thieu's forces broke up, arms were abandoned in huge quantities, everywhere, on the bridges, on the streets. There were weapons and explosives everywhere. This resulted in widespread and unchecked criminal activities which we are endeavouring to put down, with some success.

In addition, there is the counter-revolutionary network which existed and which continues to exist, and there is also the network of illegal traffic: a triple network, so to speak. The criminals in each network function, sometimes in isolation, sometimes in a co-ordinated way. Our task in combating them consists in isolating them. In fact, we have fought them and isolated them and sent them to work camps. That much is certain. But it is also natural. There are some thousands of these criminals in the work camps.

There is also a great mass of drug addicts — roughly about a hundred thousand. They are young people, often of "good family", who have gone off the rails, who were desperate because they were forced to join Thieu's army. They saw the massacres and didn't understand. In that crisis they took to drugs, and there were in fact many drug addicts at the time of liberation. To the extent that we have been able, we have had to send a section of them to re-education centres, and in them it has been necessary, first of all, to cure them of their addiction, that is to say, to find means to alleviate the withdrawal symptoms.

Then there is the problem of prostitution. In a society like that which existed in the towns of the South during the war, very many women were forced to become prostitutes. As regards the re-education and

rehabilitation of prostitutes, the problem consists in the fact that the forced transfer of peasants to the towns created a society that was anomalous from every point of view: towns with millions of people, but without industry, without the production of real wealth. An enormous services sector, but a services sector which no longer had the sector of agricultural production and had never had an industrial sector. Because of this, women had to become prostitutes and it is difficult to find productive activity for them now, difficult to involve them in work which will effectively take them away from prostitution.

And this brings us back once again to the problem of those who used to be peasants and were compelled by the bombing to move to unproductive towns where they had no possibility of being absorbed into the labour force. Now the peasants can do nothing else but go back to the land. In present conditions only by agricultural work can they make a living that is adequate or good. The land in the South is fertile and suited to a diversity of crops and there isn't the over-population which exists in the Delta in the North. But a whole series of problems arises in this connection. Where the villages, with their water systems and the condition of the soil, have remained more or less intact, it isn't hard for the peasants to go back to them. It isn't even necessary to tell them to go back; they go back of their own accord. But if, on the other hand, the villages have been destroyed, then it is necessary, as a minimum, to prepare the soil and in many cases to clear the mines, level the ground, rehabilitate the area. When new villages have to be created in rehabilitating an area, then the problem is a terrible one. It is a question of a poor, tropical country, with a high incidence of disease, with many problems. These are what we call the "new economic zones". Hundreds of thousands of people have set out to create these new villages, with government help. But the life is always extremely hard. We have taken western journalists to see those new villages. In them the situation is difficult; there are few huts, few trees and those only just replanted, few services, no water supply or light and it is easy to present them as concentration camps, even if the peasants have gone there voluntarily and can find their only hope of survival in a return to the



*Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien.*



land. In conclusion, if we are to lump all of them together — the officers who are being held in camps, the drug addicts in the process of being re-educated, the prostitutes who are being restored to a normal life and the peasants who have gone back to the zones which were devastated or have left for the “new economic zones” — then it can be said that there are “800,000 political prisoners”. But that is the wrong way to go about it. Why on earth should the peasants who have returned to the land rather than live like fugitives and outcasts, be regarded as political prisoners?

In this connection, I have a question to put. We can understand perfectly well the difficulties involved in the rehabilitation of a society destroyed after 30 years of war, guerrilla war and class struggle, by civil war, and after 20 years of massacres on a mass scale, genocide and “ecocide”, that is to say, destruction of the ecological environment. But undoubtedly the problem of coercion does exist. Is it possible to build socialism without a certain margin of coercion? No one willingly accepts a hard life, distasteful work. Have there been discussions in the Vietnamese Communist Party about this? Have there been “two lines” on this problem: one more flexible and slow and the other more rigid and intended to get speedy results? Especially with regard to the return of the peasants to the countryside and the control of Saigon.

