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THE AUGUST REVOLUTION, THE FALL OF SAIGON, AND POSTWAR REEDUCATION CAMPS

Understanding Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism

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Introduction

Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism has been prominent in the scholarship about Asian refugees and immigrants in the United States.[1] The subject merits, for example, one of eight entries about Vietnamese in an encyclopedia about Asian Americans (Vo Dang 2013).[2] Appearing in a collected volume about anticommunism among ethnic refugees in the United States, its chapter is entitled "Better Dead Than Red" to suggest that it has been a form of extremism (Le C. N. 2009). Both of these works note a series of protests in Orange County, California, in 1999 against the Hi Tek TV and VCR store, whose owner displayed a flag of Vietnam and a poster showing Hồ Chí Minh. The Hi Tek episode receives its own entry in another encyclopedia about Asian Americans, and others have viewed it as a climax of anticommunism in Orange County and other Little Saigon communities (Le L. S. 2011b; Nguyen K. 2020; Duong and Pelaud 2012).

Attention notwithstanding, Asian American studies scholarship has largely treated the subject as an ahistorical phenomenon and, therefore, has not offered a clear explanation. Diasporic anticommunism has been caricatured as unyielding and unchanging and criticized as detrimental to Vietnamese communities. Linda Võ, for example, has asserted that "those most vocal and [who] garner the most media attention do not necessarily represent the needs or voice" of the community (Võ L. 2003: xv, xvi). Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde has likewise suggested that fear "of retaliation forces Vietnamese Americans into a silent majority" (Valverde 2012: 146). Less critical in tone, Kim Nguyen nonetheless ascribes "the visibility" and "rhetorical

positioning of the protesters" to a "narrow anti-communist understanding of the Vietnam War onto the Vietnamese American body." She further points to the Vietnamese American support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and argues that the "hyper-conservatism that distinguishes Vietnamese Americans from all other ethnic groups serves certainly the purposes of reinvigorating allegiance to past imperialist endeavors" of the United States (Nguyen K. 2020: 134–150). Diasporic anticommunism and pro-war sentiment are lumped together and interpreted in the context of American history and politics. Yen Le Espiritu is similarly critical of diasporic anticommunism by linking at least some of it to American imperialism. Allowing that "the refugees' public denouncement of the current government of Vietnam is understandable, even expected," Espiritu interprets anticommunism through the lens of American politics and imperialism. The "'anticommunist' stance," she argues, "is also a narrative, adopted in part because it is the primary language with which Vietnamese refugees, as objects of US rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the US social and political landscape" (Espiritu Y. L. 2014: 96). In this view, Vietnamese refugees became anticommunist model minorities helping to justify, perhaps unwittingly, imperialism by attacking communism while praising American freedom.

Categorized broadly under "critical refugee studies," these views and related ones are hardly uniform.[3] The focus on imperialism, however, generally situates diasporic anticommunism against the background of U.S. history and the foreground of U.S. politics, leaving out its complex historical background (Le L. S. 2011a: 1–25).[4] As a consequence, much of this scholarship has viewed diasporic anticommunism as ideologically extreme, intellectually incoherent, psychologically irrational, politically at a standstill, and culturally damaging to the community. Commenting, for example, on the South Vietnamese flag, a long-standing symbol of diasporic anticommunism, at the Capitol riot in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, Viet Thanh Nguyen contends that the flag still represents nostalgia for the extinct Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in ways similar to the nostalgia for the Confederacy among some American southerners. Not only does this approach conflate Vietnamese particularism with American particularism but it also leaves out postwar developments related to the meanings of the flag in the diaspora (Nguyen V. T. 2021; Hoang T. 2021).[5]

This is not to say that scholarship is not attentive to Vietnamese particularism. On the basis of fieldwork in San Diego, Thuy Vo Dang concludes that "anticommunism is not only a political ideology for Vietnamese Americans but a 'cultural discourse' that underlies most of the community practices of first-generation-dominated organizations" (Vo Dang 2005: 66). In Orange County, Karin Aguilar-San Juan happened to conduct research during the Hi Tek protests and noted the presence of former political prisoners

at the protest site. Aguilar-San Juan observed the effort of the protesters to "find common ground with Americans" through anticommunist exhibits and noted "infuriated refugees—many of whom spent years in Vietnamese reeducation camps before escaping to the United States—[who] made loud and clear in banners and rallies their opinion that 'freedom of speech is not free'" (Aguilar-San Juan 2009: 80).[6] Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, while recognizing the active presence of former reeducation camp prisoners and the importance of their background, present a more critical view of protesters. These prisoners, the scholars note, had "encountered the violence of the communist state in Việt Nam, and thus their identities have been carved out of their experiences during and after the war" (Duong and Pelaud 2012: 261). In this respect, the carceral background of many protesters points to a crucial connection between their Vietnamese past and their American present. Elsewhere, political scientists have called attention to broader historical changes that affected Vietnamese politics in Little Saigon during the 1990s, and they have analyzed anticommunist protests as a part of a process of political incorporation (Collet and Furuya 2009; Collet and Furuya 2010: 13; Ong and Meyer 2008: 91–92).

Other scholars have been attentive to the historicity of this subject, if to different degrees and with different emphases. Studying the longer trajectory of politics in Orange County, Phuong Nguyen situates anticommunism under the umbrella of "refugee nationalism" (Nguyen Phuong Tran 2017).[7] More explicit on historical ties between the RVN and the postwar diaspora, Y Thien Nguyen argues that diasporic anticommunism has been a "remaking" of South Vietnamese anticommunism (Nguyen Y. T. 2018). Having conducted interviews with Vietnamese in Illinois, Hao Phan believes that there is "political diversity among Vietnamese Americans despite the fact that the whole community is anti-communist." He attributes this spectrum of opinions to two factors: life experiences in Vietnam before migration and the current political situation in Vietnam. In this view, anticommunism "is not a theoretical matter but the direct result of painful life experiences" in postwar Vietnam (Phan N. H. 2015: 84, 94). Such research gives more forceful analyses of the interactions between the past and present: a step in the right direction.

