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Fragmented Loyalties:  
The Great Migration's Impact on South Vietnam, 1954-1963

by

Jason Andrew Picard

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:  
Professor Peter Zinoman, Chair  
Professor Jeffrey Hadler  
Professor Andrew Barshay  
Professor Penny Edwards

Fall 2014

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@ 2014

by Jason Andrew Picard

Abstract

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This dissertation examines the impact of Vietnam's Great Migration (Cuộc Di Cư Vĩ Đại). During a 300-day period between 1954 and 1955, over 860,000 people, many of them Catholic, fled from northern Vietnam to the South. The transmigration profoundly reshaped Vietnamese society and politics. Representing nearly 4% of the entire population of Vietnam in 1954, the refugees arrived in the South homeless, jobless and often separated from family. The overwhelmed regime struggled to resettle migrants in hundreds of haphazard villages in South Vietnam. These villages consisted entirely of northern migrants, often from a single parish or village in the North, and directed by northern Catholic priests. The new villages quickly adopted regional and religious customs peculiar to the homes their inhabitants left behind. At the same time, southerners resented the recent arrivals as carpetbaggers favored by the government. This prompted the government to withdraw assistance to these new villages. As a result, ironically, northern migrants became even more reliant on traditional regional customs and religious institutions in order to overcome the many pressures and struggles they faced in this new land. Finally, the migration and resettlement left indelible marks on the culture, arts, politics and society of Vietnam that are still felt today.

This dissertation differs from existing scholarship on the subject in its emphasis both on Vietnamese actors as agents of history and the migration as a crisis that affected every aspect of southern society. Instead of portraying the northern migrant community as the privileged loyalist bloc of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime, this project reveals how the refugees faced countless struggles and disappointments in places that proved inhospitable. Moreover, this project challenges the long held assumption of a close alliance between Diệm and the Catholic Church in Vietnam. The migration and resettlement process caused deep division in all aspects of society and contributed to the regime's ultimate collapse.

## *CONTENTS*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABBREVIATIONS.....	v
MAPS.....	iiiv
INTRODUCTION—Fragmented Loyalties.....	x
CHAPTER 1—“Fertile Lands Await”: The Promise and Pitfalls of Directed Resettlement, 1954-1958.....	1
CHAPTER 2—“They Eat the Flesh of Children”: Reception, Resettlement and Migrant – Southerner Sectionalism.....	45
CHAPTER 3—“Poisoned Waters”: Forced Resettlement and the Confrontation Between Church and GVN, 1955-1957.....	80
CHAPTER 4—Hostile Designs: <i>Bắc di cư</i> and the Failure of Resettlement in the Lower Mekong Delta, 1954-1964.....	116
CHAPTER 5—Unfulfilled Fantasies: Life in the Lower Mekong Delta, 1956-1963.....	155
CHAPTER 6—Ungrateful Loyalists: The Rise, Fall and Troubled Resurrection of the <i>Tự Do</i> Press Group, 1954-1957.....	187
CHAPTER 7—“Renegades”: The Founding and Demise of South Vietnam’s First National Opposition Newspaper, 1955-1958.....	222
CONCLUSION.....	257
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	263

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During my research, I conducted numerous research trips to Ninh Bình, Nam Định, Hải Phòng, Khánh Hòa, Bình Thuận, Đồng Nai, Tây Ninh, Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu, Mỹ Tho, Cần Thơ and Kiên Giang. While I do not have the space here to name the hundreds (literally!) of people who went out of their way to help me and sat through my endless questions about the past, they are all a part of this dissertation.

In Tây Ninh province, Anh Nguyễn Văn Dũ, Cô Trần Thị Kim Liên, Chú Chung, Bác Mười Thương and family, my students and countless others planted the seeds for a life long love of Vietnam. Their teachings, guidance, friendship and sacrifice are very present in this dissertation.

Chú Phú Ích Nghiễm, who devoted countless hours of his time (and his family's) to help me tell the story of the *Bắc di cư*. Chú trải qua “những dòng sông phân ly” và “tuổi nước đục” nhưng không bao giờ đánh mất bản thân mình. Nhìn vào chú, lòng tin vào con người của cháu được hồi phục.

To my parents, Sharon and Irving Picard, I fear that words cannot adequately express the depth of my appreciation for the love, support and encouragement that they have unfailingly given to me. As always, they believed even on days when I did not.

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Luu, my daughter Sophia Thảo An and my son Gabriel Vĩnh An, who have sacrificed so much for me and make my work worthwhile. I love you.

## ***ABBREVIATIONS***

- ACL—Strategic Hamlets (Ấp Chiến Lược)
- BNV—Ministry of Home Affairs (Bộ Nội Vụ)
- CBVNCH—Gazette of the Republic of Vietnam (Công Báo Việt Nam Cộng Hòa)
- CCĐĐ—Land Reform (Cải Cách Điền Địa), South Vietnam
- CCRĐ—Land Reform (Cải Cách Ruộng Đất), North Vietnam
- CIP—Commercial Import Program
- CMQG—National Revolution Daily (Cách Mạng Quốc Gia)
- CRS—Catholic Relief Services
- CWIHP—Cold War International History Project
- ĐBCPBV—Đại Biểu Chính Phủ tại Bắc Việt (Government Representative in Northern Vietnam)
- ĐPH—Localization (Địa Phương Hóa)
- DRV—Democratic Republic of Vietnam
- EFEO: École française d'Extrême-Orient
- GVN—Government of Vietnam
- ICC—International Control Commission for Indochina
- IRC—International Rescue Committee
- JAS—Journal of Asian Studies
- JSEAS—Journal of Southeast Asian Studies
- JVS—Journal of Vietnamese Studies
- MSUG—Michigan State University – Vietnam Advisory Group
- NACII—Vietnam National Archives No. II (Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II), Ho Chi Minh City
- NACIII—Vietnam National Archives No. III (Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia III), Hanoi
- NCLS—Journal of History (Nghiên Cứu Lịch Sử), Hanoi
- NIA—National Institute of Administration (Học Viện Quốc Gia Hành Chánh)

PTTCPVNCH—Files of the Office of the Prime Minister (Phủ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ Việt Nam Cộng Hòa), NACII

PTTĐICH—Files of the Office of the President, First Republic (Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa), NACII

PTTĐIIICH—Files of the Office of the President, Second Republic (Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhị Cộng Hòa), NACII

PTUDCTN (COMIGAL)—General Commission for Migrants and Refugees (Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư và Tị Nạn)

PTUDD—General Commission for New Land Cultivation (Phủ Tổng Ủy Dinh Điền)

RVN—Republic of Vietnam (Việt Nam Cộng Hòa)

SRV—Socialist Republic of Vietnam

SVN—State of Vietnam

TĐBCPNP—Files of the Government Delegate in Southern Vietnam (Tòa Đại Biểu Chính Phủ tại Nam Phần), NACII

TLMS—Self-Reliance/Self-Sufficiency (Tự Lực Mưu Sinh)

UBBV BV—The Committee to Protect Northern Vietnam (Ủy Ban Bảo Vệ Bắc Việt)

UBHTĐC—The Committee for Auxiliary Resettlement (Ủy Ban Hộ Trợ Định Cư)

UBLĐQG—National Leadership Committee (Ủy Ban Lãnh Đạo Quốc Gia), RVN

USAID—United States Agency for International Development

USOM—United States Operations Mission

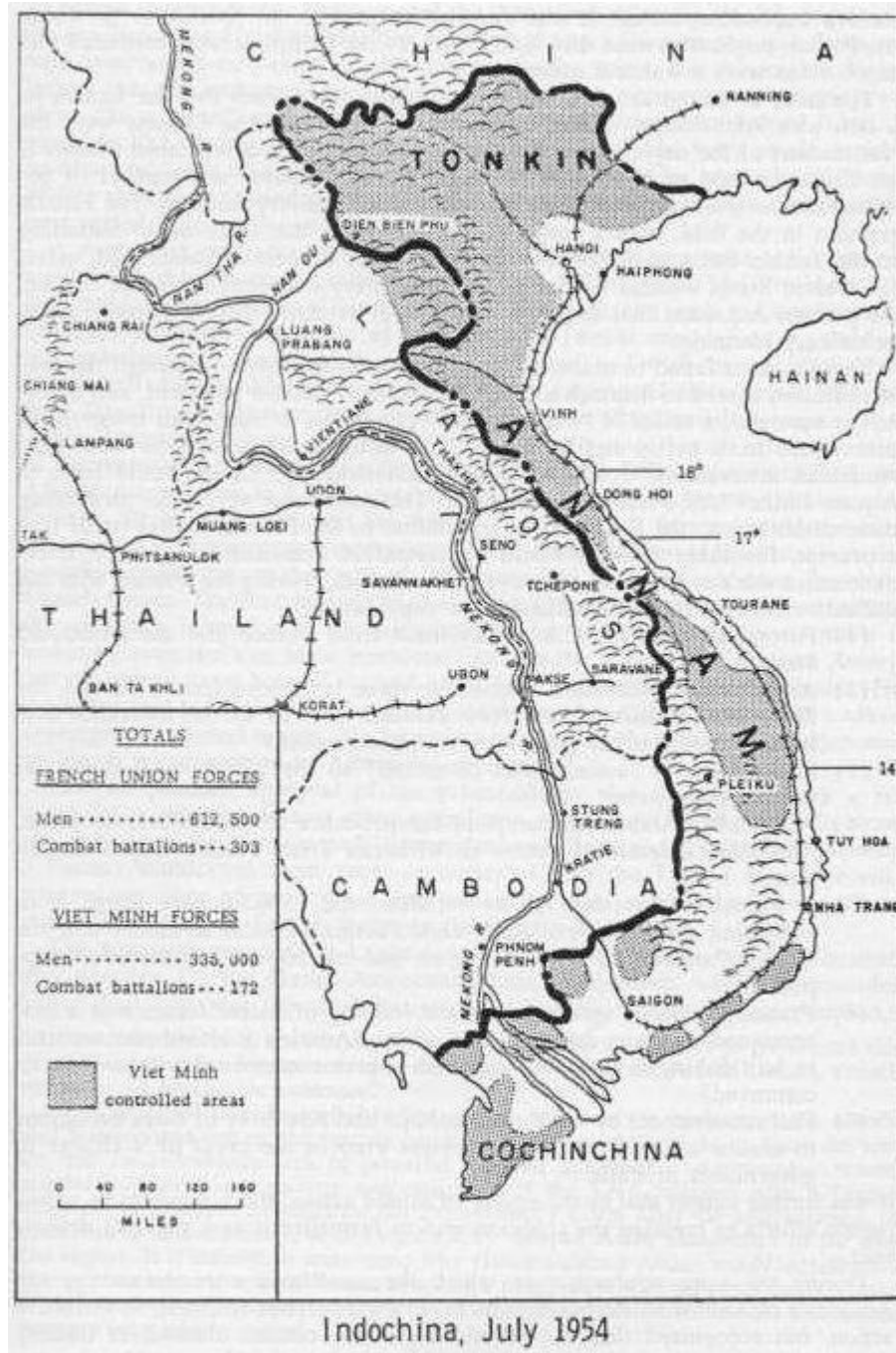
VNQĐĐ—Vietnam Nationalist Party (Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng)

VNTD—Free Arts and Literature Weekly (Văn Nghệ Tự Do)