There is the problem of the redistribution of the population over the whole of the country's territory. Viet Nam's population is distributed in a very uneven way and is concentrated in the lowlands that are suited to the cultivation of rice. Here there is a twofold problem; there is the problem of the towns in the South with millions of peasants who were driven into the towns by the bombing and should go back to the villages or create new ones. That is the case in the South. But the North, too, has this problem: two-thirds of the region is made up of mountainous and hilly zones which up to now have not been put to use, but which are not unproductive. In the zones of the Northern Delta a population density of 1,000-1,200 inhabitants per square kilometre is reached, in a purely agricultural zone. In the last 30 years of war we were not in a position to tackle that problem. The solution was delayed and there has been an enormous

increase in population, concentrated in the lowlands. It is necessary to move at least half a million people a year from the lowland zones to the mountain zones, whether in the North or in the South. If we want our country to be developed, then this movement of population will have to take place and use will have to be made of the higher zones. In the North we have the advantage that we have succeeded in conquering or, to be more exact, in eliminating malaria, breaking the cycle between malaria and its vector, that is to say, the mosquito. At one time, it was not possible to go and live in the mountains because of the presence of malaria, but now, in the North, the problem has been solved. In the South it is still necessary to work to solve it: the devastation of territory which was carried out by the Americans encouraged the spread of malaria and other diseases, and this is a problem which we should solve in order to bring about the settlement of masses of the population in the mountain zones of the South. Very fertile lands exist there, especially in the centre of the country, on the big plateaux in the interior. There are areas suitable for growing crops for export: coffee, tea and rubber. The South is suitable for the cultivation of many kinds of valuable crops which are characteristic of Viet Nam. This can provide a living for individuals and wealth for the collectivity, but sacrifices are needed in order to put these lands to use. It is also necessary to ensure for ourselves an international market which will provide a sure outlet for our products at steady prices. These are stern sacrifices. They demand a commitment to manual work in difficult conditions.

I am completely in agreement that the struggle against backwardness and poverty in poor countries, which have been impoverished by imperialist domination and war, exacts a very heavy price from the human standpoint and also a certain degree of coercion (which is another form of cost in human terms): a restriction of objective, material liberties. For instance, restriction of the freedom to move from one place to another and of the freedom to choose one's occupation. This is a price that has had to be paid, whether in the USSR or in China, and obviously also in Vietnam, which has had to pay a huge price in blood for its own liberation. Indeed, the backward countries

which have not paid that price have remained stationary and dependent. Could you give us some indication of this kind of price in human terms, of the specific restrictions on the liberty of individuals which have been imposed by the struggle against backwardness?

Above all, it is a question of objective necessity. Man must work in order to meet his needs: if no industrial activity is possible at the moment, then he must obtain his living from the land, even if it is a question of arduous work. It is not possible to abandon the living which the land can provide. Perhaps that is a luxury which no country can afford. This does not mean giving up the cultural level. Our biggest and most successful effort has been that directed towards giving all children and young people seven years' schooling. In Viet Nam, 15 million people are studying out of 50 million inhabitants. Do you realise what this means in terms of freedom, of struggle against poverty and disease? But it is fair that every man should work, should produce.

**One specific question. In China every person has a precise class status and a definite place of residence from which he cannot move without permission. He is a member of a commune and his place is within that collective structure, or else he works in a factory and has his place of residence on the spot, whether in town or countryside. Does freedom of residence, freedom of movement of the labour force exist in Viet Nam?**

A distinction has to be made. As regards the place of work, that is where it is: it depends on availability and need and cannot be changed without the agreement of the authorities responsible for the service. As for residence, that is another problem, but you have to have something to live on where you live, a post to occupy. However, in the North people can move from one place to another without permission in order to visit relatives and to attend to private business. For security reasons, it is necessary to have a permit in order to go from the South to the North. There are too many people in the South who have been trained only for the purpose of hunting communists and destroying property belonging to socialist society. It is right to defend what we have built. But the problem is not one of "coercion"; it is a problem of actual

availability. After the liberation, my wife had to wait 40 days for a seat on a plane in order to go to Saigon so as to see her mother again after 30 years of guerrilla warfare. In order to take a train to the South, it is necessary to queue at the station for four days, and then the train travels at a speed of only 15 kilometres an hour, owing to the tracks of the secondary French railways which were laid in Indochina at the beginning of the century. It was a great success to get the railway going again, but its capacity is what it is. This is not coercion; it is a case of objective limitations. This has to be understood, but not everyone finds it easy to understand this. It isn't easy for someone who has been living with the income of the ruling classes of capitalist countries, as happened in the case of privileged individuals under Thieu's regime.