This chapter makes two arguments. First, diasporic anticommunism is not new; it is the latest manifestation of Vietnamese anticommunism. While diasporic anticommunism is not identical to earlier ideologies, their connections were more fluid and continuous: not perfectly linear but not broken either. In particular, intra-Vietnamese violence that began during the "August Revolution" was crucial to understanding this genealogy. This momentous event in August 1945 marked a shift from anticommunism mostly in theory to anticommunism in action for the next thirty years. Second, the

chapter analyzes the impact of national loss and incarceration on the making of the diasporic variety of anticommunism. The abrupt fall of Saigon produced profound psychological effects on Vietnamese associated with the RVN, who experienced enormous economic deprivation and political oppression, including the incarceration in reeducation camps of military officers and government officials. This experience sharpened their anticommunist belief and contributed substantially to their activism later. It is not possible to understand diasporic anticommunism without exploring the experiences of these political prisoners, especially because tens of thousands of former political prisoners and their families came to the United States through the Humanitarian Operation Program during the 1990s. The mass migration of political prisoners renewed anticommunist activism in diasporic communities, including a marked rise in public demonstration that included the Hi Tek protests, where many former prisoners and their families kept a perpetual physical presence in front of the store.[8]

The Vietnamese Anticommunist Tradition

The anticommunist tradition has existed at least since late colonialism began with opposition to Marxism from colonial authorities and the Catholic Church. Colonialists and Catholics had different interests, methods, and reasons for opposing communism. Catholic anticommunism, in fact, had much to do with challenging French colonialism, as a number of Catholics were critical of the secularism of the French state and pointed to colonial oppression of Indochinese as a reason for the spread of communism (Keith 2012: 148–127, 177–207). Differences notwithstanding, both Catholics and colonialists considered communism a direct threat and, as a result, published many anticommunist materials. For colonial administrators, the communists were to be stopped and suppressed like any other organization that challenged colonial rule with real or perceived violence. On the other hand, the Catholic clergy viewed communism as synonymous with atheism and, therefore, as a grave threat to the church in Indochina. Anticommunist messages were integrated into Catholic moral instructions, and Catholic children were taught that communism attacked the church, the family, and the "moral order." Frequent were references to "the evil of Communism," and Catholic publications sometimes attacked positivism, utilitarianism, egalitarianism, and even "atheistic" Buddhism. Catholic anticommunist rhetoric was so effective that even the colonial authorities sometimes borrowed it for their own propaganda. One colonial leaflet included an illustration of communists burning books and beating a teacher. Another showed Vietnamese communists chopping down a Vietnamese tree at the order of a Russian Marxist (Marr 1981: 84–88).

These colorful if overwrought portrayals of communism were meant to strike terror into the hearts of ordinary Vietnamese. For many Catholics, however, anticommunism was not merely propaganda but a major issue with palpable implications. This point was well illustrated by the killing of a priest, Father Pierre Khang, at the hand of communist agitators during the Nghệ Tĩnh rebellion led by communists in 1930–1931. Contemporary Catholic accounts of the killing blamed the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) for threatening the priest and other Catholics, killing him and several villagers, burning down the church, and forbidding parishioners from burying the dead. These stories were widely circulated among Catholics and became material for stronger denunciations of communism in the Catholic press. Publications such as the periodical *Vì Chúa* (For the Lord), whose priest-editor Nguyễn Văn Thích had written possibly the best-known anticommunist pamphlet of the 1920s, offered many philosophical and theological critiques of communism. In Saigon, the newspaper *La croix d'Indochine* (The Cross of Indochina) became perhaps the loudest anticommunist voice of its time among Catholic and non-Catholic publications. Supported by the Catholic property-owning bourgeoisie, it persistently attacked communist abolition of private property and targeted the opinions of the paper *La lutte* (The Struggle), run by Vietnamese Stalinists and Trotskyists in a rare collaboration (Nguyễn Văn Thích 1927).[9]

Although ecclesiastical and colonialist anticommunist rhetoric was vocal, the impact of anticommunism was limited at that time. Before 1945, revolutionary violence affected only a minority of Vietnamese, mostly Catholics. However, there was also growing tension between the communists and non-Christian religious groups: the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Buddhists. Those sects and the ICP strove for popular support during the 1930s, but their encounters did not lead to the level of conflict and bloodshed that was to occur in the 1940s (Woodside 1976: 182–200). Among members of the urban intelligentsia, opposition to communism remained in the realm of theoretical debate. The Hanoi-based Self-Strength Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn), which exerted the most dominant literary and cultural influence on urban youth during the 1930s, was certainly opposed to class struggle. But it did not make anticommunism a major issue, focusing instead on advocacy for wholesale westernization on the one hand and severe criticism of the old Vietnamese order on the other. Some budding communist and noncommunist intellectuals went to the same schools or were friends. They tried to persuade one another but did not resort to violence (Jamieson 1993: 100–175).