VVA, TTU—Vietnam Virtual Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas

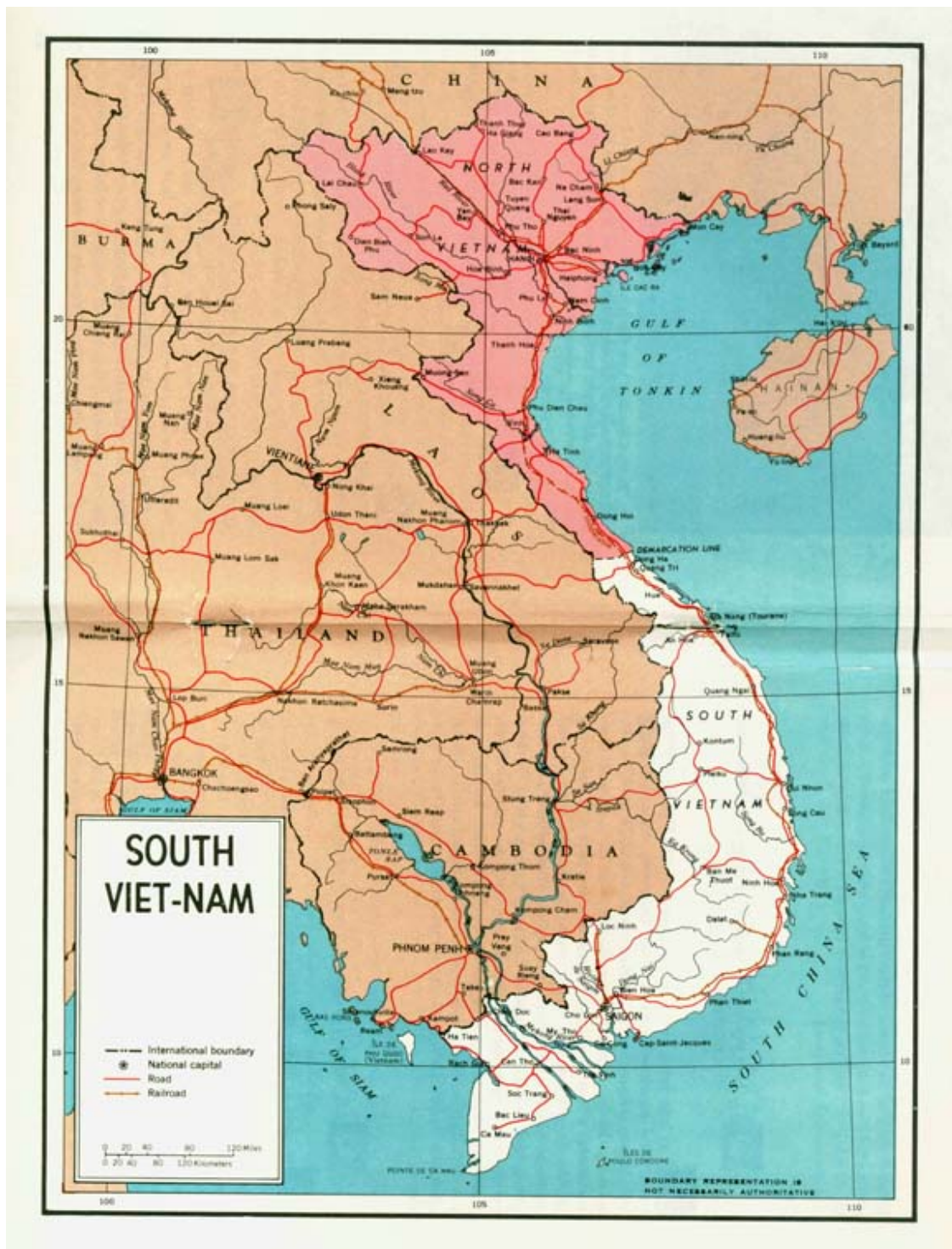
# MAPS

Map 1: Vietnam at time of Geneva Accords, 1954



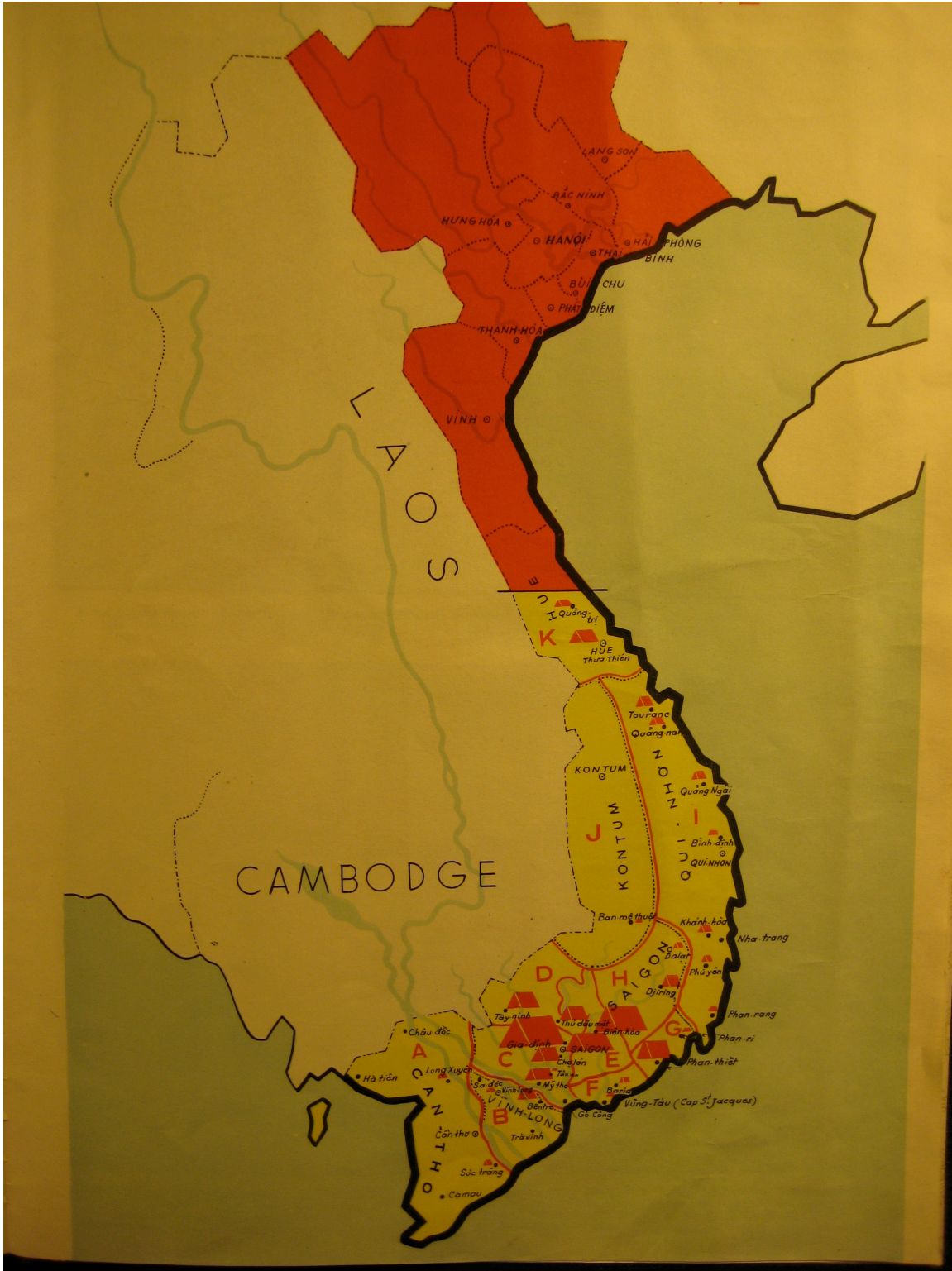
Source: *The Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel Edition* (Vol. 1), 1972

Map 2: Divided Vietnam, 1954-1975



Source: <http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Vietnam.html>

Map 3: Resettlement Zones in RVN



Source: *The Refugees of North Viet-Nam*, 1956

## *Introduction: Fragmented Loyalties*



Catholic Church, Phong Cốc Parish, Tây Ninh Province

Phong Cốc parish in Tây Ninh province lies just twenty kilometers from the border with Cambodia. Its best known for the unusual architecture of the parish church, the eaves of which have the appearance of an enormous boat (see photo above). Reflexively one assumes the design to pay homage to the biblical exodus. But for the parishioners of Phong Cốc, the roof possesses a far more personal and immediate significance.

In 1954, the parish's forebears joined nearly four percent of Vietnam's entire population as they fled from North to South in a migration of epic proportions. Officially just ten months long, at the time, the Government of Vietnam (GVN) dubbed it alternately the *Historic Migration* [Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử] or the *Great Migration* [Cuộc

Di Cư Vĩ Đại], while American authorities quickly named it the *Passage to Freedom*.<sup>1</sup> The over 860,000 refugees became popularly known as *Bắc di cư* [Northern migrants] or *Bắc 54* [Northerners of the '54 migration].

Settled in uninhabited forest, parishioners erected the church in 1962 both to memorialize the flight South and as a reminder of the homeland left behind. The story of Phong Cốc, however, is also instructive. It highlights the hardships suffered by hundreds of other resettlement villages and parishes dotting southern Vietnam. Despite the promise of government assistance, *Bắc di cư* found themselves facing many of the challenges of relocation on their own as RVN authorities raced to conclude the resettlement process and turn to the work of nation-building.

The mistakes and failures of GVN-directed resettlement imposed a legacy of distrust and hostility that reverberated throughout the Vietnam War-era and played an instrumental role in shaping relations below the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Even today, six decades after the Great Migration, these villages remain largely segregated from their southern neighbors, an indelible mark that underlines the persistence of what I call *fragmented loyalties*.

\* \* \*

This dissertation examines the effects of one of the most important events—outside of war and the end of colonialism—in 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese history, the transmigration

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957); Irving T Duke (Commander of Amphibious Force 1), “Passage to Freedom: Final Report,” June 15, 1955, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 13; VVA, TTU, Lubbock, Texas.

of 1954-1955. Lost in the ‘fog of war,’ the exodus, its repercussions and legacy have received short shrift by scholarship. This thesis seeks to correct the lacunae, asking the question, how did the Great Migration and resettlement impact South Vietnam? More specifically, how did GVN policy, societal relations and the nature of the migrants themselves shape South Vietnam between 1954 and 1963? I argue that the migration and resettlement process caused deep division in all aspects of society and contributed to the regime’s ultimate demise.

As the First Indochina War between French and Vietminh forces reached its conclusion in May of 1954, the Geneva Conference was convened to settle matters on the beleaguered Indochina peninsula.<sup>2</sup> The participants included the United States, Soviet Union, China, France, United Kingdom, Democratic Republic of Vietnam, State of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The conference concluded on July 21, 1954.

The resulting agreements temporarily divided Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and stipulated that in July 1956 a national election would be held to reunite the two zones under a single government. The North became known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh, while the South came under the direction of Ngô Đình Diệm, which in October 1955 became the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) following a presidential election. Article 14(d) of the agreements provided for 300 days of free passage that began with the conclusion of the conference.<sup>3</sup> During the

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<sup>2</sup> The conference, which opened on April 26, 1954, also dealt with issues confronting the situation on the Korean peninsula.

<sup>3</sup> “Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet Nam, July 20, 1954,” in *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict*, ed. Wesley R Fishel (Itasca: F.E. Peacock, 1968), 65. For examinations of the Geneva Conference and Accords refer to Robert F Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1969); Pierre Asselin, “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique,” *Cold War History*, Vol.

ensuing exodus over 860,000 northern Vietnamese fled South, the majority of whom were Catholic.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for the flight, however, were far more complex than simply a result of the agreements drawn up at Geneva. The decade prior to the evacuation had ravaged Vietnam, particularly the country's northern half. In the winter of 1944-45, a famine ravaged the north leaving perhaps as much as 10% of the population dead.<sup>5</sup> Triggered by a blend of weather and French and Japanese wartime policies, the famine most affected the Red River Delta, in particular the provinces of Thái Bình, Nam Định and Ninh Bình.<sup>6</sup>

The conclusion of the Second World War brought an end to the famine but not the upheaval. In late 1946, war broke out between the Vietminh and French forces. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese evacuated cities and towns. For some this would begin more

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11, No. 2 (May 2011), 155-195; Chen Jian and Shen Zhiwa, "The Geneva Conference of 1954: New Evidence from the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC," *CWIHP Bulletin*, No. 16 (n.p.), 7-104.

<sup>4</sup> PTUDCTN, July 15, 1955, PTTĐỊCH 4041. By November 1955, official RVN sources claim, the total number of refugees reached 887,861. Moreover, as many as 140,000 Vietminh supporters moved in the opposite direction, from South to North, in a movement known as *tập kết* (regrouping) in Vietnamese.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers regarding the famine vary. The DRV – SRV has long maintained that the death toll was two million people. On the other hand, the RVN asserted the numbers to be closer to one million. Despite the significant discrepancy, there is no debate about the devastation wrought by the famine. For recent examinations about the Famine of 1945 see Vu Ngu Chieu, "The Other Side of the 1945 Vietnamese Revolution: The Empire of Viet-Nam (March-August 1945)," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (February 1986); Bui Ming Dung, "Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July, 1995): 573-618; Văn Tạo and Furuta Motoo, *Nạn Đói Năm 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những Chứng Tích Lịch Sử* (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2005); Geoffrey Gunn, "The Great Vietnamese Famine of 1944-45 Revisited," *The Asia Pacific Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (January 31, 2011), <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Geoffrey-Gunn/3483> (accessed on December 15, 2011); Geoffrey C Gunn, *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Văn Tạo and Furuta Motoo, *Nạn Đói Năm 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những Chứng Tích Lịch Sử* (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2005).

than a decade of refugee status. The First Indochina War devastated northern Vietnam, causing the death of hundreds of thousands and dividing Vietnamese.

Among the relations shattered was the fragile accord between the Catholic Church in Vietnam and the DRV. The Church had initially backed Hồ Chí Minh's forces against the French. By 1949, however, Catholic militias in the Red River Delta were resisting the Vietminh. Following the DRV's victory in 1954, many Catholics, as well as non-Catholic Vietnamese who cooperated with the French, feared Vietminh retribution.

Finally, Vietminh policy also sowed seeds of fear in segments of the population. In 1953, the Vietnam Workers' Party launched its infamous Land Reform [Cải Cách Ruộng Đất] campaign, seeking to “separate our friends from our enemies.”<sup>7</sup> Officially intended to redistribute land and eliminate “cruel and ruthless” landlords, the campaign also led to the detention and murder of tens of thousands.<sup>8</sup>

Though the First Indochina War came to an end in 1954, the North—the Red River Delta in particular—had become a cauldron of distrust and panic.<sup>9</sup> On June 30, 1954, French forces began to pull back from the Delta, stoking the anxieties of Vietnamese in the region and causing thousands to follow. This evacuation would become a deluge in the months ahead, fueled by American and non-Communist Vietnamese propaganda that included such slogans as “Christ has gone South” and the

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<sup>7</sup> Decree 239/B TLP, March 2, 1953, in *Văn Kiện Đảng, 1953* (Hanoi: NXB Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2007), 155.

<sup>8</sup> “Chia Ruộng Đất,” *Nhân Dân*, January 27, 1955; “Phiên Tòa thứ nhất xử hai tên địa chủ cường hào gian ác đầu sỏ xã Diễn Trường,” *Tin Cải Cách Ruộng Đất*, March 15, 1955.

<sup>9</sup> For a Communist perspective regarding the fear present in Hanoi in 1954-1955, see Nguyễn Huy Tường's 2006 published diary. Nguyễn Huy Tường, *Nhật Ký: Nghệ Sĩ và Công Dân, Tập 3* (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 2006), 9-39.

“Virgin Mary has departed from the North,” as well as warnings that the United States was preparing to detonate a nuclear bomb over northern Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

French and American naval vessels embarking from Hải Phòng became the chief form of travel for migrants.<sup>11</sup> Catholics comprised the majority of migrants’ numbers. But the migration also included Buddhists, intellectuals, opponents of Communism, those who previously served the colonial administration, soldiers who fought with French forces, certain non-ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese. In the short term, the migration furnished the regime in the South with a major international public relations victory. With both the DRV and RVN claiming to be the rightful representative of Vietnamese aspirations, the exodus of hundreds of thousands from the North was portrayed as a referendum of sorts, a “voting with the feet.”<sup>12</sup>

In the long-term, however, the migration brought relief to the DRV for at least three reasons. The departure of the migrants alleviated rural overcrowding in the Red River Delta and, as a result, freed up land for redistribution. In a region devastated by war, it reduced the threat of famine. It also eliminated potential anti-Communist elements, allowing the government to tighten its political grip.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 153-154;

<sup>11</sup> Bui Van Luong, “The Role of Friendly Nations,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University), 49; Ronald Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954-1955* (Lubbock: Texas Tech, 2007). A significant number of refugees were also ferried by plane and others arrived in the South “independently.”

<sup>12</sup> John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard B Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 154.

For the regime in the South, on the other hand, resolving the impact of the migration became one of the most pressing and contentious issues confronting it.<sup>14</sup> The sheer number of migrants proved overwhelming to the new government. Lacking the manpower and economic resources to manage the emerging crisis, the southern administration turned to the Catholic Church of Vietnam and US government for assistance. But the arrival of the migrants and the regime's attention to their resettlement ignited southern resentment and exacerbated existing regional cultural distinctions.<sup>15</sup>

Due to its scope, the migration played a profound role in the post-colonial socio-cultural transformation of Vietnam. The impact was felt in fields as varied as religion, language, cuisine, demography, farming and the Arts. The migration ignited new movements in press and literature. It provided the manpower to settle regions previously dominated by non-ethnic Vietnamese, such as the Central Highlands (sadly, with harsh consequences). The exodus also changed the dynamics of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Yet scholarly as well as popular representations of the Great Migration of 1954-

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<sup>14</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, 1940-1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion see A Terry Rambo, *A comparison of peasant social systems of Northern and Southern Viet-Nam: a study of ecological adaptation, social succession, and cultural evolution* (Carbondale: CSEAS, NIU, 1973); Keith W Taylor, "Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southern Expansion," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 42-65; Nola Cooke, "The Myth of the Restoration: Dang Trong Influences in the Spiritual Life of the Early Nguyen Dynasty," in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies*, ed. Anthony Reid (London: Macmillan, 1997), 269-295; Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 1998); Nola Cooke, "Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyen Rule in Seventeenth Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina)," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29, no. 1 (1998): 122-61; Keith W Taylor, "Regional Conflict among Viet Peoples between the 13th and 19th Centuries," in *Guerre Et Paix En Asie Du Sud-Est*, ed. The Anh and Alain Forest Nguyen. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998; Keith W Taylor, "Surface Orientation in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of the Nation and Region." *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 4 (1998): 949-78; Choi, Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang, 1820-1841: Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2004).

1955 have failed to capture both its complexity and far-reaching ramifications, leaving the story of the *Bắc di cư* mired in the politics of the Vietnam War.

### *Western Sources*

In his 1960 article “On the Study of Southeast Asia,” DGE Hall, the noted British historian of Southeast Asia, lamented the nature and direction of American scholarship about the region and, in particular, Vietnam. The Cold War had triggered America’s interest in Asia. As a result, Hall argued, the history and people of Vietnam had become prisoner to the prevailing geo-political concerns of the United States.<sup>16</sup> Among the ‘hostages’ captured by Cold War politics was the narrative about both the exodus and refugees.

