

DISCUSSION & REVIEW QUESTIONS:

- Mr. Herschensohn informs us that, “Victory was apparent when President Nixon ordered the U.S. Air Force to bomb industrial and military targets in Hanoi, North Viet Nam’s capital city, and in Haiphong, its major port city,” and that, “The advance of communist tyranny had been halted by those [Paris Peace] accords.” Why do you think that the U.S. was not united in victory- that in the next election so many people voted against the political party that had secured the ‘win’ against the communists?
- We then learn from Mr. Herschensohn that, “Three months after his [President Nixon’s] resignation came the November congressional elections and within them the Democrats won a landslide victory for the new Congress and many of the members used their new majority to de-fund the military aid the U.S. had promised, piece for piece, breaking the commitment that we made to the South Vietnamese in Paris... Put simply and accurately, a majority of Democrats of the 94th Congress did not keep the word of the United States.” Why do you think that the newly elected Democrats used their ‘power of the purse’ to break the commitment the U.S. made to secure victory over the communists? Why wouldn’t they wish to support the ally that the U.S. spent time, effort, money, and human lives to protect? Do you think that by not supporting the South Vietnamese, the protesting Democrats were then supporting the North Vietnamese, at least in a de facto manner? Why or why not?
- We learn in the video that, “What the United States and South Vietnam received in those [Paris Peace] accords was victory.” Since this was the case, and the war was about to be over, why do you think that the Democrats of the 94th Congress wouldn’t abide by the accords in order to make sure that the war they had protested against would be over and would stay over? Why wouldn’t they wish to support the ally that the U.S. spent time, effort, money, and human lives to protect? What do you think would have happened if President Nixon hadn’t resigned from office?
- Mr. Herschensohn explains that, “The North Vietnamese leaders admitted that they were testing the new President, Gerald Ford, and they took one village after another, then cities, then provinces and our only response was to go back on our word. The U.S. did not re-supply the South Vietnamese as we had promised. It was then that the North Vietnamese knew they were on the road to [victory],” and then, “On April the 30th South Vietnam surrendered and Reeducation Camps were constructed, and the phenomenon of the Boat People began.” What do you think motivated the North Vietnamese leaders to violate the accord and continue to conquer South Vietnamese territory? Why do you think they would even try to ‘get away with it?’ Do you think that President Ford could have done anything more or differently to convince the majority Democrat congress not to de-fund the South Vietnamese aid and thus also have the U.S. violate the accord? Why or why not?

EXTEND THE LEARNING:

CASE STUDY: The Boat People

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the article “Vietnamese Boat People,” and “Vietnam’s Boat People Mark Anniversary With Return to Refugee Camps,” then answer the questions that follow.

- Who were the boat people? Why did they need to become boat people? What happened to them once they got on the boats? What happened to those who stayed?
- Why is it important to know about the boat people? What do the boat people signify, in terms of history?
- Mr. Herschensohn gives us perspective on page 63 of his book *An American Amnesia* when pointing out that, “The peace in Southeast Asia which [Vietnam War] demonstrators demanded and our 94th Congress enacted caused millions of deaths. More were killed in just the first year of peace than during the preceding decade of war.” The Democrats who voted to defund the aid to the South Vietnamese had to have known what the repercussions for the South Vietnamese people would be. Considering this, do you think that those Democrats cared about what happened to the Vietnamese people? Why or why not? Do you think that the Democrats felt bad later for what they did? Do you think that the cost of ending the war by letting the communist North Vietnamese take the south and further victimize the people of South Vietnam worth it? Why or why not?



QUIZ

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR

- 1. Which of the following was a guarantee of the Paris Peace Accords?**
 - a. South Vietnam would surrender to North Vietnam.
 - b. US troops to remain throughout North and South Vietnam forever.
 - c. A US commitment to provide whatever South Vietnam needed to stop the aggression of North Vietnam.
 - d. France would assist the US with all provisions of the accords.