The poet and publisher Nguyễn Vỹ, a prominent Buddhist noncommunist intellectual, provides an example. Living in Hanoi during the 1930s, he knew Võ Nguyên Giáp and Trường Chinh, adherents of Marxism and future members of the Politburo. Giáp loaned Vỹ dozens of French-language leftist

magazines and books from Marxist authors such as Lenin, Bukharin, and Maurice Thorez. But the anticolonial and antifascist Vỹ was "disappointed" in communist theory and thought that Marxism, "if applied in Vietnam, would certainly destroy all moral foundations of the family, society, nation, the Vietnamese people, even the personal self." Giáp's attempts to persuade Nguyễn Vỹ did not cause him to change his mind, but they remained friendly and often bantered when running into each other on the street (Nguyễn Vỹ 1970: 381–394). Like Vỹ, most educated urbanites were neither Catholic nor supporters of colonialism. But they found Marxism wanting because, in the words of a scholar of Vietnamese communism, it would have "sacrificed traditional Vietnamese patriotism to proletarian internationalism" (Huỳnh K. K. 1982: 188). Or, as another scholar has put it, the communists "interpreted patriotism as outmoded tradition and internationalism as modern, a judgment with which most Vietnamese [at the time] disagreed" (Popkin 1985: 353). Even intense disagreements between Marxist and non-Marxist intellectuals were theoretical and not focused on specific programs. Violent outbreaks between communist and noncommunist Vietnamese were confined mostly to prison, where different anticolonial groups such as the ICP and the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng; VNQDĐ), vied for control and conversion of one another (Zinoman 2001a: 200–239).

The Second World War and especially the August Revolution brought forth dramatic changes in the anticommunist outlook. This period was the beginning of decolonization and witnessed the growing influence of the ICP. Anti-ICP opposition also grew. Although not in a strong position as it had been, the VNQDĐ remained an important noncommunist player (Hoang V. D. 2008: 156–207). Moreover, several Đại Việt political parties emerged to present an alternative political and ideological challenge to the ICP. The Đại Việt parties opposed socialist internationalism, and at least a number of their leaders admired European fascist regimes. They reemphasized social Darwinism, a driving force among the previous generation, as the basis for an independent postcolonial Vietnam. The multiplicity of the Đại Việt parties demonstrates fragmentation that plagued noncommunist nationalists in subsequent years, yet their emergence demonstrated ideological alternatives to Vietnamese communism (Quang Minh 1996: 11–191). The stage was set for a new kind of contestation in revolutionary ideology and politics.

As the military situation turned very volatile in early 1945, the communist and noncommunist parties jockeyed for advantages in anticipation of the Allied victory. In northern Vietnam, the VNQDĐ and the Đại Việt created a new formal alliance while independently operating several military training schools. In the South, the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo solidified power in their areas of influence while expressing support for Japan's "pan-Asianism." In Saigon, the Trotskyists reconstituted themselves into a new political

party and reestablished contacts with the smaller Trotskyist groups in the north. Against them were ICP-associated Stalinists, who formed the Vanguard Youths (Thanh Niên Tiền Phong) and attracted hundreds of new members with a nationalistic rather than communist appeal. Using nationalistic rhetoric, the Vanguard Youths constantly attacked the Trotskyists and called for "the People's government to punish them" by assassination (Ngô V. 2000: 307).[10] Such threats and attacks fomented the revolutionary violence that soon engulfed Vietnamese anticolonial politics and helped to create new ideas and rationale for a broader anticommunist ideology.

Much of the anticommunist ideology was shaped by fighting among Vietnamese, especially ICP-directed violence against noncommunist groups. Even before Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of independence, most communist-led Việt Minh groups, to quote a historian of the August Revolution, "probably spent as much time selecting Vietnamese 'traitors' and 'reactionaries' for elimination as trying to kill Japanese" (Marr 1997: 234). Even though revolutionary violence varied from place to place, the overall cost was steep for non- and anticommunists. In the northern mountainous area, for example, the Việt Minh exercised considerable "red terror" on Vietnamese officials. In the Red River Delta, the Việt Minh preferred to "threaten or cajole government officials rather than to eliminate them" but still killed many lower-level officials. The situation worsened after Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of independence. Although communists were the victims of some attacks and killings, they were a lot more successful at eliminating their real and potential rivals than the other way around. One estimate puts the number of deaths of "alleged enemies of the Revolution" at several thousand from late August to September alone, and "tens of thousands" of others were detained for weeks and even months (Marr 1997: 235, 519).

As revealed by the official history of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), Việt Minh teams of "national defense" and "self-defense" engaged in episodic fighting against three enemies in late 1945 and early 1946: the French, the Chinese, and noncommunist Vietnamese, including the VNQDĐ. Fighting the last category was especially "complicated" because it involved the police and "the people" in addition to the defense corps. Việt Minh teams relied on a variety of tactics depending on location and circumstance: "isolating" the noncommunist enemies from their comrades and supporters, "surrounding" them with revolutionary forces, "punishing" (i.e., assassinating) them even "in front of the Chiang troops," and "protecting" areas already controlled from possible invasion by "traitors" and "collaborators" (*Lịch Sử Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam* 1977: 213–217).[11] Access to the files at the Sûreté, the French police headquarters, allowed them to identify and arrest or liquidate colonial spies, agents, and potential foes in Hanoi, Huế, and Sai-

gon. Many assassinations of real and potential rivals were carried out in Hanoi (Goscha 2007: 105; *Công An Thủ Đô* 1990: 18).

Although the Việt Minh took great care to keep this history out of circulation during the French War, it fueled greater anticommunism among many survivors. In southern Vietnam, assassinations and armed conflicts led to a "balkanization" of the region among the communists and the Hòa Hảo, Cao Đài, and Catholics (Biggs 2012: 127–151). In the northern and central regions, members of noncommunist political parties went into hiding. In his memoir, former South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States Bùi Diễm, a member of the largest Đại Việt Party, wrote about the "outright war between the Vietminh and the nationalists" in a chapter aptly called "The Terror" (Bui Diem 1987: 46). The Đại Việt Party was overwhelmed by Võ Nguyên Giáp's troops and secret police, and the party leader ordered members to withdraw and escape in the summer of 1946. Bùi Diễm was able to flee to a fortified Catholic area; not so lucky was his party's leader, who disappeared without a trace. The violence had triggered greater anticommunism among the Đại Việt and other opponents of the communists. "I watched the destruction of the nationalists," recalled Bùi Diễm decades later, "from a victim's perspective" (Bui Diem 1987: 49).