Informed by recent events in China, Korea and the Philippines, the earliest American accounts of the migration became shaped by existing fear of the spread of Communism. The United States, these writers observers argued, had a “moral obligation” to assist those Vietnamese choosing “freedom” over “tyranny.”<sup>17</sup> Examples of this argument included William Lederer’s “They’ll Remember the Bayfield,” Gertrude Samuels’ “Passage to Freedom in Viet Nam” and Leo Cherne’s “To win in Indochina we must win these people.”<sup>18</sup> Each stressed the sacrifice made by refugees who fled to the

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<sup>16</sup> DGE Hall, “On the Study of Southeast Asia,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 33, No 3 (September 1960), 278.

<sup>17</sup> For an expression of the moral obligation, see Ronald B Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954-1955* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 2007), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Cherne, “To win in Indochina we must win these people” *Look*, January 25, 1955, p 61; William Lederer, “They’ll Remember the Bayfield,” *Reader’s Digest*, March 1955, 1; Gertrude Samuels, “Passage to Freedom in Viet Nam,” *National Geographic*, June 1955, 858.

South and the need for the US to assist them in their quest. Thomas Dooley's *Deliver Us From Evil* represented the most well known of such accounts.

A US Navy doctor, in the late 1950s, Dooley achieved folk-hero status for *Deliver Us From Evil*. The book exposed the reputed atrocities committed by the Vietminh against Catholic Vietnamese, whose only crime was their wish to enjoy religious freedom. Dooley shocked the American public with his accounts of Vietnamese children having chopsticks thrust into their ears by Vietminh soldiers as punishment for listening to the catechism and a Catholic priest sentenced to bear a "Crown of Thorns," eight nails driven into his head.<sup>19</sup> By establishing the humanity of the victims in question, writers like Dooley also offered an argument for America to pursue nation building in the RVN. Failure to support the refugees, observers argued, risked America's own reputation as the symbol of freedom and democracy was riding on this assistance.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most notable expression of this view was by then-Senator John F Kennedy. In a piece entitled, "America's Stake in Vietnam," he contended that among the most significant challenges facing the United States in Vietnam was the resettlement of the northern migrants:

If some one million refugees have fled the totalitarianism of the North only to find neither freedom nor security in the South, then weakness, not strength, will characterize the meaning of democracy in the minds of still more Asians.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas A Dooley, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Story of Vietnam's Flight to Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), 182.

<sup>20</sup> Leo Cherne, "To win in Indochina we must win these people," *Look*, January 25, 1955, 61; Mike Mansfield, "Reprieve in Vietnam," *Harper's*, January 1956, 50

<sup>21</sup> John F Kennedy, *America's Stake in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: American Friends of Vietnam, 1956), 10.

Cast in terms of the politics of the Cold War, the migration was dubbed a referendum in which Vietnamese had “voted with their feet.”<sup>22</sup>

Diệm’s ability to navigate the uncertainty of 1954-1955 and avoid the Geneva-mandated elections of 1956 gave rise to a new narrative, the ‘miracle’ of South Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> Diệm had established a stable regime against tremendous odds. To many observers, the resettlement of the northern migrants had become the embodiment of this success.<sup>24</sup> One of the largest “sudden mass migrations in history,” wrote John Dorsey in the *Far Eastern Survey*, the government had shown itself capable of managing the crisis.<sup>25</sup> As a result, three years on, the nearly 900,000 migrants had been resettled and become self-reliant citizens. Echoing these views, Francis Corley wrote that resettlement exemplified the incredible success South Vietnam was achieving with American assistance. Not only had the northern migrants been permanently settled in areas ideal for self-sufficiency, they were now in a position to make a “substantial contribution” to the

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<sup>22</sup> Wolf Ladejinsky, “Vietnam: The First Five Years,” *The Reporter*, December 24, 1959, 21; Wesley R Fishel, “Political Realities in Vietnam,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 1961), 15.

<sup>23</sup> For examples of the ‘miracle’ thesis see: Chalmers Roberts, “Diem—Symbol of Free New Asia,” *Washington Post*, May 8, 1957; “An Asian Liberator,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1957; Joseph Buttinger, “The Miracle of Vietnam,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 10-31.

<sup>24</sup> John D Montgomery, *Cases in Vietnamese Administration* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1958); Joseph Buttinger, “The Miracle of Vietnam,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 10-31; Wolf Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence*, ed. Wesley Fishel (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1961), 153-175.

<sup>25</sup> John T Dorsey, “South Viet Nam in Perspective,” *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 27, No. 12 (Dec. 1958), 180.

Vietnamese economy.<sup>26</sup> But even in the 1950s not all depictions of the resettlement were positive.

David Hotham, Roy Jumper and Bernard Fall warned that the mass migration as well as the GVN's attention to the resettlement had given rise to regional hostility.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Fall, an American-trained French political scientist specializing in Vietnam, repeatedly challenged the portrait of prosperous refugee camps. Resettlement, he stressed, had failed to achieve many of the objectives the Diệm government set. Most refugees still lived on handouts, unable to survive on the fruit of their labor. As a result, the newcomers had grown distrustful of the GVN.<sup>28</sup> Despite these warnings, in the 1950s, few paid attention. The dominant narrative about the northern migrant remained one of American obligation and the success of resettlement.

As Diệm's image began to decline, the migration and northern migrant became cast in a negative light. Arguably the most important event in transforming perceptions was the so-called Buddhist Crisis of 1963, pitting certain Buddhist factions in Huế against Diệm. In the eyes of many observers, the confrontation highlighted southern resentment over Diệm's alleged favoritism toward his co-religionists, the Catholic

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<sup>26</sup> Francis J Corley, SJ, "Viet-Nam Since Geneva," *Thought*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 131 (Winter 1958-1959), 531.

<sup>27</sup> Roy Jumper, "The Communist Challenge to South Viet Nam," *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 11 (November 1956), pp 166-167; David Hotham, "South Vietnam—Shaky Bastion," *The New Republic*, November 25, 1957, 15; Bernard Fall, "The Birth of Insurgency," *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (New York: Preager, 1966), 170. Originally published in *Pacific Affairs*, September 1958.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Fall, "Danger Signs," *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (New York: Preager, 1966), 160. Originally published in *The Nation*, May 31, 1958.

northerners.<sup>29</sup> The crisis also became a reminder that the GVN had settled hundreds of thousands of *Bắc di cư* in unassimilated communities.

The journalist Robert Shaplen wrote that the migrants had arrived in the South destitute. The refugees “chose” to remain together, starting new villages directed by their priests. In the process, they became “a new class” upon which Diệm could rely and who came to dominate South Vietnam’s government. The Catholic refugees, Shaplen wrote, became Diệm’s “henchmen.” The regime, he claimed, “not only condoned but encouraged” Catholic favoritism and Buddhist discrimination.<sup>30</sup>

In his 1965 bestseller *The Making of a Quagmire*, David Halberstam of the *New York Times* also depicted the refugees a privileged Catholic minority:

A lonely, undesirable minority as far as most Southerners were concerned, they found a friend in Diem, became his most enthusiastic supporters and established their own communities. Diem suspicious of Buddhists and southerners, felt he could trust the newcomers; after all they were refugees and Catholics, and they had no one to turn to but him. Catholic priests naturally encouraged the relationship and thus became a vital part of the Government; Diem in turn used his religion to prop up his weak administration. Favoritism and abuses inevitably resulted; members of the faith became village leaders, and soon most district and province chiefs were Catholics—often in a province whose population was completely Buddhist.<sup>31</sup>

Even Bernard Fall, who had previously stressed the struggles northern refugees encountered under Diệm, was endorsing the favored station of the *Bắc di cư*. In

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<sup>29</sup> Examples of this characterization included: Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian: Vietnam, Southeast Asia and the West* (New York: Penguin, 1964); Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965); Malcolm W Browne, *The New Face of War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); I.F. Stone, “Vietnam: An Exercise in Self-Delusion,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 22, 1965; Joseph Kraft, “A Way Out in Viet-Nam,” in *The Viet-Nam Reader*, eds. Marcus G Raskin and Bernard Fall (New York: Random House, 1965), 315-322.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 191.

<sup>31</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 200-201.

“Sociological and Psychological Aspects of Vietnam’s Partition,” Fall wrote that, “The Catholic refugees, resettled in easily accessible areas, mostly around Saigon and along major roads, became the political shock troops of the regime.” Furthermore, preferential status had given them access to the “choicest” positions in the government and economy.<sup>32</sup>

By the mid-1960s, however, not only were the *Bắc di cư* under Diệm painted as a privileged class, they were increasingly also regarded as possessing questionable nationalist credentials. How could, many western observers wondered, a Vietnamese person embrace Catholicism? It was a religion that embodied the colonialist mission, a venture that had caused so much suffering and pain to the Vietnamese people. As a result, we discover that the literature of this period often treated Vietnamese Catholics as outsiders and even colonial collaborators.<sup>33</sup> Writers based their argument for this on two distinctions. The northern Catholic refugees lived in isolated communities and were the privileged recipients of foreign assistance and the attention of their co-religionist, Ngô Đình Diệm.

Joseph Kraft referred collectively to the northern migrants as a band of “medieval fanatics” who lived isolated from greater Vietnamese society.<sup>34</sup> In *Vietnam: Between Two*

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<sup>32</sup> Bernard B Fall, “Sociological and Psychological Aspects of Vietnam’s Partition,” *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1964), 175.

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm W Browne, *The New Face of War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 282; Robert Scheer, “Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley,” *Ramparts*, January-February 1965, 24; John Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces*. New York: Vintage, 1966, 74; George McT Kahin and John W Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1967), 67; Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph M Kraft, “Politics in Vietnam,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 23, 1966 (Vol 6, No 11) (see <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/jun/23/politics-in-vietnam/>)

*Truces*, the French journalist Jean Lacouture agreed. The northern Catholics were a “fanatical mass” that never integrated into the South.<sup>35</sup> In an essay following the publication of the Pentagon Papers, David Marr, the scholar of Vietnamese history, blamed the *Bắc di cư* for antagonizing southerners with their fanatical Catholicism and almost utter dependence on hand-outs for survival.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the three most important contributions to this argument were George Kahin and John W Lewis’ *The United States in Vietnam* (1967), *The Pentagon Papers* (1971) and Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake* (1972). Kahin and Lewis argued that in spite of DRV guarantees of religious freedom, the *Bắc di cư* realized Hồ Chí Minh’s government would not forget Catholic “collaboration” with the French.<sup>37</sup> The South under Diệm, on the other hand, offered northern Catholics the promise of access to power and government assistance. Thus, they rose to prominence in the government or bolstered the regime as a loyalist bloc. Unfortunately, also guaranteed that they would remain unassimilated, religious outsiders in the eyes of southerners, according to Kahin and Lewis.<sup>38</sup>

The publication of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971 confirmed popular perceptions about the northern refugees and the migration. Among its most important documents, the *Papers* included “Excerpts from Lansdale Team’s Report on Covert Vietnam Mission in

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<sup>35</sup> John Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 74.

<sup>36</sup> David G Marr, “The Rise and Fall of ‘Counterinsurgency’: 1961-1964,” in *The Pentagon Papers* (Senator Gravel Edition), Vol. 5, eds. Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 203-204.

<sup>37</sup> George McT Kahin and John W Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, 67.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

'54 and '55." In it, Edward Lansdale detailed the CIA's operations in Vietnam and reinforced the impression that the CIA had *instigated* the migration.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, the *Papers* also maintained that the northern migrants provided Diệm with "a claque:"

A politically malleable, culturally distinct group, wholly distrustful of Ho Chi Minh and the DRV, dependent for subsistence on Diem's government, and attracted to Diem as a co-religionist... Most were kept unassimilated in their own communities, and became prime subjects for Diem's experiments with strategic population relocation. One heritage of Geneva is the present dominance of South Vietnam's government and army by northerners.<sup>40</sup>

In the final analysis of *The Pentagon Papers*, the northern migrants in Diệm's South Vietnam became a powerful political bloc.

In her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Fire in the Lake*, Frances FitzGerald wrote explained the French had turned Vietnamese Catholics "into a self-conscious elitist minority." At the same time, she argued, Vietnamese Catholicism was,

harsh and medieval, a product of the strict patriariate of the Vietnamese village rather than of the liberal French Church. Its Churches stood like fortresses in the center of each Catholic village, manifesting the permanent defensive posture of the Catholics towards all other Vietnamese.<sup>41</sup>

Collectively, these highly stylized depictions of the *Bắc di cư* entrenched several perceptions. As Catholics, they were not quite Vietnamese. Their failure to integrate was due to their own "medieval" vision of the world. As loyalists to Diệm, northern refugees were feted with assistance and privilege. Yet these accounts failed to consider the exodus and resettlement as migrants experienced it. They also neglected to recognize the impact

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<sup>39</sup> *The Pentagon Papers As Published By The New York Times*. (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 54-67.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, (New York: Little, Brown, 2012), 81.

the migration had on southern society. And while the war came to an end in 1975, this did not improve the place of the *Bắc di cư* in western scholarship.

### *Post-1975*

In the years since 1975, there has been no shortage of examinations of the war, its origins and its lessons. This scholarship has evinced three key elements regarding the northern migrant and migration.<sup>42</sup> First, the migration was the product of an intense propaganda campaign by the United States. Second, as co-religionists, Diệm favored the Catholic northern migrants. Third, conversely, the migrants formed a bloc loyal to Diệm. Like its predecessors, the literature after 1975 generally ignored the effects of the migration and resettlement on the participants and society. Though not the first, no two books played a greater role in promoting this narrative than George Kahin's *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (1987) and Marilyn Young's *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (1991).<sup>43</sup>

Published in 1987, Kahin's *Intervention: How America Became Involved in*

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<sup>42</sup> For various discussions of the two major schools existing in the field see: David L Anderson, *Trapped By Success* (New York: Columbia University, 1991), ix-xv; Marc Gilbert, ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1-45; Philip Catton, "Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War," *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (October 2004), 7-11; Edward G Miller, "War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think About the War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol 1, No. 1-2 (2006), 453-484; Mark P Bradley and Marilyn B Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Some of the early works included: George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1979); Ronald H Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); and William Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986).

*Vietnam* believed the exodus to be the result of the enormous propaganda campaign mounted by the US to utilize article 14d of the Geneva Accords. The campaign aroused the fears of two general groups of northerners, according to Kahin. The first was former civil servants of the French and their dependents as well as soldiers who fought the Vietminh. They fled due to fears of Communist reprisals. They comprised about 25% of the refugee population. The second group was Catholics lured by slogans such as “Christ has gone South.”<sup>44</sup>

Once in the South, Kahin wrote, the *Bắc di cư* became an instrument of the Diệm regime, resettled in “strategically important” areas of the South. Though northern Catholic migrants constituted less than 10% of the southern population, their anti-Communism set them apart from others. The privileged position long occupied by Catholics in the French colonial regime, as well as better access to Western education, equipped them to serve Diệm’s anti-Communist political order.