There is another question — more political and very explicit. During the whole period of the revolutionary struggle against the Americans, it was well known that the main burden — military and political, in terms of blood, effort and political imagination — of the struggle waged under the banner of the National Liberation Front was born by the communists, but the communists of Viet Nam: "communists of the North" and "communists of the South" did not in fact exist. This was the essential nucleus of the struggle and all the time the Americans were trying to destroy it, killing communist cadres and militants. On the other hand, the origins of the armed struggle in the South were actually determined by the fact that Diem's regime and then that of Thieu, because of a specific choice on the part of the Americans, always refused to allow the slightest room for any political force, mass organisation or autonomous institution. We well remember that round about 1962 the Vietnamese communists proposed a "political solution" for the South, a solution based on compromise between the various forces which would eliminate the regimes imposed by the Americans — regimes which were actually fascist. It was certainly not the fault of the Vietnamese communists that the struggle in the South assumed the character of an armed struggle and that the communists were the leading force in that struggle.

Nevertheless, in weakening and unmasking

Thieu's regime and in mobilising public opinion throughout the world on behalf of Viet Nam, the voice of other political forces which in Diem's or Thieu's Viet Nam didn't find a place and were subjected to repression had a certain weight. I am referring to the "Third Force" and the Buddhists. Can you give us information about these forces and about their present fate? In the campaign against Viet Nam today, there is talk of persecution of the "Third Force" and also of the Buddhists, of arrests and persecution of monks. Can you tell us something definite about this? I believe it would be of great interest to those who worked for peace in Viet Nam.

It is necessary to make a general distinction. First of all, let us speak about the "Third Force": this "Third Force" was very mixed. In it there were true patriots, but there were also agents of the CIA. It was a question of a very vague assemblage of groups and forces of a political, religious and cultural character. The CIA had an extremely extensive network in Saigon. It infiltrated in the most varied ways and in the most unexpected forms. Scarcely did some intellectual make a proposal, whether for an art exhibition or a chess circle, than the CIA offered to finance it directly or indirectly and then controlled people by that means. In the "Third Force" there were many dubious personages who were tied up in various ways with the CIA. In this connection, it must be added that the CIA had even succeeded in infiltrating into the Resistance. There were cadres and militants who might seem to have a past that was above all suspicion and who thought they could exploit that past after the liberation, whereas it turned out later that they were in the clutches of the CIA to such an extent that they committed counter-revolutionary acts.

Some Vietnamese people in Paris who are not particularly reactionary have said to me that in the circles in which they move, it is regarded as certain that Mme Nguyen Thi Binh has been removed from power and has probably been shot, like other members of the National Liberation Front of the South. Is that true?

It is most certainly not true! Nguyen Thi Binh lives in a house which is close to my own home and when I was about to leave Hanoi six weeks ago she was in her garden.

She is preparing the reform of the secondary schools in her capacity as Minister of Education — it is a difficult job. It is perhaps the case that you in Italy entrust reforms of the secondary school system to people who have been removed from power. As for Nguyen Huu Tho, the president of the National Liberation Front, he is now in Algeria on an official visit to a country with which we have the very best of relations.

**But to what extent do they count today — the people of the "Third Force"?**

In Viet Nam there is the Patriotic Front, which has embraced various political and social forces, communist and non-communist, and continues to do so. For example, you no doubt know about the case of the jurist, Mme Ngo Ba Thanh. Under Thieu's regime she created a movement in defence of the dignity of women — a movement which was, in fact, confined to the city of Saigon. Now she has dissolved that small movement but she has become a member of the leading committee of the Vietnamese Women's Union and so has a far wider field for her political and social activity. Much the same could be said about many other patriotic intellectuals who were active in the "Third Force".

**But there have been, haven't there, sentences on, or trials of Buddhists — even if they are counter-revolutionary Buddhists?**

There have been trials and sentences, not on the plane of religion, worship or ideology, but solely on the political plane. The pagodas are functioning and welcome the religious people who visit them. Preaching is carried out. But there have been Buddhist priests who have been sentenced — priests who have carried out counter-revolutionary political activity. There has only been one important Buddhist priest who has been sentenced, because Buddhism does not have a tightly-knit institutional organisation. It is a question of individual cases at the unit level, whereas the number of Catholic priests who have engaged in organised counter-revolutionary activities and who have been tried and sentenced has been larger. You should bear in mind the fact that Diem's regime and then that of Thieu based themselves on the minority Catholic community in order to exercise full power,

and in particular in order to recruit officers and members of the police force. All round Saigon, in the belt of slums on the outskirts, in 1954 the fugitives from the North who were organised on military lines, were settled. You should have seen the priests who controlled that community, with revolvers stuck in their belts. I was taken on one occasion to the Saigon seminary and in the room in which the seminarists used to be instructed in the "arts of war" — karate, kung fu, etc. — they had not yet removed the inscription: "Faith without force is nothing". Under Diem, inscriptions of that kind could be seen everywhere. Do you know what that means? The Church in the colonial world, and above all in Viet Nam, has not had the same character as in Christian countries.