In important respects, *victim* became *the* operative word for anticommunists from the 1940s onward. After the August Revolution, anticommunists continued to formulate their critiques philosophically, but also increasingly with stories and eyewitness accounts designed to strike fear in the Vietnamese. Because of the ascent of the Việt Minh during the First Indochina War, an anticommunist ideology circulated in selected circles but did not blossom until after the Geneva Accords. Not long after the installment of Ngô Đình Diệm as prime minister, anticommunism found a venue for expression in South Vietnam. The first five years of Diệm's rule saw a flourishing of anticommunist publications from Saigon and other southern cities. Accompanied by the Denounce Communist (Tố Cộng) Campaign, the publications focused on communist brutality and spread anticommunist propaganda on an unprecedented scale. Many featured writings by fervent anticommunist émigrés from North Vietnam and criticized three aspects of communism: revolutionary violence and repression, class struggle, and thought control. The fact that most of these anticommunist authors were *not* Catholic highlighted a significant change from the leading role that Catholics had played in the 1920s and 1930s (Hoang T. 2009: 17–32; Tran N.-A. 2013).[12]

This state-sponsored anticommunism was part of the nation-building competition between Saigon and Hanoi. Each side claimed the mantle of nationalism and sought to portray the other side as illegitimate. From the 1950s, the imprisonment of anticommunists became a preponderant theme

in South Vietnamese literature. An example is *Tù Ngục và Thoát Ly* (Prisons and Escapes), a popular book that employed a simple narrative style to reach less-educated readers (Thanh Thảo 1957). It opens with an introduction from an officer of the Commissioner of Refugees to the President (Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư Tị Nạn) and a preface by the president of the Association of Vietnamese Communist Victims (Hội Nạn Nhân Cộng Sản Việt Nam). The narrator recalls his experience in Việt Minh zones in central and northern Vietnam during the second half of the 1940s. Initially "invited" by the police to leave his village for his "own security," he and others were later accused of being "reactionaries" and held in prison camps. Each camp held between two hundred and two thousand inmates, placed in barracks divided according to gender and categories of political or "economic" prisoners. Even after release, former inmates were required to report regularly to cadres. For these and other reasons, inmates spent their time devising ways to escape from the camps and head to French- or Catholic-controlled zones (Thanh Thảo 1957; see also Hoang T. 2021: 22–23). This genre of wartime incarceration peaked under President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu in the Second Republic, exemplified by a serialized and fictionalized work called *Trại Đầm Đùn* (The Đầm Đùn Camp). Described as a "novel based on reportage" (*phóng sự tiểu thuyết*), a not-uncommon genre since late colonialism, its lengthy description of life in a large prison camp during the French War further essentialized the dangers of communists (Trần Văn Thái [n.d.] 1973). The Saigon regime also propagated news and fiction that highlighted attacks and assassinations by the PAVN and the National Liberation Front (Mặt Trận Dân Tộc Giải Phóng Miền Nam Việt Nam; NLF). It popularized an anticommunist saying from President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu: "Don't believe what the communists say but look closely at what they have done." In comparison to the postwar era, not many southern Vietnamese were incarcerated by the communists. Yet anticommunist South Vietnamese portrayed communist imprisonment to be hardly better, and sometimes worse, than death or destruction caused by armed attacks by the NLF or the PAVN. The themes of imprisonment and victimhood were consistent with the era of the August Revolution and proved intrinsic to the anticommunist propaganda in South Vietnam.

The Fall of Saigon and the Shock of National Loss

The overview above shows that Vietnamese anticommunism began early but exploded as a reaction to revolution, decolonization, and warfare. Likewise, scholars of diasporic anticommunism should benefit from studying the reaction to the fall of Saigon among anticommunists. The collapse shocked all anticommunist South Vietnamese. Its abruptness further left many South Vietnamese in disbelief, depression, and even denial. This state of mind

could be discerned in a number of memoirs and reflections. "The loss of the country still stuns us," writes a refugee some thirty-five years later. "We did not know what to think about the sudden collapse of Vietnam; like drunkards we all seemed to be in denial" (Vo N. M. 2011: 23). Another recollects that on April 29, "the heaviest, most overwhelming feeling was that of total, incomprehensible failure: I had failed. I had failed my family. I had failed my colleagues. I had failed my country" (Nguyen Le Hieu, n.d.: 393). "I rubbed my eyes," recalls a former U.S. embassy employee who watched Soviet tanks on his street. "Am I dreaming or is it reality?" (Phạm G. Đ. 2011: 23). Most South Vietnamese were not prepared for the quickness of this conclusion.