- 2. What effect did the landslide Democratic victory of Congressional seats have on the Vietnam War?**
 - a. A new, progressive agenda that included a successful completion of the Vietnam War.
 - b. A balanced federal budget that gave adequate support to the Southern Vietnamese.
 - c. The failure of Ford to win the war using executive orders and czars.
 - d. The eventual surrender of South Vietnam due to Congress' refusal to allocate funds in the fulfillment of the Paris Peace Accords.

- 3. Why did the new members of Congress have an investment in the outcome of the Vietnam War?**
 - a. Before being elected, they had disagreed with the US action in Vietnam and wanted it to fail.
 - b. As patriotic Americans, they desired to see freedom flourish wherever needed.
 - c. America's word was on the line in fulfilling the Paris Peace Accords.
 - d. They wanted to be on the right side of history.

- 4. What happened to the South Vietnamese after their surrender?**
 - a. The North Vietnamese peaceably let the South Vietnamese continue their daily lives.
 - b. Reeducation camps were constructed and the phenomenon of the Boat People began.
 - c. The United States sent military troops to assist the South Vietnamese as they reestablished their government.
 - d. All of the above.

- 5. South Vietnam's capital city, Saigon, was renamed by the North Vietnamese.**
 - a. True
 - b. False



QUIZ - ANSWER KEY

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Vietnamese Boat People



The 'Boat People of Vietnam' seemed to encapsulate all the suffering Vietnam had suffered from [1965](#) to [1975](#). Despite the end of the [Vietnam War](#), tragedy for the people of Vietnam continued into 1978-79. The term 'Boat People' not only applies to the refugees who fled Vietnam but also to the people of Cambodia and Laos who did the same but tend to come under the same umbrella term. The term 'Vietnamese Boat People' tends to be associated with only those in the former South who fled the new Communist government. However, people in what was North Vietnam who had an ethnic Chinese background fled to Hong Kong at the same time fearing some form of retribution from the government in Hanoi.

In late 1978, Indo-China degenerated into wholesale confrontation and war between Vietnam and Kampuchea (Cambodia) and [China](#). In December 1978, Vietnam attacked Kampuchea while in February 1979, Vietnam attacked Chinese forces in the north. These two conflicts produced a huge number of refugees

Many in what was South Vietnam feared the rule of their communist masters from what had been North Vietnam. Despite the creation of a united Republic of Vietnam in 1975, many in the South feared retribution once it was found out that they had fought against the North during the actual war. The rule exerted in [Ho Chi Minh City](#) (formally Saigon) was repressive as this was seen as a bastion of 'Americanisation'. Traditional freedoms were few. It has been estimated that 65,000 Vietnamese were executed after the end of the war with 1 million being sent to prison/re-education camps where an estimated 165,000 died.

Many took the drastic decision to leave the country – an illegal act under the communist government. As an air flight out of Vietnam was out of the question, many took to makeshift boats in an effort to flee to start a new life elsewhere. Alternately, fishing boats were utilised. While perfectly safe for near-shore fishing, they were not built for the open waters. This was coupled with the fact that they were usually chronically overcrowded, thus making any journey into the open seas potentially highly dangerous.

No one can be sure how many people took the decision to flee, nor are there any definitive casualty figures. However, the number who attempted to flee has been put as high as 1.5 million. Estimates for deaths vary from 50,000 to 200,000 (Australian Immigration Ministry). The primary cause of death was drowning though many refugees were attacked by pirates and murdered or sold into slavery and prostitution. Some countries in the region, such as Malaya, turned the boat people away even if they did manage to land. Boats carrying the refugees were deliberately sunk offshore by those in them to stop the authorities towing them back out to sea. Many of these refugees ended up settling in the United States and Europe. The United States accepted 823,000 refugees; Britain accepted 19,000; France accepted 96,000; Australia and Canada accepted 137,000 each.