Published four years after Kahin, Marilyn Young’s *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* portrayed the exodus as the product of CIA propaganda and the migrants’ almost servile-like relationship to the Catholic Church:

Of particular propaganda value to Diem was the exodus of almost 1 million Catholics from north to south who were said to have ‘voted with their feet’ for freedom. They did not really use their feet, nor was their flight entirely about freedom. Encouraged by the Catholic hierarchy and organized by Lansdale and his team, entire parishes were carried south in American ships, following priests who told them Christ had moved south, as well as making promises of land and livelihood. The usefulness of this refugee population did not end with their much-photographed arrival in the South. In effect they were an imported political resource for Diem, a substantial and dependent bloc of loyal supporters.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 76.

<sup>45</sup> Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 45.

Young depicted all *Bắc di cư* as Catholic sharing a single experience.

When forced to consider the role that DRV policy may have played in instigating the flight, she used sleight of hand. Despite the fact that DRV Land Reform had been launched *prior* to the migration, Young refrained from any discussion of land reform until *after* her account about the exodus. Claiming the “thoroughgoing” campaign did not begin until 1955, she gives the impression that DRV policy had no impact on the flight.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Young portrays the migrants as ‘foreigners’ in the South, an “imported” political resource, a status further magnified by their affiliation to a foreign religion. Forming the loyal backbone of the Diệm government, a regime that owed its existence to the United States, the *Bắc di cư* were distrusted by the majority of southerners. As a consequence, Young views the Buddhist crisis as a direct result of this cozy relationship. For nearly a decade, Young explains, “the Catholic Diem” and his family had given benefits and patronage to the northern Catholics, causing the disaffection of the Buddhist “majority.”<sup>47</sup>

The work of Kahin and Young has played a particularly powerful role in the portrayal of the *Bắc di cư* in recent work by scholars such as Joseph G Morgan, John Ernst, Seth Jacobs, Jessica Elkind, James Carter, Mark Bradley, Fredrik Logevall and Jessica Chapman among others.<sup>48</sup> *Embers of War*, Fredrik Logevall’s most recent

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>48</sup> James T Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A Dooley, 1927-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1997); Joseph G Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997); John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998); Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* (Durham, Duke University,

addition to scholarship on the War, frames the migration as an important result of Edward Lansdale and Ngô Đình Diệm's relationship. A propaganda coup for both South Vietnam and the United States that demonstrated Vietnamese repudiation of the Communist regime, Logevall's depiction of the migration ignores the migrants altogether.<sup>49</sup>

For others, the migrants were a privileged group. The Diệm government had shown "undeserved bias" toward the northern refugees, according to John Ernst.<sup>50</sup> In discounting the experience of the northern migrants, Jessica Elkind writes that they were not "stereotypical downtrodden" refugees, many had previously served as civil servants in the colonial administration.<sup>51</sup> James Carter and Seth Jacobs stress that the Catholic *Bắc di cư* were an educated elite to whom Diệm distributed most civil service positions.<sup>52</sup>

Critics of Young and Kahin have fared no better in grasping the complexity of the migration and its impact. In *Triumph Forsaken*, Mark Moyar argues that Diệm was "a wise and effective leader" who successfully resettled the migrants in sparsely populated

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2004); Jessica B Elkind, "The First Casualties: American Nation Building Programs in South Vietnam, 1955-1965" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005); James M Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge, 2008); Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam At War* (New York: Oxford, 2009); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012); Jessica C Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 636-638.

<sup>50</sup> John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998), 22.

<sup>51</sup> Jessica B Elkind, "The First Casualties: American Nation Building Programs in South Vietnam, 1955-1965" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005), 63.

<sup>52</sup> James M Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge, 2008), 59.

provinces.<sup>53</sup> Moyar’s analysis ignores the struggles migrants faced in their new homes, the considerable resentment that southerners felt and the government’s failures. Examining the United States’ role in transporting migrants to the South, Ronald Frankum’s *Passage to Freedom* highlights what he calls “the first major humanitarian effort to aid the Vietnamese people.”<sup>54</sup> However, Frankum’s central actors are the American participants. The refugees only appear as they relate to the American experience. Consequently, he operates on the assumption that resettlement was a success.

### *Vietnamese Sources* *DRV – SRV*

In the 1950s, the DRV produced an enormous corpus of literature concerning the migration and the lives of migrants. Collectively these accounts were marked by three factors. First, they depicted the migration as purely a consequence of “enticement and pressure [dụ dỗ cưỡng ép]” by US, GVN and Catholic Church elements. Second, the sources painted a dismal picture of conditions in the South. Finally, for the most part, they were reputedly first hand accounts based upon the writers’ travels and engagement with *Bắc di cư*.<sup>55</sup> Two examples of this literature were *Thoát Chết* [Escape Death] and

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 40.

<sup>54</sup> Ronald B Frankum, Jr., *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954-1955* (Lubbock: Texas Tech, 2007), 14.

<sup>55</sup> Examples of this genre: Hồ Dzếnh, *Đi Hay Ở* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1954); Sao Mai, *Trại Di Cư Pa-Gốt Hải Phòng* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955); Tình Quê Hương (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955); Hoàng Linh, *Tội của Đế Quốc Mỹ trong việc Bắt Ép Đồng Bào Di Cư Vào Nam* (Hanoi: Sự Thật, 1955); Phùng Quán, *Trên Bờ Hiền Lương* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955); Phạm Huy Khuê, *Sự Thật Trên Một Chuyến Tàu Di Cư Mỹ* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955); Hữu Loan, *Ai Về Ké Sắt: Chuyện Di Cư Bằng Thơ* (Hà Nội: Hưng Văn, 1955); Hữu Loan, *Thoát Chết* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955); Lộng Chương, *Trên Đường Di Cư Vào Nam* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955); *Sự Thật Về Những Vụ Dụ Dỗ và Cường*

*Cuộc Đòi Chìm Nổi của Đồng Bào Bị Cường Ép Di Cư Vào Nam* [The Unstable Existences of Our Compatriots Forced to Migrate South].

In 1955, the poet Hữu Loan published *Escape Death*. Disguising himself as a migrant, Hữu Loan allegedly came South and visited numerous reception and resettlement centers. *Escape Death* detailed migrants suffering from hunger and disease, female refugees being propositioned in resettlement centers and the presence of death always looming. With so many dying, in fact, each encampment even had its own cemetery.<sup>56</sup> Hữu Loan maintained that all of the refugees he interviewed had been forced to come South.

Confirming the abject conditions, in 1957, the anonymously written *The Unstable Existences...* claimed to “expose” the unfulfilling lives of those “coerced to flee South” two years before.<sup>57</sup> The writer stressed the “tremendous pain” the United States and Diệm had caused northern Catholics. Forced to work on rubber plantations and live in unproductive areas, they had lost hope and were now seeking to return North.<sup>58</sup>

Works like these faced obvious shortcomings. Writers portrayed the problems faced by migrants as the result of scheming of the “enemy” [địch]. Such depictions disregarded the reality of a mass migration of this size. Moreover, this literature failed to consider that fleeing refugees had reasons for joining the exodus other than inducement or force.

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*Ép Di Cư* (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 1955); *Cuộc Đòi Chìm Nổi Của Đồng Bào Bị Cường Ép Di Cư Vào Nam* (Hanoi: n.p., 1957).

<sup>56</sup> Hữu Loan, *Thoát Chết* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955), 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Cuộc Đòi Chìm Nổi Của Đồng Bào Bị Cường Ép Di Cư Vào Nam* (Hanoi: n.p., 1957), 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

In the years to come, these early accounts became the foundation for the standard DRV-SRV narrative relating to the migration. Official Communist histories about the First and Second Indochina Wars reflexively described the migration as “conceived of and organized by the imperialist United States,” which lured and pressured Vietnamese, Catholics in particular, with slogans such as “the South is the promised land,” “God has gone South,” and “the United States will use nuclear bombs in the North.”<sup>59</sup> Even today, most Vietnamese scholars continue to cling to the depiction that the migration was the result of schemes to “entice and force” northerners to flee.<sup>60</sup>

Though not replacing the conventional narrative, beginning in the 1980s, literature in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam promoted a new angle to the migration story. The 300-day free passage period, the approach contended, had functioned as an important vehicle for infiltrating the South. In numerous memoirs published since then,

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<sup>59</sup> *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Cảnh Hải Phòng* (Hải Phòng: n.p., 1979); *Thủ Đô Hà Nội: Lịch sử Kháng Chiến Chống Thực Dân Pháp, 1945-1954* (Hanoi: n.p., 1986); *Hồng Bàng: Lịch sử đấu tranh vũ trang cách mạng, 1945-1975* (Hanoi: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1990); *Lực lượng chống phản động, 1945-1954* (Hanoi: Công An Nhân Dân, 1996) [internal distribution]; *Lịch sử Đảng bộ Huyện Xuân Lộc, 1930-2005* (Biên Hòa: Tổng Hợp Đồng Nai, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Nguyễn Hồng Dương, *Hoạt động tôn giáo và chính trị của Công Giáo miền Nam thời Mỹ-Ngụy* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Thanh Niên, 1988); Quỳnh Cư, “Giáo Hội Công Giáo miền Nam trong thời kỳ chống Mỹ cứu nước (1954-1975),” *NCLS*, September-October, 1988; Trần Hữu Hợp, “Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công Giáo người Việt vùng Cái Sắn từ năm 1956-1975” (MA Thesis, Institute of Social Sciences, Hồ Chí Minh City, 2000); Trịnh Hồng Hạnh, “Đấu tranh chống địch cường ép giáo dân di cư vào Nam ở Khu Tả ngạn sông Hồng,” *NCLS*, January 2001, 25-31; Nguyễn Quang Hưng, “Vài nét về cuộc di cư của giáo dân Bắc Kỳ sau Hiệp Định Giơnevơ năm 1954,” *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (June 2004), 22-31; Trần Hữu Hợp, “Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công Giáo người Việt vùng đồng bằng sông Cửu Long” (PhD Dissertation, Institute of Social Sciences, Hồ Chí Minh City, 2005); Nguyễn Văn Khoan, “Về sự kiện chống cường ép di cư cuối năm 1954 đầu năm 1955 tại miền Bắc Việt Nam,” *NCLS*, November 2009, 42-49.

writers described how they had come South disguised as migrants when, in reality, they were serving the North, sent to retrieve information and transmit it back.<sup>61</sup>

The first such memoir was Mai Thanh Hải's *Hai Mươi Mùa Xuân Thầm Lặng* [Twenty Springs of Silence] (1985).<sup>62</sup> But without question the most well known example of this genre was Hữu Mai's historical novel, *Ông Cố Vấn* [The Advisor].<sup>63</sup> Based on the real life experiences of the spy Vũ Ngọc Nhạ, Hữu Mai's story followed the exploits of Hai Long. Fleeing South, Hai Long used his Catholicism and the fact that he had served in the northern Vietnam Catholic militia to conceal his true identity as a DRV agent. Once in the South, Hai Long—like Nhạ—gained the confidence of Diệm and Nhu due to his intellect and connections. As historical fiction, *The Advisor* reportedly demonstrated how Nhạ was ultimately able to infiltrate and serve in the office of the president of both the Diệm and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu administrations.

To what degree such spies influenced events of the Vietnam War-era is debatable. It is clear the Communist government had motives for stressing the success of infiltration, depicting it as part of a master plan to achieve victory. This maneuver transformed what was clearly an embarrassing moment in Communist history—the flight of over

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<sup>61</sup> Mai Thanh Hải, *Hai Mươi Mùa Xuân Thầm Lặng* (Nha Trang: Tổng Hợp, 1985); Đinh Thị Vân, *Tôi Đi Làm Tình Báo: Hồi Ký* (Hanoi: CAND, 1988); Hồ Bá Thuần, *Người ở Dinh Độc Lập* (Hanoi: NXB Hà Nội, 1997); *Lực Lượng Chống Phản Động: Lịch Sử Biên Niên (1945-1954)* (Internal Distribution) (Hanoi: CAND, 1996); Nguyễn Tài, *Về Với Cối Nguồn: Hồi Ký*. (Hanoi: CAND, 1997); Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, *Người lưu dật trở về...* (Hanoi: CAND, 1997); Hàn Song Thanh, *Chân Dung: Một nhà tình báo* (Ho Chi Minh: Văn Nghệ TP, 1999); Lê Giản, *Những ngày sống gió: Hồi Ký* (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 2003); Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Hải, *Trần Quốc Hương: Người thầy của những nhà tình báo huyền thoại* (Hanoi: CAND, 2003); Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Hải, *Trần Quốc Hương: Người chỉ huy tình báo* (Hanoi: CAND, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Mai Thanh Hải, *Hai Mươi Mùa Xuân Thầm Lặng* (Nha Trang: Tổng Hợp, 1985).

<sup>63</sup> Hữu Mai, *Ông Cố Vấn: Hồ Sơ Một Điệp Viên* (Hanoi: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1987).

860,000—into a great triumph. It is, however, also worth noting that these accounts suggest a topic ignored by western scholarship: the role of North Vietnamese espionage during the Vietnam War. In light of the tens of thousands of volumes written about the Vietnam War, this is a remarkable omission.<sup>64</sup>

Over the past decade or so, beginning with the work of Trần Hữu Hợp on Cái Sắn (the western Mekong Delta) in 2000 and Diệp Đình Hoa on Gia Kiệm in Biên Hòa (Đồng Nai province) in 2001, several anthropologists have explored Catholic *Bắc di cư* resettlement communities to understand how they have fared both socially and economically.<sup>65</sup> Still, constrained by the story of Vietnamese nationalism, this scholarship has framed the *Bắc di cư* village as classically Vietnamese. Thus, Diệp Đình Hoa writes that *Bắc di cư* resettlement reflected Vietnamese tradition:

The spirit of community is one of the particular elements of the Vietnamese nation, a precious tradition... It can be said that the collective psyche of the Vietnamese nation has its roots in the spirit of community (tính cộng đồng). Catholic Vietnamese, of course, are first and foremost Vietnamese and therefore cannot escape this custom (thông lệ).<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately, this scholarship completely disregards the conflicts between *Bắc di cư* communities and their southern counterparts. Moreover, on closer inspection, these

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<sup>64</sup> Two Recent exceptions are Larry Berman *The Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) and Thomas A Bass, *The Spy Who Love Us: The Vietnam War and Pham Xuan An's Dangerous Game* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009). While achieving notice in the United States, neither book engages the new scholarship about the Vietnam War or Vietnamese archives that are now available. Moreover, the figure in question, Phạm Xuân Ân, was a southerner.

<sup>65</sup> Trần Hữu Hợp, *Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Cái Sắn từ năm 1956 – 1975*, (MA Thesis, Institute of Social Sciences, Southern region, 2000); Diệp Đình Hoa, *Hố Nai: Lịch Sử Văn Hóa Làng Tân Biên* (Hanoi: n.p., 2001); Trần Hữu Hợp, *Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long* (PhD, Institute of Social Sciences, Southern region, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Diệp Đình Hoa, *Hố Nai: Lịch Sử Văn Hóa Làng Tân Biên* (Hanoi: n.p., 2001), 34.

accounts suffer from overreliance on the official Communist histories cited above. Therefore, the classic generalizations and stereotypes of sixty years ago remain present. These include characterizations of the *Bắc di cư* as forced to migrate, as victim of Diệm policy, and coerced into military service and corvée labor.<sup>67</sup> Rarely, if ever, does this literature engage with RVN sources.