Another example comes from the prominent South Vietnamese novelist Duyên Anh, who published a book-long memoir devoted to his memories of that fateful day. Even though this memoir was published twelve years after the event, the shock of losing South Vietnam remains palpable on the pages. He elaborates, as if assuming that the book speaks for the people on the losing side:

> *Saigon the Longest Day* is from Vietnamese writers, from authentic Vietnamese souls, not from American journalists getting their dough from the CIA and from the KGB. The world, especially the third world, and especially countries where their own people fight and kill one another over communist and capitalist ideologies, by American bombs and Russian rockets, should learn from the experiences in *Saigon the Longest Day*. The longest day resulted from twenty of the harshest years in the history of warfare. Then, after that day, [came] the longest months and years of poverty, stupidity, hatred, prisons, reeducation camps. And warfare still. (Duyên Anh 1988: 5)

This passage includes an articulation of noncommunist and anti-American nationalism. The last two sentences, however, shift the blame to the communists and link the demise of South Vietnam to postwar economic decline and political incarceration. "And warfare still" means that the communists had won the South yet continued to wage war against Vietnamese like himself. On that fateful day, Duyên Anh listened to the announcement of unconditional surrender and thought, "Why surrendering without a fight? I see the same tearful question behind the haggard looks of Saigonese around me" (Duyên Anh 1988: 125–126). The loss of Saigon was painful, but the *manner* of loss was worse for him and other anticommunists.

For the losing side, the profound collective loss tied together the fate of the South Vietnamese. National loss is often portrayed as spiritual death. "I lived like a body without a soul," writes a former prisoner, "at once anguished, pained, ashamed, and hopeless" (Bảo Thái 2002: 22). He continues, "I felt as if we were living a nightmare [after the fall]. Only two months before, my

family had a peaceful life in Đà Lạt. . . . In a short time, all good things disappeared [and] I had nothing left other than two empty hands" (Bảo Thái 2002: 23, 25). Such examples show the link between the fall of Saigon and their subsequent suffering, including the reeducation camp experience. Some did not accept the communist victory. For a small number, the abrupt loss of South Vietnam motivated them to join or organize armed resistance in the 1970s and 1980s. Nguyễn Thanh Nga, for example, recalls her participation in an anticommunist group not long after the fall of Saigon. The group was led by a Catholic priest who had served as a military chaplain. Calling itself National Restoration (Phục Quốc), the group was based in Hố Nai, a post-1954 settlement of northern Catholics. Nga was assigned by the priest to recruit more members, and "the number of young men joining the movement grew and enthused us" before the organization was infiltrated and destroyed a few months later (Nguyễn T. N. 2001: 23–25). Another example is Võ Đại Tôn, a former colonel who left for Australia in 1975 and then put together a resistance political organization and attempted to infiltrate Vietnam in the early 1980s. Hiding in a Laotian jungle on April 30, 1981, he recollected the humiliation of the fall of Saigon, especially the hour when the South Vietnamese leader "Dương Văn Minh announced unconditional surrender to the Communists and ordered all of us soldiers to put down our arms . . . leading Vietnam to absolute poverty and decline in the face of progress" elsewhere (Võ Đ. T. 1992: 13).[13] Utterly disgraced by the surrender, Tôn channeled the humiliation into a desire to return to Vietnam and agitate the people to resist the postwar regime. His experience suggests a link between the fall of Saigon and diasporic support for the homeland liberation movement of the 1980s (Nguyen Phuong Tran 2017: 77–96; Tran T. N. 2007).[14]

Of course, only a very small minority of anticommunists engaged in active resistance. Many others turned the initial shock to an emotive call to oppose the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). For many, the victorious communists continued to oppress the Vietnamese people after the end of the war. "April of 1975," states the preface of a collection of poetry by a former prisoner living in Canada, saw "a maddening storm that sank the country into darkness, when countless families were broken up, when young men and talented people and officers of the Republican military were sent to prisons" (Lê K. A. H. 2004: 5). Moreover, unconditional surrender was dishonorable and unacceptable to nationalist Vietnamese, and many anticommunists emphasized that they opposed the decision to surrender. A former Marine notes that "over 90 percent of Marine officers were imprisoned" and remembers fellow officers who died in the camps where he was kept: after 1975, they "continued to fight . . . because of honor, duty, and the nation" (Tô V. C. 2005: 147).

In the minds of many, anticommunism did not stop after April 1975 just because the military was ordered to surrender. Instead, they turned memo-

ries of the shameful fall into motivation for opposing the Communist Party. After the shock of national loss subsided, anticommunists interpreted the event by weaving together two lines of thought. First, the decision to surrender unconditionally was unacceptable because they viewed themselves, and not the Vietnamese communists, to be the legitimate claimants to the mantle of Vietnamese nationalism. Second, the decision to surrender came from one person and did not represent the decision of the South Vietnamese military. This military had fought the communists for over two decades, but because of Dương Văn Minh, it did not get a fair chance to fight and demonstrate its worth. It was very difficult for the anticommunists to accept defeat, but it was doubly difficult for them to accept defeat without having engaged in a battle for Saigon. The decision to surrender was shameful, and the manner of loss was dishonorable. Shame and dishonor, in turn, further motivated anticommunists to oppose the postwar government.

The Anticommunist Experience in Reeducation Camps

In addition to the shame of national loss, the incarceration of South Vietnamese military officers and governmental officials contributed significantly to the making of diasporic anticommunism. Incarceration was only one of the postwar policies—which included rapid collectivization of the economy, anti-bourgeois cultural campaigns, classification of southerners according to family background, and expulsion of ethnic Chinese—that led to the "boat people" exodus. Incarceration, however, affected the most politically prominent and influential groups of the Saigon regime. The shock of national loss and the suffering from incarceration provided a one-two punch that strengthened diasporic anticommunism and the determination to oppose the VCP. Thanks to memoirs, much is known about the experience of incarceration. Hà Thúc Sinh published the first major memoir, *Đại Học Máu* (Blood University), in the United States. He began writing it as soon as he landed in a Malaysian refugee camp in 1980, completed it four years later in San Diego, and saw its publication shortly thereafter. At more than eight hundred pages, this memoir details the daily life of detainees in three southern reeducation camps during the first three years after the Vietnam War (Hà T. S. 1985). More memoirs followed in the 1980s and especially the 1990s and 2000s, including many published online (Đỗ V. P. 2008).[15]