<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/boatpeople-09042015131758.html>

Vietnam's Boat People Mark Anniversary With Return to Refugee Camps

2015-09-04



Vietnamese boat people receive food and water after being rescued in a file photo.
Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

A group of former “boat people” who fled persecution by the communist government in Hanoi at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 recently toured resettlement camps in Southeast Asia to mark their journey to sanctuary 40 years earlier, and to honor those who were not so lucky.

The group set off from Australia on Aug. 20 as part of a “Back to Freedom” boat tour organized by the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People to sites in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand—four key destinations for refugees seeking asylum after the conflict.

During a stop on Malaysia’s Bidong island, members of the group shared stories as a bus drove them to the former site of one of the largest refugee camps to house boat people in Southeast Asia before they were resettled to Western countries.

An island of less than one square mile (260 hectares) in area, Bidong was designated the principal refugee camp in Malaysia in August 1978 and prepped to receive some 4,500 asylum seekers, but by June the following year had a population of more than 40,000.

Conditions in the camp were cramped and unsanitary, while food and water had to be imported from the mainland by barge, and many refugees were forced to wait years on the island before being resettled.

But despite the grim state of the island camp, nearly 800,000 boat people fled Vietnam between the end of the war and the late 1990s to Malaysia and other regional countries, with as many as 400,000 perishing in the attempt, according to estimates by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

Since 2005, the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People has documented some 2,500 refugees known to have died during their flight from Vietnam.

Honoring the dead

Kha Van Long, a former boat refugee who joined the tour, told RFA's Vietnamese Service his impressions of the island 34 years after he left and was resettled in Australia.

"All of my memories of this place appear in my mind as if in a movie," he said.

"I visited cemeteries and felt sadness for those who were unable to reach the freedom they had dreamt of."

Truong Lam Bao Di, a former refugee who is now a doctor living in Canada, said many of the cemeteries the tour visited contained the remains of hundreds of boat people who had washed ashore after drowning when their vessels sank.

"We visited a grave in Malaysia where 46 people were buried, including one boy and two girls," he said.

"I suddenly became very emotional because it reminded me about my two little cousins who were with me [on our boat which sank]. I heard that when the boat foundered, my uncle put them on his shoulders, but they drowned together."

In addition to those who died in stormy seas, from starvation, and in pirate attacks, many boat people perished while awaiting resettlement. One cemetery on Bidong includes the remains of some who committed suicide after their bids for asylum were rejected.

The gravesites on Bidong have been restored by the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People through the contributions of ethnic Vietnamese around the world, and continue to be cared for by local residents.

During the tour visit to the island, the group held prayer ceremonies at four separate cemeteries under the supervision of Buddhist monks and nuns, and a Catholic priest.

Preserving history

While the group was pleased to see that the cemeteries had been maintained, much of the former Bidong refugee camp has since fallen into neglect, and the visitors said the site should be restored to ensure future generations understand the history of the boat people.

Kenneth Le, who was a refugee on Bidong as a teenager and is now a doctor living in the U.S., said sites like the island camp serve to show members of younger generations what sacrifices their relatives made to create a new life for their families.

“I saw some seniors bring children who were born in the U.S., Australia and Canada,” he said of the tour group members.

“They are all teenagers, so they need to understand the reason behind their relatives’ journey 40 years ago. Every time we visited a cemetery, we also went to the accompanying museum in order to thoroughly learn the history.”

Tran Dong, director of the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People, said that his organization has plans to create a museum about the refugees to preserve their history for posterity.

Mass resettlement

Boat people fled Vietnam to arrive safely in countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Hong Kong between 1975 and 1995.

More than one-half were resettled in the U.S., while most others were sent to France, Canada, Australia, Germany, and the U.K. Several tens of thousands were repatriated to Vietnam, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

The last refugee housed on Bidong left the island in 1991.

Reported by RFA’s Vietnamese Service. Translated by KaLynh Ngo. Written in English by Joshua Lipos.