### *RVN Sources*

In the mid- to late-1950s, the Diệm regime published a sizable body of literature relating to the flight South and resettlement. Propaganda for the most part, it was intended to mobilize two groups: the *Bắc di cư* and foreign countries/international organizations. In reaching out to the northern migrants, the government hoped to ease fears and explain GVN policy. Examples of this were *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* [Vietnam's Historic Migration] and *Hoạt Động của Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư và Tỵ Nạn* [Activities of the General Commission for Migrant and Refugee Affairs].<sup>68</sup>

However, the regime's most important medium for communication with refugees was the weekly journal, *Dân Việt* [The Vietnamese People]. Published by the General Commission on Migrant and Refugee Affairs, the *Dân Việt* was launched on July 21, 1955. The magazine was intended to highlight the agency's successes in normalizing life

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 31; Trần Hữu Hợp, "Sự hình thành cộng đồng người Việt Công giáo vùng đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo, Vol. 30, No. 6 (June 2004), 32.

<sup>68</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt-Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957); *Hoạt Động của Phủ Tổng ủy Di Cư Tỵ Nạn trong năm Chấp Chánh thứ III của Ngô Tổng Thống* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957)

for the migrants and, at the same time, to promote the critical importance of migrants becoming “self-reliant” [tự túc, tự lực mưu sinh] as soon as possible.<sup>69</sup>

In reaching out to western countries, the GVN had three purposes: explain the background of the crisis; stress the severity of the migration; and underline the strides the government was making to resolve the challenge. To achieve this goal the GVN distributed such pamphlets as *Why Have 800,000 refugees left North Vietnam?*, *The Refugees of North Vietnam, Resettlement and Refugees* and *Cai-San: The Dramatic Story of Resettlement and Land Reform in the ‘Rice Bowl of the Republic of Vietnam* in the United States.<sup>70</sup>

Throughout the 1954-1975 period, RVN literary treatments of the *Bắc di cư* proved another important mode for defining Vietnamese narratives about the migration and resettlement. The writers themselves were northern migrants, individuals like Mai Thảo, Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Duyên Anh, Dương Nghiễm Mậu, Thế Uyên, Vũ Bằng and Y Uyên, among others, who borrowed from their own experiences as sources of inspiration.<sup>71</sup> As a result, however, this literary production was defined by certain

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<sup>69</sup> See for example: Thanh Việt, “Ý Nghĩa Tự Lực Mưu Sinh,” *Dân Việt*, July 28, 1955 (No. 2), 11; Loan Khế, “Tự Lực Mưu Sinh,” *Dân Việt*, August 4, 1955 (No. 3), 6; Thanh Việt, “Tự Lực Mưu Sinh khác với Tự Lực Cảnh Sinh như thế nào?,” *Dân Việt*, July 11, 1955 (No.4), 6-8.

<sup>70</sup> *Why Have 800,000 refugees left North Vietnam?* (Saigon: GVN, 1955); *The Refugees of North Vietnam* (Saigon: UBHTĐC, 1956); *Resettlement and Refugees* (Saigon: GVN, 1957); *Cai-San: The Dramatic Story of Resettlement and Land Reform in the ‘Rice Bowl of the Republic of Vietnam* (Saigon: Secretariat of State for Information, RVN, 1958).

<sup>71</sup> Mai Thảo, *Đêm Gia Từ Hà Nội* (Saigon: Tự Do, 1955); Mai Thảo, *Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non* (Sáng Tạo, 1956); Duy Thanh, “Khép Cửa,” *Sáng Tạo*, No. 4 (January 1957); Lý Hoàng Phong, “Cái Nhìn,” *Sáng Tạo*, No. 6 (March 1957), 26-32; Doãn Quốc Sỹ, *Dòng Sông Định Mệnh* (Saigon: Tự Do, 1958); Vũ Bằng, *Miếng Ngon Hà Nội* (Saigon: n.p., 1960); Y Uyên, *Có loài chim lạ* (Saigon: Văn, 1971); Dương Nghiễm Mậu, *Kẻ Sống Đã Chết* (Saigon: Giao Điểm, 1972); Duyên Anh, “Người Quê Hương” *Văn Học Miền Nam* (Vol. 1), ed. Võ Phiến (California: Văn Nghệ, 1999), pp 671-687

common elements that often proved narrow and even distorted. The protagonists in this work were generally Hanoians and/or educated elites. At the same time, this literature was also marked by certain absences as well. In particular, both Catholicism and life in the South for migrants was neglected.

In the 1950s, writers like Mai Thảo portrayed the flight as offering opportunity for a new beginning. In “Đêm Giã Từ Hà Nội [The Night of Farewell Hanoi]” (1955), the narrator described the fateful decision that Vietnamese had grappled with just the year before: stay in North and face the “darkness” of Communism that was about to descend or go South and continue the struggle for freedom.<sup>72</sup> Building on the idea that the South was a land of opportunity for *Bắc di cư*, Mai Thảo published the story “Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non [Young Grass of January]” (1956). Like the title suggests, the story was about the possibility for rebirth and hope in a free South Vietnam.<sup>73</sup>

As time past and the partition became permanent, however, historical fiction by Bắc di cư writers relating to the exodus and the lives of migrants became less positive. In 1965, for instance, a decade after the flight, the journal *Văn* [Literature] published a special issue entitled *Hà Nội, The Homeland in Memory* [Hà Nội, Quê Hương trong Trí Nhớ].<sup>74</sup> The hopefulness that filled works in the 1950s was now replaced with nostalgia for the “homeland” [quê hương] left behind. And as the title suggests, the collection was overwhelmingly devoted to Hanoi. Among the titles were Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s “Remembering Hà Nội” [Nhớ Về Hà Nội], Dương Nghiễm Mậu’s “Quyên, a Hanoi far

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<sup>72</sup> Mai Thảo, “Đêm Giã Từ Hà Nội,” *Mưa Núi* (Saigon: Tân Văn, 1970), 20.

<sup>73</sup> Mai Thảo, “Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non,” *Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non* (Sài Gòn: Sáng Tạo, 1956), 11-22.

<sup>74</sup> “Hà Nội, Quê Hương trong Trí Nhớ,” *Văn*, September 15, 1965.

past” [Quyên, dĩ vãng một Hà Nội] and Y Uyên’s “There is a Hà Nội autumn wind” [Có heo may Hà Nội].<sup>75</sup>

In May of 1972, Robert Shaplen published “The Cult of Diem” in the *New York Times Magazine*. Having witnessed more than 5,000 people gather in Saigon the previous November to commemorate the death anniversary of former president Ngô Đình Diệm, Shaplen detailed a resurging interest in South Vietnam about the deceased leader.<sup>76</sup> One might conclude that Vietnamese in the South were expressing a latent reverence for the fallen president. But a closer look demonstrates that this was part of a broader process of self-reflection by Vietnamese in the South following the Tết Offensive of 1968.

Between 1969 and 1973, numerous memoirs and accounts were published concerning the Diệm regime.<sup>77</sup> This reassessment included debate about Diệm’s relationship with both the northern migrant community and its Catholic leaders. Though many of these writers had been supporters of Diệm and served his government, they still provided a depth to these complex relationships that had previously been absent. In

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<sup>75</sup> Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, “Nhớ Về Hà Nội,” *Văn*, September 15, 1965, 19-35; Võ Hồng, “Nhớ Về Hà Nội,” *Văn*, September 15, 1965, 48-54; Dương Nghiễm Mậu, “Quyên, dĩ vãng một Hà Nội,” *Văn*, September 15, 1965, 65-75; Y Uyên, “Có heo may Hà Nội,” *Văn*, September 15, 1965, 79-93.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Shaplen, “The Cult of Diem,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 14, 1972, SM16.

<sup>77</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, Hồi Ký 1940-1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1969); Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật Ký Đỗ Thọ: Tùy Viên Một Tổng Thống bị Giết* (Saigon: Đồng Nai, 1970); Lê Tử Hùng, *Công Dân Áo Gấm: Hồi Ký* (Saigon: Đồng Nai, 1970); Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm thế nào để giết một tổng thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1971); Lê Tử Hùng, *Những Bí Mật Cách Mạng 1-11-1963* (Saigon: Đồng Nai, 1971); Minh Hùng, *Đời Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon: n.p. 1971); Nguyễn Văn Bảo, *Đời Một Tổng Thống: Hình Ảnh Cuộc đời và Sự Nghiệp cổ Tổng Thống Ngô Đình Diệm* (Saigon: n.p. 1971); Trần Tương, *Biến Cố 11: Từ Đảo Chánh đến Tù Đà* (Saigon: Gia Định, 1971); Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cán Lao* (San Diego, CA: Mẹ Việt Nam, 1993); Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Thủy, *Giám mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm 1945-1954* (Sài Gòn: Sử Liệu Hiện Đại, 1973).

particular, the reappraisal exposed the existence of conflict between Diệm and northern migrant Catholic priests.

In his 1969 memoir, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, Hồi Ký 1940-1965* [In the Current of History], Cao Văn Luận highlighted how Diệm “lost trust” in some of the most important northern migrant Catholic Church leaders—in particular Bishop’s Phạm Ngọc Chi and Lê Hữu Từ—when they attempted to establish independent political organizations.<sup>78</sup> Writing under the pseudonym Lương Khải Minh, Trần Kim Tuyền—Diệm’s chief of secret police—echoed the existence of a deepening rift between *Bắc di cư* Catholic leaders and the president in his political memoir *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống* [How to Kill a President]. According to Tuyền, the problem was, in part, due to Diệm’s expectation that all needs—including those of the Church—came second to his government.<sup>79</sup> Accounts also painted a harsh picture of the president’s older brother, the then-Bishop Ngô Đình Thục of Vĩnh Long Diocese.

One of President Diệm’s former bodyguards, Đỗ Thọ, portrayed Thục as casting a long shadow over Diệm’s decision-making and had strained relations between northern migrant Catholic leaders and Diệm. Diệm was not interested in creating a “Catholic state,” the problem was the power his elder brother, the Archbishop Ngô Đình Thục

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<sup>78</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, Hồi Ký 1940-1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1969), 260-261. A priest, Luận hailed from the same province as Diệm’s family (Quảng Bình) and had studied seminary in France. He was a close confidante of Diệm and, in 1958, helped found the University of Huế, where he would also serve as the school’s first rector.

<sup>79</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm thế nào để giết một tổng thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1971), 44.

wielded over him.<sup>80</sup> As the eldest living Ngô Đình brother or *anh trưởng* and the most senior [niên trưởng] Bishop in Vietnam's Council of Bishops, Diệm was unable to deny Thục. This literature portrayed the brothers' relationship as poisoning the well with *Bắc di cư* Church leaders. Still these books continued to depict migrants as completely devoted to Diệm.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to complicating understandings about relations between the Ngô Đình house and Catholics/*Bắc di cư*, the post-1968 reappraisal also shed light on life in northern migrant resettlement villages. Under Diệm, the regime had generally 'recommended' that those Vietnamese conducting field-research on agrarian reform [cải cách điền địa] and new land cultivation [đình điền] avoid *Bắc di cư* resettlement areas. Beginning in the late 1960s, however, students of South Vietnam's National Institute of Administration (NIA) began to examine conditions in these previously restricted sites.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật Ký Đỗ Thọ: Tùy Viên Một Tổng Thống bị Giết* (Saigon: Đồng Nai, 1970), 59. See also Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử*, 308-309; Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào để giết một Tổng Thống*, 44.

<sup>81</sup> Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Thủy, *Giám mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm 1945-1954* (Sài Gòn: Sử Liệu Hiện Đại, 1973), 247; Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao* (San Diego: Mẹ Việt Nam, 1993), 174. Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử*, 245.

<sup>82</sup> On April 7, 1952, Bảo Đại officially signed a decree establishing a new school in the Central Highland town of Đà Lạt. The National School of Administration (*Trường Quốc Gia Hành Chánh*) was initially a branch of the University of Law in Hanoi. After the founding of the Republic of Vietnam in 1955, the regime moved the school to Saigon. In the process, the school was transformed into a discrete institution (no longer a part of the University of Law), symbolized by the modification in the school's name, the National Institute of Administration or *Học Viện Quốc Gia Hành Chánh*. Michigan State University played a formative role in the school's restructuring. For more on the NIA and its origins see Walter R Sharp, "Some Observations on Public Administration in Indochina," *Public Administration Review*, 14 (Winter, 1954); Nghiem Dang, "The National Institute of Administration," in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959); Nghiem Dang, *Viet-Nam: Politics and Public Administration* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1966); John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998).

As a result, dozens of graduation research projects centered on the western Mekong Delta, home to Cái Sắn resettlement region, and Biên Hòa province, site of one of the two largest northern migrant resettlement populations.<sup>83</sup> Though many of the papers are the work of students merely interested in graduating and gaining employment in South Vietnam's bureaucracy, others provide plain accounts about the desperate conditions facing inhabitants in these communities.

In his 1973 thesis, “Đặc Khảo Tài-Chánh Xã Hồ-Nai Tỉnh Biên-Hòa” [Economic Survey of Hồ Nai Commune, Biên Hòa Province], Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu articulated numerous problems that had faced *Bắc di cư* since their arrival in 1954. The soil, they quickly discovered, was of poor quality, making agriculture very difficult. Instead, during the 1950s, they struggled to survive using schemes such as illegal logging and even capturing tigers to sell in Saigon. Failing to make a living through farming, the construction of the Biên Hòa – Saigon highway in 1957 and the establishment of nearby Long Bình airfield provided many *Bắc di cư* families in Hồ Nai alternative economic opportunities, either working for the United States in some fashion or participating in the black market tied to the American presence.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The list of these theses includes Đặng Ngọc Vân. “Vấn-Đề Cải-Cách Điền-Địa tại Việt-Nam Cộng-Hòa” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1969). Đinh Công Đắc. “Vấn-Đề Cải Cách Điền-Địa và Nếp Sống tại Nông-Thôn” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1970); Nguyễn Trình. “Đặt lại vấn đề Cải Cách Ruộng Đất ở Việt Nam” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1972); Vũ Tiến Trung. “Công Giáo Việt Nam và vấn đề tổ chức,” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1972); Đoàn Đức Xuân, “Nghiên Cứu Một Cộng Đồng Liên Xã Khu Cái Sắn,” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, 1973); Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, “Đặc Khảo Tài-Chánh Xã Hồ-Nai Tỉnh Biên-Hòa” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1973); Võ Tự Do, “Công Cuộc Phát Triển Cộng Đồng tại Hồ Nai” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1974).

<sup>84</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, “Đặc Khảo Tài-Chánh Xã Hồ-Nai Tỉnh Biên-Hòa” (Thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1973), 7-8.