A survey of these memoirs shows that the prisoners emphasized the cruelty of camp personnel. They describe both systemic dehumanization and cruelty committed by individuals, using such words as "nightmare" (*ác mộng*), "darkness" (*đen tối*), and "hell" (*địa ngục*), and refer to camp wardens, officers, and guards variously as "animals" (*thú vật*), "devils" (*quỷ*), and "red devils" (*quỷ đỏ*). While some accounts show flashes of humor, the memoir-

ists highlight dehumanization to demonstrate that Vietnamese communists were lacking in human decency, punitive and unjust in practice, and totalitarian on the whole. Dehumanization is most vividly portrayed in cases of corporeal deprivation, especially hunger and thirst; injuries and ailments; and poor medical care. Hunger was a constant preoccupation. "Hunger was horrific in Communist prisons," writes a former Marine, adding that a "prisoner's mind was always thinking about different ways to survive" (Đặng V. H., n.d.: 147). "We were never full during all of the time [kept] in the north," writes another Marine. He specifies that each prisoner was allowed two hundred grams of cooked flour for breakfast, 250 grams for lunch, and another 250 grams for dinner: a very small sum for men engaged in hard labor (Nguyễn N. M. 1977: 205). Prisoners ate any animal they could catch at camps and work sites, including insects and reptiles. One writer even witnessed a fellow inmate finding half a dozen newly born field rats and swallowing them raw. Surprisingly, he did not get sick (Đặng V. H., n.d.: 147). But others were not so lucky, and many memoirs note that inmates contracted dysentery, diarrhea, and other illnesses as a result of eating poisonous plants by mistake. Humiliation went hand in hand with physical deprivation. One writer remembers the trip taken to the north in a ship, during which prisoners were kept in the brig. It was very tightly packed, and they could not stretch out or lie down. At mealtime, ramen noodles and Chinese-made dried food were thrown from above. There was little space for urination and defecation, and the stench of body waste was unbearable. The experience was too brutal for at least one prisoner, a military physician, who killed himself before the ship landed (Mai V. T. 1980–1981: 277–280).

Torture was also widespread in reeducation camps, especially during the first few years after the war. Because escape was considered among the worst offenses, captured escapees were punished severely in several ways, usually starting with a beating. Vương Mộng Long graphically describes one such beating after his second attempt to escape. In 1978, he and three other prisoners escaped from a camp in Yên Bái Province, which ended with the death of one prisoner in the jungle. The rest were captured and kept in one camp unit for the first three days before they were transferred to another unit. On the first day, a "very young guard" found a "reactionary poem" on Long and struck his face with an AK-47, knocking out one of his teeth. The guard returned the next day and broke one of Long's ribs. After the transfer, Long endured daily beatings of "more or less two hours" by four young guards. He was left in a public room until the evening, and he looked so lifeless that rumors of his death made their way to other camps and even to his family in the south (Vương M. L. 2012). At a camp in Long Khánh, which had been used as an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) base during the war, several prisoners tried to escape during the first six months in detention.

They were caught and hung upside down in Conex containers. These heavy and sturdy steel containers had been used by the U.S. Army to ship materials. Now converted to hold human beings, the containers were completely dark when shut and extremely hot during the dry season. Detainees in the Conex containers were also beaten nightly. Punishment was most severe and frequent during the first few years after the war as a way to deter prisoners from escaping from detention centers and reeducation camps. Prisoners could also be beaten for lesser offenses. In some cases, cadres even killed prisoners for the slightest provocation. One guard, for instance, shot and killed an inmate at a work site because the man did not respond quickly enough to his order (Đỗ V. P. 2008: 21).

Another punitive measure was detention in a cell, usually without food or water. In one form or another, all reeducation camps had a "discipline house" (*nhà kỷ luật*) for inmates who had committed violations. After his second escape, Vương Mộng Long was thrown into the discipline house. His hands and feet were shackled. At noon he was fed the only meal of the day: a bowl of cooked "thumb-size dried cassava," a starchy root, that was covered with dust (Vương M. L. 2012). Long did not specify the length of his punishment, but it was not uncommon for captured escapees to be held in a discipline house for months. Prisoners learned from experience that not seeing someone again after six months meant that he had died in the discipline house. In a rare case, a prisoner was taken out of an underground discipline room after a year; his "legs were paralyzed," and he had developed kidney stones. He was "skin covering bones" but still alive (Đặng L. 2004: 135–136). Besides holding captured escapees, Conex containers also served as a discipline house in some of the southern camps. "The Conex," describes a former prisoner, "was considered a kind of an improvised cell" (Nguyễn H. H., n.d.). Left in the open and without shade, the containers were very hot during the day and very cold at night. This memoirist recalls that a former ARVN captain was thrown into one such container and died several weeks later. Camp authorities announced that he had committed suicide, but the prisoners believed that torture and deprivation had led to his death. In some cases, Conex containers were used as temporary jail cells. One prisoner, a non-ARVN young man who had joined an anticommunist militant group, was held in one in 1977. On capture, he and sixteen other members of the militant group were transported to a detention area and thrown into two Conex containers. They were held inside these containers for forty-five days before being transferred to a larger camp (Trần V. L. 2015).