**One last question, and a very delicate one. Have there been trials of members of the Resistance or of communist cadres and leaders and have they been sentenced? Have there been cases in which persons who have not followed the party line or who sought to organise a political line opposed to that of the Party have been sentenced? I believe it would be very opportune if you gave us some precise information about this.**

One can speak about old members of the Communist Party or about non-communist members of the National Liberation Front. A few were sentenced after the liberation and this happened for two reasons: there were people who profited from the part they had played in the Resistance and obtained posts which they subsequently used for personal ends, to obtain privileges for themselves, or else they received vast sums as bribes. There were people who, although they had taken part in the Resistance, then sought to provide themselves with a base in order to enrich themselves: they were corrupted by the atmosphere of Saigon. On the other hand, there were other individuals who were unmasked as counter-revolutionary agents only at the end of the resistance struggle and who had infiltrated into our ranks. Some comrades who had returned from imprisonment revealed that they had been denounced, even tortured, or recognised by other people whom they had taken for comrades. However, none of these persons has organised a faction on the basis of an alternative political line. There have certainly been many discussions on the

political line which should be followed, but in the end we have reached unanimity. For instance, as regards the speed at which unification and the building of socialism should proceed, in the beginning there were comrades who maintained that there was a South Vietnamese bourgeoisie and that it was in our interests to let it develop and enrich itself, to make it work, to profit from its "expertise" before changing society. The fact was that in Saigon there was not a real bourgeoisie able to act in an autonomous way but only a parasitic bourgeoisie, an appendage of the economic system of American hand-outs. It was not a question of anything comparable with, I won't even say the British or French bourgeoisie, but even the Italian or Indian. The Indian bourgeoisie does have its foundations, whatever may be the system of exploitation which it controls, but the South Vietnamese bourgeoisie had no economic foundations, nor even ideological ones. Scarcely had American aid been cut off than that parasitic bourgeoisie was no longer able to exist.

As a result, the foundations have not existed for the formation within the revolutionary ranks of opposing factions and groups. That at least has been the case up to now. As for the future, I don't know. In a few years, who can tell?

**We do know, and this has been one of the factors making for the strength, the power of attraction of the Vietnamese revolution, that — even in the midst of big political discussions, not to mention major political clashes such as cannot fail to occur in any communist party that is truly alive — all the contradictions have been resolved within the framework of a fundamental unity of line, without internal wounds. Tell us something in this connection, since it is of interest to our comrades and to Italian democrats.**

Like all communist parties, the Vietnamese Communist Party found itself confronted by very complex problems right from the time of its birth. It is enough to think of the problem of uniting class struggle and national struggle. How was the contradiction to be resolved? There were comrades who went in one direction and comrades who went in the opposite one, but then, when the problem had been gone into more thoroughly, unity was restored. It was like that in 1945 and 1946 at the time when

the compromise with France was being arrived at. Then, in 1954, after the Geneva Conference, when we had to discuss whether to accept the division of the country, whether to accept the compromise with French and American imperialism. In 1956, at the time of the agrarian reform: as you know, there were serious happenings, very serious differences, but afterwards the mistakes were rectified and unity was restored. So it was in 1960 at the time of the conflict between various communist parties, we had to define our position, make our own analysis. We certainly couldn't take a little of the Soviet analysis and a little of the Chinese analysis: it wasn't a question of "keeping oneself in a state of equilibrium". The problem was that of establishing our own strategy, our international line, seeing what were the differences with one side and the other and discussing them, whether with the Soviet comrades or with the Chinese comrades. Naturally there were comrades of ours who leaned more to one side or more to the other. But, as we had worked out our line, unity was arrived at on those positions. Above all, at that time the most important problem for us was that of the attitude to be adopted towards United States imperialism; on the nature of United States' imperialism and imperialism in general. At that time we had differences, now with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, now with the Communist Party of China. After 1975, discussions opened on how to unify the country. At every stage we had discussions in the Party and in the midst of the Vietnamese people. Up to now, we have always succeeded in bringing about unity in such a way that following every discussion, while there have been comrades who were not able to hold responsible posts, because they had made mistakes, they have continued to engage in political activity and to have responsibilities in other posts. With us there have not been "purges", as they say. This is the important thing: we have kept our forces intact, so as to concentrate them on national liberation, on reunification, on reconstruction. Despite the fact that there have occurred very complex situations, which have often been difficult and tense, and in face of which it has been necessary immediately to adopt a very firm attitude, we have not had irreparable breaches, purges. This I can tell you.