Hiếu argued that this shift had two deleterious effects. First, northern migrant ties to the new economy destroyed family and community relations, as well as the “self-reliance [tự túc]” ethic that he claims was an entrenched feature of the community. Second, at the same time, because the villages established were entirely northern and Catholic, *Bắc di cư* had little if anything to do with their southern counterparts. Hiếu even claims that southerners and GVN officials alike referred to Hồ Nai as an “autonomous zone [khu tự trị]” into which strangers dared not enter.<sup>85</sup>

Since 1975, numerous *Bắc di cư* now living abroad have published memoirs. Generally, these books detail the writers’ experiences during the Vietnam War and, in some cases, their post-75 flight.<sup>86</sup> They provide only a narrow account of the transmigration of 1954-1955. As educated individuals able to relate their experiences in written form, the migrants in these memoirs are urban elites, former civil servants to the French, officers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or their children. The experience of peasants is largely absent. Consequently, the Great Migration of these narratives is defined by two common elements, ‘nationalism’ and ‘anti-communism.’<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Ngan, *The Will Of Heaven: The Story of One Vietnamese and the End of His World* (New York: Dutton, 1982); Hoành Linh Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi* (California: Văn Nghệ, 1986); Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Duyên Anh, *Nhà Tù, Hồi Ký* (Los Alimitos: Xuân Thu, 1987); Duyên Anh, *Trại Tập Trung* (Los Alimitos: Xuân Thu, 1988); Hoang Lac and Ha Mai Viet, *Blind Design: Why America Lost the Vietnam War?* (1996); Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University, 2000); Andrew X Pham, *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (New York: Harmony Books, 2008); Nguyễn Công Luận, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Solider* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2012).

<sup>87</sup> Hoành Linh Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi* (California: Văn Nghệ, 1986); Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The*

Reading these memoirs, one has the impression that the participants of the mass exodus of 1954-1955 were, in fact, elites.

### *New Directions*

In recent years, scholarship in the three fields of Vietnam, the Vietnam War and Migration Studies have illuminated new ways in which to think about the transmigration of 1954-1955. Philip Catton's *Diem's Final Failure* (2002) and Edward Miller's *Misalliance* (2013) show the disorder and complexity that faced the South under Diệm. In particular, Miller and Catton both give evidence that establishes the existence of friction between Diệm and northern migrants and raises doubts about the notion of the 'favored class.'<sup>88</sup>

Challenging long-held beliefs about the Catholic Church in Vietnam, Charles Keith's *Catholic Vietnam* (2012) rejects the notion that it was merely a monolithic institution alien to Vietnamese culture and acting on behalf of colonialism.<sup>89</sup> And Andrew Hardy's *Red Hills* (2003) reminds us of the importance of migrant experiences as he examines the migrations of the ethnic-Vietnamese from the Red River Delta to the uplands. Hardy demystifies the classic perception of the Vietnamese tied to his/her village, stressing that migration and movement were essential features of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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*Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University, 2000); Nguyễn Công Luận, *Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Solider* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> Philip E Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2002), 61; Edward G Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2013), 168.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012).

experience in the region.<sup>90</sup> Still, as this dissertation shows, while the *Bắc di cư* may have fled South, they still sought succor and security in northern communities that often comprised people from their own village/parish in the North.

Innovative work by two scholars on the migration and its impact provide the clearest examples of a new approach to the subject. In his 2010 dissertation and 2013 manuscript, Nguyễn Đức Lộc, an anthropologist at the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, examined the continued existence of conflict between *Bắc di cư* and their southern compatriots as well as the former's continued reliance on religious and cultural practices/institutions from the homeland.<sup>91</sup> In *Cấu Hình Xã Hội* [Social Structure], Lộc writes:

Catholic *Bắc di cư* did not forget their northern roots in resettling on southern lands. Though they quickly had to adjust to their new circumstances, they also consolidated and reconstructed classic northern village structures in an effort to preserve traditional cultural values and ease the pain of being far from home. They provided support and comfort for one another as residence in a strange land (người ngụ cư).<sup>92</sup>

However, as Lộc does not examine the events of the 1950s and 60s, his account does not detail the migration, resettlement and the impact they had on society.

The most complete and detailed account of the *Bắc di cư* experience to date is the scholarship of Peter Hansen. In his 2009 PhD dissertation, “The Virgin Mary Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954-1964,” Hansen explores the

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<sup>90</sup> Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2003).

<sup>91</sup> Nguyễn Đức Lộc. “Cấu trúc Cộng Đồng của Người Việt Công Giáo Di Cư Năm 1954 tại Nam Bộ” (PhD dissertation USSH in HCM, 2010); Nguyễn Đức Lộc, *Cấu Hình Xã Hội: Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Bắc Di Cư tại Nam Bộ* (Ho Chi Minh City: National University of Vietnam, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> Nguyễn Đức Lộc, *Cấu Hình Xã Hội: Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Bắc Di Cư tại Nam Bộ* (Ho Chi Minh City: National University of Vietnam, 2013), 47.

Great migration and resettlement under Diệm to a degree never researched before.<sup>93</sup> Yet his main concern in surveying these events is the affect they had on the transformation of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. In his account, the impact on broader southern society is of secondary importance.

In this dissertation, I aim to examine the effect of both the migration and state directed-resettlement on South Vietnam, the society, people and state. Though juridical resettlement officially concluded in 1957, the process had tremendous consequences for the coming Vietnam War and still cast a shadow over Vietnamese society today.

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This dissertation is presented in seven chapters. *Chapter One* examines South Vietnam's efforts to deal with the flood of migrants and the resettlement process. While clearly relocation of the migrants was a crucial problem that necessitated the regime's attention, however, this did not mean Diệm favored the migrants. The government juggled numerous issues demanding resolution including its own mismanagement and corruption. As a result, the GVN was unable to fulfill promises it made to the migrants.

*Chapter Two* surveys relations between *Bắc di cư* and southerners under Diệm. It demonstrates the development of regional hostility born of a complex brew of cultural and religious difference, perceived favoritism on the part of the regime toward northern

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<sup>93</sup> Peter Hansen, "The Virgin Mary Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954-1964," (PhD. Diss., Melbourne College of Divinity, 2009); Peter Hansen, "*Bắc di cư*: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and their role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2009), 173-211.

migrants and the resettlement of migrants in unassimilated communities. *Chapter Three* chronicles tensions between the Catholic Church and Diệm over resettlement, in particular the forced relocation of migrants to the Central Highlands in 1956 and 1957. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Church and Catholic migrants did not necessarily provide the regime a ‘loyalist bloc.’

*Chapters Four and Five* explore South Vietnam’s reputed model resettlement center, Cái Sắn. Located in the lower Mekong Delta, the government tabbed the region due to several factors including the land allegedly being fertile and lightly populated. Cái Sắn received enormous amounts of American aid and was immediately hailed as a prototype for agricultural development in Vietnam. Yet from the outset, the project met numerous obstacles that led to government – migrant, migrant – southerner, government – Church and even migrant – migrant confrontations.

*Chapters Six and Seven* describe the rise and fall of what I call the *Bắc di cư* press. As migrants arrived in the South, among the many problems the government faced was communication with the new arrivals. Diệm encouraged the establishment of newspapers for this purpose. Among those papers introduced were the *Tự Do* [Liberty], *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* [Free Literature and Arts] and *Thời Luận* [Current Commentary]. However, it became quickly apparent that Diệm’s expectations and the needs of migrants and the newspapers were not synonymous. Thus, the two chapters show that rather than supplying a medium for the government, the *Bắc di cư* press became the first significant source of non-Communist public opposition to the Diệm regime following the establishment of the RVN. Finally, the *Conclusion* argues that these *fragmented loyalties* continue to trouble Vietnamese society today.

**Chapter 1—“Fertile Lands Await”:  
The Promise and Pitfalls of Directed Resettlement, 1954-1958**

*Introduction*

On August 3, 1954, just twelve days after the conclusion of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, the new Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm, visited Vietnam’s northern cities of Hải Phòng and Hanoi. This visit marked the second of two made by Diệm during the summer of 1954 and the only time a standing leader of either half of Vietnam *publicly* visited the other during the course of the country’s twenty-plus-year division.<sup>1</sup> Standing on the steps of Hanoi’s Ngô Quyền Palace, Diệm addressed a crowd officially estimated to be tens of thousands.<sup>2</sup> The recently appointed head of state had a dual objective: promote his fledgling government in Saigon and persuade Vietnam’s northern population to flee South. “As you know,” he began,

following the ceasefire, our country has been divided in two. The northern half of the country is about to be shackled by the cruelty of Communism. To stay in the North is to tempt fate and become sacrifices for an inhumane ideology and a ruthless political aim [...] For this reason, you will flee South to the land of the Nation [Quốc Gia], where you will find freedom and your needs fulfilled.

I understand your concerns, your fears. I recognize that each of you face a heartrending separation from your native land as you temporarily retreat from the land of your ancestors [nơi chôn rau cắt rốn]. Here I want to assure you, my compatriots, that you need not worry about tomorrow. Your choice of freedom will not lead you on a pointless journey.

By embracing the GVN, you will not only find a land of freedom, worthy of human dignity, but you will be furnished with enough to start life anew, both spiritually and materially. You will be given the freedom to choose where you want to move. Upon arriving in your new homes, reception committees will see to your needs. My fellow citizens, you will be given both the time necessary to select your occupation and the assistance to reestablish yourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Diệm also visited Hanoi for forty-eight hours between June 30 and July 2, 1954. “Dân chúng Bắc Hà nhiệt liệt đón tiếp thủ tướng Ngô Đình Diệm,” *Liên Hiệp* (Hanoi), July 1, 1954.

<sup>2</sup> “Hàng vạn dân chúng tụ tập trước dinh Ngô Quyền để hoan hô Thủ Tướng NĐD và yên cầu cho họ di cư ngay vào Nam,” *Giang Sơn* (Hanoi), August 4, 1954.

Civil servants will be retained, young people will be given the help to continue their studies, workers will be invited to join those enterprises needing employees, while *the fertile lands of the South await* the industrious and clever hands of our northern farmers...<sup>3</sup>

Diệm's words painted an idyllic picture of what awaited northerners in the South. Though short on specifics, the speech pledged material assistance, employment and the chance to choose one's home. However, the proclamation notwithstanding, Diệm's government faced a myriad of obstacles if it hoped to fulfill those promises he made.

The received wisdom about state-directed resettlement in South Vietnam has long confused the Diệm regime's active encouragement of the exodus as indicative of "a bias shown toward northern Catholic refugees."<sup>4</sup> In the eyes of many scholars and observers, the fact that the Diệm government made frequent promises of support to those who fled South became de facto evidence of favoritism toward northern migrants.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the extraordinary size of American assistance earmarked for GVN-conducted resettlement further cemented the belief that the Vietnamese government showered the *Bắc di cư* with support.<sup>6</sup> Despite the promises and assistance, however, the reality of state-directed resettlement was very different.

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<sup>3</sup> "Lời hiệu triệu của Thủ tướng Ngô Đình Diệm" August 2, 1954, Hanoi, pp 17-18; File 2992, PTTCPVNCH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City. For other accounts see: "Thủ tướng Ngô Đình Diệm đã tới Hà Nội sang hôm qua..." *Liên Hiệp*, August 3, 1954; Biểu tình hoan hô thủ tướng Ngô Đình Diệm và ủng hộ phòng trào di cư vào Nam," *Liên Hiệp*, August 4, 1954; "Hàng vạn dân chúng tụ tập trước dinh Ngô Quyền để hoan hô Thủ Tướng NĐĐ và yêu cầu cho họ di cư ngay vào Nam," *Giang Sơn* (Hanoi), August 4, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998), 22.

<sup>5</sup> George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 76-77.

<sup>6</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 200-201; Frances Fitzgerald *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002), 85; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention*, 77; Seth Jacobs: *America's*

Diệm and his government had to navigate numerous challenges during those first years after Geneva.<sup>7</sup> The socio-political landscape of the southern half of Vietnam at the time of the Geneva Accords was fragmented, a checkerboard of forces whose allegiances were uncertain. Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious groups held sway over large swaths of territory around Saigon and the Mekong Delta. The Bình Xuyên gang controlled the Saigon metropolitan police force under an agreement with Bảo Đại. The leadership of the National Army demonstrated little if any allegiance to the new Prime Minister. Finally, the specter of Communism cast a long shadow over the South.

Complicating the hostility to his government from without, Diệm also had to cope with the reality of a fragile mandate. The end of colonialism and the First Indochina War had done nothing to assuage fears about the future. By stipulating national elections be held in 1956 to unite Vietnam under a single government, the Geneva Accords unwittingly engendered an environment of uncertainty and diminished morale among civil servants. Officials of the Government of Vietnam, or GVN, found themselves serving what felt like nothing more than a placeholder authority. This gave way to what

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Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia (Durham: Duke University, 2004), 133

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1958); Bernard Fall “South Viet-Nam’s Internal Problems,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (September 1958): 241-260; Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford, 1968); George McT Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Marilyn B Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); Philip E Catton (2002); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2006); Mark Bradley, *Vietnam At War* (New York: Oxford, 2009); Nguyễn Công Luận, *Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2012); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2013); Edward G Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2013).

many observers referred to as a prevailing attitude of *attentisme* or “political fence-sitting,” in Vietnamese, *trùm chẵn*.<sup>8</sup> It was under such conditions of apathy, suspicion and conflict that Diệm’s government faced the arrival of more than 860,000 refugees over the course of just ten months, an exodus that the International Rescue Committee (IRC) later called one of the most significant migration crises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and one that many Vietnamese would eventually refer to as the “Great Migration” or *Cuộc Di Cư Vĩ Đại*.<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter I examine the GVN resettlement apparatus and the problems related to it. I ask the question: how did GVN policies shape resettlement? More specifically, how did it shape migrant relations with the government? Simply put, it provoked distrust among refugees. Not only was the government unable to live up to the promises made in Hanoi but state-directed resettlement also caused a host of challenges for migrants attempting to settle into their new lives. Dispelling the conventional belief that *Bắc di cư* were the privileged class of Diệm’s South Vietnam, nonetheless, this chapter demonstrates that he considered GVN resettlement a model for all future land development in the RVN.

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<sup>8</sup> Roy Jumper “The Mandarin Bureaucracy and Politics in South Vietnam,” *Pacific Affairs*, 30 (March 1957), 49; Nguyễn Thái, *Is South Vietnam Viable?* (Manila: Carmelo & Bauermann, 1962), 45; John C Donnell, “Politics In South Vietnam: Doctrines Of Authority In Conflict” (Ph.D. Diss, University of California, Berkeley, 1964), 77; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1964), 50; Edward G Miller, “Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945-1954,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (October 2004), 435.

<sup>9</sup> Alton Kastner, “A Brief History of the International Rescue Committee,” undated, 6, available at [http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/migrated/resources/history\\_of\\_the\\_IRC.pdf](http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/migrated/resources/history_of_the_IRC.pdf) (retrieved 3/21/2012); Aaron Levenstein, *Escape to Freedom: The Story of the International Rescue Committee* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 207; Louis A Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Viet-Nam, 1954-1975* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988); Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man In Vietnam*, 134.

*Background: Numbers and Their Meanings*

The numbers surrounding the *Great Migration* were staggering. Yet the size and scope of the exodus has often been obscured by the impreciseness of the statistics. Between 1955 and 1959, the GVN alone used multiple official figures.<sup>10</sup> In June 1955, the PTUDCTN, the agency in charge of resettlement, claimed that 810,000 people had participated in the migration.<sup>11</sup> By October, however, the agency claimed a total of 886,881 people, a figure that remained relatively consistent.<sup>12</sup> Finally, at a 1959 symposium, a high-ranking GVN official gave the figure 928,152 refugees.<sup>13</sup> The government typically explained the discrepancies as a result of two factors. First, one portion of the refugees did not originally appear in official accounting because they had fled independently. Second, refugees continued to seek asylum after the May 18, 1955 deadline.