The brutal treatment strengthened the anticommunist belief among prisoners. Extensive corporal punishment convinced the inmates that "reeducation" was no more than a cover for exacting revenge on the losers. Very often, and especially during the first few years of incarceration, camp authorities

berated prisoners for supporting the "imperialist Americans" and fighting against the revolution. The inmates were required to write "confessions" of "crimes" that they had committed against the revolution and, during political lectures and study sessions, to speak about those self-incriminating crimes. The experience of punishment reinforced the prisoners' belief that violence was inherent to the communist system. The fact that most camp cadres and guards had received no more than rudimentary schooling suggested to prisoners that the communist system placed violence over knowledge and blind obedience over justice. It fortified their conviction that it is morally righteous to oppose communism absolutely. Hà Thúc Sinh's memoir, for example, mentions the trial and execution of a fellow prisoner who spoke out against the reeducation policy during a public lecture. After confining the prisoner in a Conex container, the camp authorities staged a trial before all the inmates. They gave a long speech detailing the prisoner's "crimes," sentenced him to death, and executed him a few minutes later. Sinh ends the chapter by stating that "the dead are free of debt, but the living must remember [what happened] so they can avenge" those executed. The living are obligated to fight the injustice of the communist system; otherwise, the living "are worse than dogs" (Hà T. S. 1985: 501).

Though the war ended in 1975, communist violence in reeducation camps showed the prisoners that the war did not really end. A memoir by Tô Văn Cấp focuses on eight prisoners who died from beatings, torture, illnesses, and failed escape attempts. Commemorating the heroism of South Vietnamese officers who died in battle during the war and that of officers who died in postwar incarceration, Cấp writes:

> My comrade-in-arms and my superiors passed away in different ways. Some died bravely for the nation in battle and were buried in coffins decorated with flowers and the flag, with friends bidding them farewell and their families caring for their graves. [Others] had fulfilled their military duty but [after the war] were led into the jungle by the enemy to die, without their military units and their families, without a grave to help their children find their corpses, without a cigarette, a candle or incense. . . . However you departed, you honored the martial spirit of [the Marines]. (Tô V. C. 2005: 325)

In other words, those who died during the war and those who died in postwar reeducation camps were one and the same. Reeducation camps sought to change the prisoners' allegiance, but the opposite occurred. Prisoners strengthened their political identity and appropriated the deaths of other prisoners in their opposition to Vietnamese communists.

In addition to their ordeal in reeducation camps, prisoners were worried about the welfare of their family members back home. For the first few years, most prisoners kept in northern Vietnam did not have any contact with their families. Even after initial contact, mail was infrequent and letters from family were cautiously worded to avoid confiscation. During the first years after the war, family members of the prisoners had no news about their whereabouts. If the inmates were kept in the dark about their families, the families received vague answers, or none at all, from the authorities. In one case, a young wife found out where her husband was detained. In August 1975, she went to the camp with the wives of other prisoners, but the guards refused to let them visit. She returned two months later but was again turned away. Two guards called their husbands "reactionaries" and "counterrevolutionaries" and even threatened to shoot the women. On their third visit nine months later, the prisoners had been moved. It took another year before she received a letter from her husband from a reeducation camp in the North. Another five years passed before she made the first successful visit to a camp in Nam Hà (Bảo Trân 2005: 178–189).

For prisoners in the South, family visits could be more frequent because travel was easier. Yet they too encountered hostility from authorities as well as arbitrary regulations on visits. According to Nguyễn Kim Hoàn, her husband was a former ARVN officer who eluded arrest by moving his family to a Catholic village in the southern province of Sóc Trăng. Because of the lack of teachers in the area, they were given positions teaching math at a local high school. In 1976, a year later, the state security sent soldiers and police to arrest Hoàn's husband on November 20, the Charter Day of Teachers (Ngày Nhà Giáo Việt Nam). Although her husband was detained in the South, it took Hoàn a year and many petitions to track down the location of his detention in Cần Thơ. One year later, he was moved to Camp Cồn Cát, on an island of the province Hậu Giang. Although Hoàn could visit him monthly, each trip now took her three days, and she had to make arrangements with other teachers to substitute for her. After these exhausting journeys, she was only allowed to meet her husband for fifteen minutes. The guards glowered at visitors and prisoners and would heap verbal abuse on anyone straying from even the most minor regulations. Food and supplies were inspected carefully. Sweet potatoes, for example, were halved, and small containers of salt and sesame were stirred up to make sure that nothing was hidden in them (Nguyễn K. H., n.d.: 115–133). In some camps, authorities created more regulations after a visit, such as requiring prisoners to consume all food from families within a week or it would be thrown away (Jolie 2004: 169).

Association with the former regime worsened the already-dire economic situation of the prisoners' families. Just as northerners had been subjected

to classification before 1975, southern Vietnamese were classified according to their family background. Families of communist revolutionaries could receive benefits from the state, including job preferences. Conversely, spouses and children of "counterrevolutionaries," including reeducation camp prisoners, were low in the new hierarchy and often faced discrimination. One woman, for example, was dismissed from her factory job when it was discovered that her incarcerated husband had worked in the RVN's Bureau of Psychological Warfare (Nha Chiến Tranh Tâm Lý; Bảo Trân 2005: 184). Many families were forced by the government to move to the countryside, where few economic resources were available to them. Memoirs by family members of the incarcerated also stressed the heavy psychological toll that they experienced in poverty. The prisoners understood that postwar policies such as collectivization, the creation of new economic zones, and the classification of families were blatantly discriminatory and gave rise to a host of intractable problems for the people. Some memoirs note the similarities between life inside and outside the camps, as if those experiences were two sides of the same coin. After a prisoner was granted a rare ten-day leave to see his family, he returned to tell his fellow inmates that "food has become the common topic of conversation" and "the main concern nowadays is how to obtain rice and other items" (Tran T. V. 1988: 288).[16] The shared suffering of the prisoners and their families showed them that the communist system oppressed not only prisoners but also other southerners and, ultimately, the entire country.