In September 1955, The Catholic Church in South Vietnam declared the total number of migrants to stand at 860,206, a number it and many scholars continued to use for years to come.<sup>14</sup> In a confidential file the same month, the United States claimed the

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<sup>10</sup> *Tự Do*, July 12, 1955; *Thời Luận*, June 30, 1955; Bùi Văn Lương, *Hoạt động của Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư và Tỵ Nạn trong năm chấp chánh thứ III của Ngô Tổng Thống*, June 20, 1957, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President Diệm, 217/TU/VP/M (Secret), July 15, 1955, 1, File 14744, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>12</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President Diệm, 97/TU/VP/M (Secret), November 21, 1955, 5, File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII; “Hoạt Động của PTUDCTN từ tháng 7/1955-tháng 6/1956,” *Dân Việt*, July 7, 1956, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Bui Van Luong, “The Role of Friendly Nations,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W. Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 49.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, *Số Định Cư* September 1955, 17, File 14758, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

figure of 821,524.<sup>15</sup> A secret North Vietnamese document, dated 1956, actually claimed that over 892,000 migrants participated in the flight South.<sup>16</sup> *The Pentagon Papers* later cited 900,000 northern *civilians*.<sup>17</sup> Adding to the uncertainty of the figures, officials and commentators regularly used the estimate of *one million* migrants.<sup>18</sup> While any one of these numbers was enormous, no statistical consensus existed.

In addition to the quantitative impreciseness, the transmigration faced another challenge. In a country understood to be predominantly Buddhist, the migration's predominantly Catholic composition overshadowed the crisis. According to a Vietnam's Catholic Church figures of September 1955, the migration's religious composition appeared as follows:

*Statistical Breakdown of Migration Based on Religion*<sup>19</sup>

Religion	Migrants
Catholic	676,348
Buddhist	182,817
Protestant	1,041
Total	860,206

Based on these statistics, Catholics comprised almost 79% of the refugee population. In a secret GVN report one month later, Catholics made up 76.3% of the total.<sup>20</sup> Finally, at a

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<sup>15</sup> "Vietnam Refugee Resettlement Program (Confidential)," September 29, 1955, 1, Ronald B Frankum Collection, VVA, TTU.

<sup>16</sup> Nguyễn Quang Hưng, interviewed by Jason Picard, Hanoi, September 24, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> *The Pentagon Papers Gravel Edition*, Volume 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 247.

<sup>18</sup> Ngô Đình Diệm, "Reopening of the Dong Cam Dam" in *Major Policy Speeches by President Ngo Dinh Diem* (Saigon: Press Office, 1956), 17; *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*, October 26, 1956; "Address of his Excellency Ngo Dinh Diem, President of the Republic of Vietnam," Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York, May 14, 1957, Douglas Pike Collection, VVA, TTU.

<sup>19</sup> VP UB Hộ Trợ Định Cư, *Sổ Các Làng Định Cư* (Saigon, 1956), 13, File 14757, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

1959 symposium at Michigan States University, a GVN representative maintained that almost 86% of all refugees had been Catholic.<sup>21</sup>

As a result commentators have tended to wage debate over the statistics and the significance, while ignoring the ramifications of a population movement this size. In 2005, John Prados argued that the figure of one million refugees was an old “chestnut.” Instead the ultimate number barely reached 800,000 people and of these 350,000 were either forced or duped to come South.<sup>22</sup> Seth Jacobs agreed explaining that by and large the exodus was the product of one of the most “audacious propaganda campaigns” in the history of covert operations, concocted by Edward Lansdale and his Saigon Military Mission (SMM) team.<sup>23</sup> And Sophie Quinn-Judge maintained that most *Bắc di cư* were *passive actors* in the decision to flee South.<sup>24</sup> Such a debate both distorts and minimizes the scope of the crisis.

In 1954, the entire population of Vietnam was estimated to be just over twenty-four million people. Therefore, the transmigration led to a shift on the order of 4% of the entire population of Vietnam and a 9% increase of the South’s total population, estimated to have been over ten million at the time. A migration of this magnitude would have caused trouble for any government. When examined against the conditions facing

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<sup>20</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, Monthly Report (October 1955), 97/TU/HC/M, November 24, 1955, 5; File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII. This claims the number of “Buddhists” to have been 209,492.

<sup>21</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, “The Role of Friendly Nations,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W. Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 49.

<sup>22</sup> John Prados, “The Numbers Game: How Many Vietnamese Fled South In 1954?” *The VVA Veteran*, January/February 2005, accessed October 2012, [http://www.vva.org/archive/TheVeteran/2005\\_01/feature\\_numbersGame.htm](http://www.vva.org/archive/TheVeteran/2005_01/feature_numbersGame.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* (Durham, Duke University, 2004), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, “Review,” *H-Diplo Article Roundtable Review*, Vol. XI, No. 12 (2010), 8.

southern Vietnam in 1954-1955, it is no wonder that many viewed the situation as “doomed.”<sup>25</sup>

### *Resettlement and Administration in Theory*

Theoretically, GVN “rehabilitation” of the northern migrants occurred in three phases. These were reception or *tiếp cư*, relocation or *định cư* and localization or *địa phương hóa*. Ideally, the *reception* stage provided northern migrants temporary shelter, food and living allowance while they awaited permanent resettlement. It was supposed to conclude within a few months of the end of the 300-day free passage period. The second phase, *relocation*, was intended to settle migrants in areas appropriate to their occupations. Thus, farmers would be resettled in locations with land suitable to agriculture and fisherfolk near water. Moreover, during this stage, new villages were to be erected. This included the construction of homes, wells, schools, churches and pagodas, by and for the new inhabitants. The relocation phase also began with the arrival of the first northern migrants in 1954.<sup>26</sup>

Theoretically, by the final stage of the process, referred to as *localization*, migrants had both become independent and adapted to their new communities, no longer requiring GVN assistance. As a result, local authorities took responsibility for these new

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<sup>25</sup> Peggy Durdin, “Saigon in the Shadow of Doom,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 21, 1954; Joseph Alsop, “An Asian Munich,” *Washington Post*, December 31, 1954; Robert Shaplen, “The Enigma of Ho Chi Minh,” *The Reporter*, January 27, 1955, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư và Tị Nạn, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử Tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957), 115-209; Ralph Smuckler, “Research Report: Field Study of Refugee Commission,” Michigan State University Group, September 20, 1955.

villages.<sup>27</sup> The entire process was intended to allow *Bắc di cư* to achieve individual self-sufficiency [tự túc] and collective integration into southern society.

The main agency overseeing the resettlement process was the *Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư và Tị Nạn* (PTUDCTN) or *General Commission on Migrant and Refugee Affairs* (often referred to by its French acronym COMIGAL). Officially launched on September 17, 1954, two months *after* the conclusion of the Geneva Conference, the PTUDCTN was a cabinet-level agency. For two crucial reasons, the PTUDCTN quickly became one of the most important GVN agencies during its nearly forty-month existence. First, the crisis had drawn international attention and, as a result, vast amounts of assistance. Second, for the sake of re-establishing order and fulfilling promises, such as those made in Hanoi, resettlement needed a quick resolution.<sup>28</sup>

The agency's original headquarters were located at 449 Galliéni Street (soon to become Trần Hưng Đạo Boulevard).<sup>29</sup> A Director-General (*Trưởng Tổng ủy*) headed the agency and had equivalent rank to a government minister. During the course of its existence, three commissioners directed the agency: Ngô Ngọc Đồi, Phạm Văn Huyền and Bùi Văn Lương. The central PTUDCTN consisted of five bureaus: Chief of Staff (Nha Đồng lý), Inspection (Nha Thanh tra), Migrant Reception (Nha Tiếp cư), Resettlement (Nha Định cư) and the Finance Service (Nha Tài chính sự vụ).<sup>30</sup> In

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, Hồi Ký 1940-1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1969), 278; Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm thế nào để giết một tổng thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1971), 45.

<sup>29</sup> Over the course of its 39 months, the PTUDCTN had three headquarters. The destruction of the facility caused by the Battle of Saigon in May 1955 forced the PTUDCTN to move to 29 Thống Nhất Street. The last PTUDCTN offices were located on Đồng Khánh Street.

<sup>30</sup> “Lược đồ tổ chức PTUDCTN trước ngày 17-9-1955,” 37, File 4157, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

September of 1955, the agency announced reforms to its organizational structure.<sup>31</sup>

Among the changes, the Reception Bureau was closed in response to the conclusion of the migration period.

The responsibilities of the PTUDCTN were immense. The agency was in charge of coordinating the operations of the welcome centers and temporary shelter sites. It conducted the transportation for hundreds of thousands of migrants from arrival points to camps. It supplied food, bedding, money and tents. Through its own health services (Sở Y tế Xã hội), the PTUDCTN offered migrants health care and medicine. Once relocated, the agency would coordinate the construction of homes, schools, health clinics, roads, places of worship, as well as providing the resources for communities to become self-sufficient (i.e. implements for farming and fishing). It was also the responsibility of the PTUDCTN to communicate information and government policy to those migrants in its care. To this end, the PTUDCTN published its own magazines and distributed them to all camps. The most famous of these was the *Dân Việt* (Việt People).<sup>32</sup>

At the province level, the agency had representative offices known as the Resettlement Representative or *Ty Đại diện Định cư*. Ostensibly it oversaw all projects and initiatives on behalf of the PTUDCTN in that province. Each village/camp had its own elected body, the *Ủy ban Định cư* or Resettlement Committee.<sup>33</sup> This committee

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<sup>31</sup> See Ralph Smuckler, "Research Report: Field Study of Refugee Commission," Michigan State University Group, September 20, 1955, 6 (Unpublished). In part, these reforms were based on recommendations made by Michigan State University.

<sup>32</sup> Other examples of this were the *Hòn Quê* and *Quê Hương*.

<sup>33</sup> Phủ Tổng Ủy Di cư và Tị nạn, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957), 71.

oversaw the operation of the camp, distribution of such things as food, money and tools to the *Bắc di cư* and communication with the PTUDCTN.<sup>34</sup>

Though the creation of the commission represented an upgrade in terms of GVN attention to the resettlement of the *Bắc di cư*, the PTUDCTN still faced serious shortcomings. For instance, at its height in 1956, the entire PTUDCTN staff totaled 1442 or just over one percent of the entire bureaucracy.<sup>35</sup> Shorthanded and faced with a migration of this scope, the agency reached out to foreign governments and other institutions.<sup>36</sup> Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) providing assistance included the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and CARE.<sup>37</sup> The French government provided financial and technical support and the Philippines sent medical assistance through Operation Brotherhood.

The two most significant players, however, were the US government and Catholic Church of Vietnam. The US provided the overwhelming majority of financial assistance for resettlement of the *Bắc di cư*, by some estimates 97% of all monetary aid.<sup>38</sup> During the period 1954-1957, US aid allocated to refugee resettlement reached as much as 121

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>35</sup> N21-9, TĐBCPNP, From Bùi Văn Lương to President, Document 922/VP/M (Secret), “việc do PTUDCTN phụ trách tại Cái Sắn,” in October 5, 1956, p 219, TTLTQGII, Ho Chi Minh City; Walter W Mode, et al., “Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Field Proposed Field Organization of the Commissariat for Refugees of September 20, 1955,” Michigan State University Advisory Team (Saigon), June 29, 1956, 8. Estimates place the total bureaucracy of South Vietnam at the time to have been 129,000.

<sup>36</sup> In 1954, the US charge d’affaires in Saigon complained that “Diệm’s only formulated policy was to ask for immediate American assistance.” See George McT. Kahin, *Intervention*, 78.

<sup>37</sup> For CARE’s concluding report on its response to the crisis see “CARE in Vietnam,” November 30, 1958, 1-38; Douglas Pike Collection, VVA, TTU.

<sup>38</sup> Phạm Văn Huyền to PM, 1444 TU/VP, March 11, 1955, 19, File 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII. The main directive overseeing the monetary assistance was 95-VP/1.

million US dollars.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the US government provided technical expertise both directly and through agencies such as the Michigan State University Group (MSUG).<sup>40</sup>

Still money and technical know-how did not resolve the other major problem facing Diệm's government: the need for leadership and administration in each of these villages. For that, the GVN turned to Vietnam's Catholic Church. Thus, Vietnamese clergy supervised much of the resettlement operations at the village level to cover for a government facing manpower shortages. This reliance on non-governmental and international assistance would lead to a host of problems that in turn inflamed conflict between the *Bắc di cư* and southern communities, the GVN and the Church and even the government and the *Bắc di cư*, the bloc reputedly loyal to the government.

#### *Early GVN Efforts to Manage the Crisis*

The PTUDCTN was not, in fact, the first initiative launched to assist fleeing migrants in South Vietnam. As early as July 3, 1954, two and half weeks before the conclusion of the Geneva Conference, Diệm announced the establishment of a Council to sponsor migrant compatriots (Hội Đồng bảo trợ đồng bào di cư). Its mission was to help those people

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<sup>39</sup> Jessica B Elkind, "The First Casualties: American Nation Building Programs in South Vietnam, 1955-1965" (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2005), 78. George Kahin claimed that in December 1954, the United States allocated \$282 million US to pay for resettlement. I believe that Kahin added a zero to this figure. At no time did the Vietnamese government receive almost \$300 million dollars to manage the crisis. Instead, in 1954, the US officials did provide \$28.5 million US (or 1.4 billion piasters) for resettlement. George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1987), 77.

<sup>40</sup> For more about the Michigan State University Group and the role it played in the refugee resettlement refer to John Ernst, *Forging A Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998).

already fleeing their homes.<sup>41</sup> On July 23, 1954, just hours after receiving word from his foreign minister of the “debacle” at Geneva, Diệm issued his secret “Directive regarding North Vietnam migration [Chỉ thị về di cư Bắc Việt]” to all ministries and departments of the GVN.<sup>42</sup> The instructions included basic plans for promoting the migration; the organizing and care of those seeking to come South; transportation; and, most importantly as it relates to this chapter, resettlement assistance.

The directive emphasized that *all* those fleeing South—civil servant, soldier, merchant, student, farmer, etc.—would receive resettlement assistance. The government would provide temporary shelter, a living stipend for an unspecified period of time and it would help find work, provide land, assist in building homes and provide means of production. Days later, Diệm publicly confirmed these plans in his Hanoi address, promising that the government would see to their needs.<sup>43</sup> Yet the government’s initial steps lacked focus and coordination.

Between the end of the Geneva Conference and the first week of August, numerous subcommittees tasked with providing assistance were launched. The first of these was the *Committee to Assist North Vietnamese Evacuees* [Ban Cứu trợ đồng bào Bắc Việt tản cư] on July 19. Over the course of the next two weeks, this was followed by the establishment of several other agency’s, among them the *Provisional Committee of Civil Servants to Assist Evacuees* [Ủy ban Lâm thời Công Tư chức cứu trợ đồng bào tản cư], the *Committee to support North Vietnamese migrants and refugees* [Ủy Ban Chấn Tế

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<sup>41</sup> “Thành lập tại HN một Hội Động bảo trợ đồng bào di cư,” *Liên Hiệp*, July 4, 1954.