In addition, prisoners were subjected to constant humiliation about their nationalist identity. Cadres and guards frequently ridiculed their noncommunist nationalism, even calling prisoners "criminals" (*kẻ có tội*). More often they were called "reactionaries" (*phản động*) and "counterrevolutionaries" (*chống cách mạng*). Most offensive to the prisoners were "henchmen" (*tay sai*), "puppets" (*ngụy*), and "puppet soldier [and] puppet government" (*ngụy quân ngụy quyền*). "Hired soldiers for American imperialists" (*lính đánh thuê cho đế quốc Mỹ*) was another common phrase. Prisoners were expected to refer to themselves with these terms when writing confessions and discussing study materials (Đinh T. L. 2008: 137). South Vietnamese officers and officials were thus seen by the guards as imperialist rather than nationalist, "American" or foreign rather than Vietnamese. According to a political lecture, the South Vietnamese were "created and built up by imperialism, became effective instruments against our people, [and] were public enemies of the people" (Chánh Trung 1989: 29). The association with foreign powers directly disparaged their nationalism.

The brutal treatment of prisoners fueled their belief that the VCP was obsessed with the protection of its power at the expense of the rest of the country. Contact with the local people in the North generally reinforced this belief, and many prisoners felt sorry for northern Vietnamese. While a number of

memoirs begin with a critique of the VCP as persecutors of former enemies and southerners, they end with a broader critique of communism as an oppressor of *all* Vietnamese: southerners and northerners, enemies and supporters of the socialist revolution alike. In their eyes, the VCP's failure to create a prosperous postcolonial Vietnam meant that its leadership was concerned with preserving its own power. For the prisoners, deception, as exemplified by the planned assaults of prisoners by northern civilians, characterized the modus operandi of the VCP.

Many memoirs also point out the lack of formal education among most cadres and guards as evidence that communist legitimacy was based on revolutionary violence rather than scientific knowledge. One memoirist recalls that his camp commander had a "sixth grade or seventh grade" education, which was decidedly "low" in the eyes of the prisoners, who, after all, had at least a high school diploma, with a significant number having been educated at a university, professional school, or military academy (Nguyễn V. D., n.d.: 512). One prisoner felt "frustrated and angry" not only because his side lost the war but also because the winners were uneducated: they were, he said in tears, "so weak, so stupid" (Tran T. V. 1988: 65). The belief that postwar Vietnam was controlled by the uneducated further depressed and angered the prisoners. In addition, the prisoners believed that Vietnamese communists were pseudo-nationalists. In Hà Thúc Sinh's words, prisoners saw that the communists "possessed a false pride and a superiority complex" while "communist soldiers and generals believed in their skill, power, and ability to instruct the puppets" (Hà T. S. 1985: 191). The prisoners believed that guards and cadres resorted to force, violence, and revolutionary credentials to mask their lack of education and technical knowledge: hence a feeling of "false pride" or false superiority. In some respects, this belief that they were the legitimate claimants of Vietnamese nationalism helped them endure carceral hardship. As South Vietnamese nationalism was routinely dismissed, their opinion of the camp authorities reinforced their moral righteousness and strengthened their noncommunist nationalism. The suffering and humiliation of incarceration worsened the experience of national loss, but it also gave prisoners newfound rationale and determination to oppose Vietnamese communism. As a writer points out, the carceral experience "showed that *[prisoners] could never accept Vietnamese communists and co-exist with them*" (Phạm V. C., n.d.: 11). Such anticommunist convictions did not stay in Vietnam but traveled with prisoners after they migrated to the United States and other parts of the world.

Conclusion

As is noted in the Introduction to this volume, Vietnamese refugees and immigrants came to the United States in several waves that bore different

experiences in adaptation and integration. While diasporic anticommunism was not the same as adaptation, it too has moved at different paces and undergone different emphases in different periods. During the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnamese refugees were preoccupied with survival and adjustments. They might not have organized as many public protests and displayed South Vietnamese flags as often, but their anticommunism was consistent through activities such as the annual commemoration of Black April and support for homeland liberation organizations (Tran T. N. 2007: 101–145).[17] As a small number of prisoners escaped by boat after release from reeducation camps and resettled in North America, some joined refugees who had not been incarcerated to create informal networks for mutual support and activism. By the late 1980s, former political prisoners had established a number of regional and national organizations in the United States, and some worked to help political prisoners in Vietnam gain release and emigration (Demmer 2017). During the 1990s, the Humanitarian Operation Program led to a new critical mass of tens of thousands of former prisoners and their families, and many of the new arrivals quickly joined or created networks for support and activism (Đào V. B. 2000). As Vietnam shifted direction in the late 1980s and the Cold War came to an end in the early 1990s, the homeland liberation movement ceased to exist, and anticommunist Vietnamese shifted their hope to anti-VCP movements within Vietnam. The arrival of former prisoners reenergized anticommunist activism, especially in the form of protests against the real and perceived encroachment of communism in Little Saigon communities. The demonstrations against the Hi Tek video store were by far the best known and best attended in the United States, but they were hardly the only ones.

In the end, diasporic anticommunism is traced back to political competitions during late colonialism and decolonization, especially during the August Revolution, which saw intra-Vietnamese violence favoring the Việt Minh. Anticommunism intensified during the Vietnam War and took another turn after the fall of Saigon. Postwar policies, especially the incarceration of South Vietnamese government officials and military officers, diminished the hope for national reconciliation and validated wartime beliefs about the inhumanity of Vietnamese communism. The carceral experience convinced prisoners and their families that the VCP was not capable of change in any meaningful way. Resettled abroad, they supported anticommunist activities by establishing political networks, organizing public protests, and contributing to diasporic media. Anticommunism in Little Saigons existed long before their migration, but it is they who shaped diasporic anticommunism as we know it today.