<sup>42</sup> Diệm, 126-PTT/DL/M, “Chỉ thị về di cư Bắc Việt,” July 23, 1954, 25-28, N21-19, TĐBCP, NACII.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Đông Bào Bắc Việt Di Tản Cư], a Catholic agency, and the *Committee to Assist Northern Migrant War Victims* [Ủy Ban Cứu Trợ Nạn Nhân Chiến Tranh Bắc Việt Di Cư].<sup>44</sup> In addition, GVN ministries like the Ministry of Justice established committees devoted solely to assisting their respective bureaucrats from the North. Even the Consulate of the Republic of China organized a bureau to assist those evacuees of Chinese heritage.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the haphazard approach meant that little coordination existed among the committees.<sup>46</sup>

Upon returning from Hanoi, Diệm looked to organize a more collaborative and formal response to the expected flood. To achieve this, he first turned to Dr. Phạm Hữu Chương, Diệm's then-Minister of Social Action and Health.<sup>47</sup> A northerner, Chương had a reputation as a doctor deeply concerned with rural health. During the First Indochina War, he served as a top health official in the Vietminh government.<sup>48</sup> After breaking with the DRV, Chương became a member of Diệm's first cabinet, serving as health minister between 1954 and 1955. He soon split with Diệm as well and, in 1960, Chương was among the eighteen critics to sign the so-called Caravelle Manifesto demanding the then-President make reforms.

In 1954, however, Chương responded to Diệm's assignment by organizing the Migrant Assistance Service [Sở Thân trợ Đông bào Di cư], an office within his

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<sup>44</sup> 27-PTT/DL, July 22, 1954, 18; File N21-19, TĐBCPNV, NACIL.

<sup>45</sup> ĐBCPNV, 2768-HCSV, August 20, 1954, 10; File N21-19, TĐBCPNV, NACIL.

<sup>46</sup> An umbrella organization known as the *Central Assistance Committee* [Ủy ban Trung ương Cứu Tế] was formed to coordinate operations but failed to take off.

<sup>47</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam*, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Order 33/SL (Nước Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hòa), March 4, 1950, Signed by Hồ Chí Minh.

ministry.<sup>49</sup> Chương appointed Ngô Ngọc Đới to lead the new service. Though little information exists about Đới, he appears to have been an associate of Chương's during the First Indochina War. The three duties of the Migrant Assistance Service were to locate shelter for refugees, organize camps and disperse assistance. By the end of August 1954, 32 reception stations had been organized and received 44,211 people, a figure that excluded those migrants affiliated with government ministries and the national army.

From the outset, Chương realized that his ministry could not devote the attention necessary to the budding crisis.<sup>50</sup> By some estimates, 3-4,000 people were arriving everyday.<sup>51</sup> The Ministry of Social Action lacked sufficient personnel to deal with the burgeoning flight. Complicating matters, this was not the only emergency confronting his ministry. The First Indochina War had wrought devastation that affected all aspects of society, a matter I deal with in chapter two.

Just a few weeks after taking the reins of migrant resettlement, Minister Chương recommended a cabinet-level agency be established, one whose sole purpose would be the management and care of *Bắc di cư* and the coordination of all related operations. On August 27, 1954, the government announced plans to pursue the establishment of such an agency.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The service's headquarters were placed in Saigon's Hospital of the Common People.

<sup>50</sup> In fact, two days after being assigned responsibility for arriving migrants, Chương wrote Diệm that his office was not equipped for the expected exodus.

<sup>51</sup> Prime Minister, 85-CP, September 17, 1954, 9, File 4157, PTTCPVNCH, NACIL.

<sup>52</sup> In fact, plans for the PTUDCTN had been discussed in the weeks prior to the August 27 announcement, however, Diệm did not act upon them. Though no clear reason exists, there is one possible explanation. Not wanting to relinquish the North, Diệm continued to search for ways to prevent the Vietminh takeover. This included wanting would-be migrants to stay put.

The new commission would be an offshoot of the Ministry of Social Action's Service on Migrants and Refugees and led by Ngô Ngọc Đồi. It was named the *General Commission on Migrant and Refugee Affairs* (PTUDCTN) and launched on September 17, 1954. At the same time, overwhelmed GVN officials also made another decision, one that would have profound implications for northern migrants, southern society and the regime.

On August 25, Đồi approached Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi to request the assistance of Vietnam's Catholic Church for the care and resettlement of *Bắc di cư*. Chi had been the Bishop of Bùi Chu Diocese in the Red River Delta, one of the main centers of Catholicism in Vietnam and a stronghold opposing Communism during the First Indochina War. In 1954, prior to the migration, the Catholic population of Bùi Chu was estimated to be 209,000 people, making it easily the largest diocese in Vietnam.<sup>53</sup> Thus, arriving in Saigon, Chi was the titular leader of the Catholic exodus. This status appears to have been officially confirmed by Rome's Apostolic Delegate, John Dooley, who had authorized Chi to oversee care for *Bắc di cư* clergy and laity, according to several Church sources.<sup>54</sup>

On September 1, Phạm Ngọc Chi announced the establishment of the *Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee* (Ủy Ban Hộ Trợ Định Cư or UBHTĐC) at Huyện Sĩ Church, 1 Bùi Chu Street in Saigon. The committee consisted of one representative from each of the ten northern Vietnam dioceses plus Chi, who became the committee's

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<sup>53</sup> *Sổ Định Cư*, September 1955, 18, File 14757, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>54</sup> Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám, 1964 (Saigon: Sacerdos, 1964), 267; Phan Phát Huồn, *Việt Nam Giáo Sử*, Vol. 2 (Saigon: Khái Tri, 1965), 293; Bùi Đức Sinh, *Giáo Hội Công Giáo ở Việt Nam*, Vol. 3 (Calgary: Veritas, 2002).

director.<sup>55</sup> The organization's objectives were to assist with reception of arriving migrants, organization of resettlement camps and distribution of aid. Consequently, *Bắc di cư* clergy provided both spiritual and administrative leadership in many of the communities later established.

The decision to seek the Bishop's support should not, however, be confused as evidence proving that the new regime privileged Catholic northerners. First, the government approached and gained the assistance of numerous organizations including Buddhist leadership. Second, as we will see in chapters two and three, Diệm was not necessarily eager to cooperate with Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi. Nonetheless, with the majority of migrants expected to be Catholic, the Church made an obvious bedfellow. I will return to the Church's role and the friction between Diệm and the Bishop in chapter three. For now, however, we turn our attention to the establishment of the General Commission on Migrant and Refugees Affairs, the PTUDCTN.

### *The Struggle to Catch Up: The PTUDCTN Begins Operations*

By the time the PTUDCTN was launched on September 17, nearly two months had elapsed since the Geneva Accords and according to figures from the end of September perhaps as many as 350,000 migrants were already in the South and more than 100,000 were in temporary centers.<sup>56</sup> Only a well-trained and well-equipped team could have

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<sup>55</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957), 73. The committee members were Ngô Văn Yên (Bắc Ninh), Vũ Minh Thái (Bùi Chu), Lê Quang Ngọc (HP), Đỗ Đăng Khoa (HN), Nguyễn Thái Hân (Hưng Hóa), Vũ Văn Mạch (Lạng Sơn), Trần Cao Đàm (Phát Diệm), Nguyễn Duy Nhật (Thái Bình), Trịnh Việt Yên (Thanh Hóa) and Nguyễn Viết Khai (Vinh).

<sup>56</sup> Phạm Văn Huyền to PM, 39/TU/VP/M, March 1, 1955, 3, File 14744, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

hoped to manage the situation the agency was inheriting. Unfortunately, the commission was neither of these and it was two months behind the mounting crisis.<sup>57</sup>

Ngô Ngọc Đồi seemed the logical choice to lead the newly established PTUDCTN. He had directed the agency's forerunner, the Ministry of Social Action's Migrant and Refugee Service. Moreover, Đồi had a background in rural health. Yet just ten weeks after he launched the PTUDCTN, Đồi was sacked for ineffective leadership.

Though the commission had resettled almost 200,000 *Bắc di cư*, Đồi also made some disturbing admissions. His office had become overwhelmed by the numbers, which by November had reached over 479,000 refugees according to GVN statistics.<sup>58</sup> To compensate the PTUDCTN sought to conduct *Bắc di cư* to resettlement areas as quickly as possible. As a result, the new agency made critical errors. Of those relocated to date, 86% had been placed in just six provinces surrounding Saigon, including 92,000 in Biên Hòa.<sup>59</sup> The uneven distribution of migrants became compounded by other interrelated problems.

Đồi's office had failed to conduct any significant surveys to determine the efficacy of resettlement in those locations selected. Moreover, tens of thousands of *Bắc di cư* wound up in areas inappropriate to their occupational skill-sets. Thus, for example, Catholics from the Bùi Chu Diocese in Nam Định, who had made livings as salt workers [diệt dân], arrived at Làng Cát in Vũng Tàu only to discover the location was over 20

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<sup>57</sup> Ngô Đình Diệm to Cabinet, 60-PTT/TTK, November 15, 1954, 1, File 4140, PTTCPVNCH, NACII; Phạm Văn Huyền to PM, 39/TU/VP/M, March 1, 1955, 1-6, File 14744, PTTCPVNCH, NACII. The PTUDCTN was launched by GVN Decree 928-NV and Prime Minister Order 85-CP.

<sup>58</sup> "5011 người Bắc Việt tị nạn đã đến Saigon, hôm 2.11.1954," *Việt Tấn Xã*, November 6, 1954, 19, File 14629, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>59</sup> "Vấn đề định cư cho đồng bào tị nạn đã tiến đến đâu?" *Việt Tấn Xã*, December 2, 1954.

kilometers from the coast.<sup>60</sup> In another case, *Bắc di cư* farmers from Nghệ An and Thanh Hóa sent to Lăng Cô (Thừa Thiên Huế province) and La Vang (Quảng Trị province), found the closest arable land was two hours walk.<sup>61</sup> The PTUDCTN moved 13,000 ethnic Nùng to the southern central coastal town of Phan Rí and expected them to harvest salt. As upland rice cultivators, not only did they not have experience harvesting salt, they also knew little about the sea.<sup>62</sup> While the government may have seen these as “correctable” mistakes, the PTUDCTN was gaining a reputation among recent arrivals for ineptitude and failure to live up to GVN promises.<sup>63</sup> On December 4, 1954, Đồi was replaced by Phạm Văn Huyền.

Born in 1903, Phạm Văn Huyền hailed from the province of Nghệ An, north of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. In the 1920s he studied both medicine and veterinarian medicine in Paris. In 1945, Huyền served as General Inspector of the Agro-forestry Section of Trần Trọng Kim’s short-lived government. Much of his career, however, seems to have been spent as an educator and administrator.

In his first interview upon taking charge of the PTUDCTN, Huyền announced that he would draft a new resettlement program to take advantage of all available fertile land in the Central Highlands and Mekong Delta as well as coastal areas. This would by and large resolve two significant problems facing the South, he explained:

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<sup>60</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Prime Minister, 207/TU/VP/M, July 2, 1955, 39; 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>61</sup> [Untitled], March 6, 1957, File 4930, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>62</sup> PTUDCTN, 217 VP/TU/M (Secret) July 15, 1955, 6, File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph Harnett, “Commentary,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 82.

First, this plan will reduce the overcrowding occurring in greater Saigon region by distributing migrants more evenly across the South... Second, it will create conditions for development in previously untapped [chưa khai thác] areas.<sup>64</sup>

In addition, Huyền promised that his agency would carefully determine refugee placement based on occupation. Therefore, farmers would be provided fertile land and fisherman given access to sea/rivers. Unfortunately, the issues facing the PTUDCTN ran deeper than mere project planning.

The agency was not immune to the poor morale consuming the government.

While welcoming present staff to continue under his direction, in his first address as Director-General, Huyền emphasized employees needed to change their attitudes:

I would prefer to retain experienced cadre who are familiar with the task ahead rather than enlist a new staff. Time is critical. But we also do not have time to waste on personal issues. The interests of the state must take precedence above all else... Thus, I require that you work honestly and closely with me.<sup>65</sup>

The problem of morale would, indeed, have enormous repercussions for the task of resettlement.

In mid-June 1955 Diệm proposed that exceptional or promising officials be assigned to the most desired jobs within the government, while the less competent be given jobs in recently established ministries. Recognizing the plan as a formula for catastrophe, Bùi Văn Thịnh of the Ministry of Justice protested.<sup>66</sup> Agencies and

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<sup>64</sup> “Đồng bào Bắc Việt tị nạn sẽ được định cư ở các vùng Cao Nguyên, Duyên Hải...,” *Tự Do*, December 11, 1954.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> By the beginning of 1955, Diệm and Thịnh were at loggerheads. Thịnh, along with several other high-ranking GVN officials—including Vũ Quốc Thúc, the governor of the National Bank of Vietnam—founded a political party known as *Phong trào tranh thủ tự do* or Movement to Champion Freedom. The party subsequently organized a large rally in front of the Prime Minister’s residence to challenge certain GVN policies. Two months later, Thịnh found himself

ministries like the PTUDCTN would become home to those officials deemed mediocre. In light of the official refugee figures reported at the time, the PTUDCTN desperately needed qualified staff. While its unclear if the government pursued this strategy, nonetheless, subsequent events demonstrate that the PTUDCTN was riddled with poorly trained and indifferent staff.<sup>67</sup>

During the commission’s first year of existence, staff was largely stationed in Saigon. Following reforms made in September 1955, field staff, or those not in Saigon, officially increased by 173 while the PTUDCTN reduced Saigon-based employees by 127. The chart below shows the change in personnel assignments between August 1955 and March 1956.

Comparison of Total Personnel<sup>68</sup>

Place	August, 1955	March, 1956	Increase or Decrease
Saigon	765 (60%)	638 (49%)	-127
Field	503 (40%)	676 (51%)	+173
Total	1268	1314	+46

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with a new assignment, Ambassador to Japan. Nguyễn Thái referred to this sort of punishment as the “golden exile.” Nguyễn Thái, *Is South Vietnam Viable?*, 249.

<sup>67</sup> To tackle the problem of a moribund bureaucracy, the government observed a “Week of Diligence in the Administrative Services” campaign. The campaign was intended to revitalize the government and urge civil servants to be more proactive. For more on the campaign see John C Donnell, “Recent Reports in the Republic of Vietnam to Strengthen the Moral Foundation of Vietnamese Society,” 22-28; John C Donnell, “Politics In South Vietnam: Doctrines Of Authority In Conflict,” 323.

<sup>68</sup> Walter W. Mode, et al., “Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Reorganization of the Commissariat for Refugees of August 6, 1955,” MSU Vietnam, June 29, 1956, 23.

The numbers suggested an improvement in personnel distribution. In reality, however, most of those in the ‘field’ lived in provincial capitals/market towns, commuted from Saigon or ignored their assignments altogether. The field staff remained, as one official wrote, “woeful.”<sup>69</sup> Low morale and the lack of interest in the mission stimulated additional problems as well. Chief among these were corruption, mismanagement and questionable allegiances.

*Vanishing Millions: The Mysterious Resignation of Phạm Văn Huyền*

When Phạm Văn Huyền resigned the post of Director-General on May 18, 1955, the last day of the migration, in addition to low morale, he left a trail of mystery and suspicion that would haunt South Vietnamese politics for years to come. Three weeks before, on April 28, 1955, the so-called Battle of Saigon had erupted between forces loyal to Diệm and the Bình Xuyên. Among its casualties, the confrontation left the PTUDCTN’s headquarters on Galliéni Boulevard in ruin and over nine million US dollars earmarked for resettlement unaccounted.

Initial reports maintained that a fire had swept through the facilities incinerating the money and/or, in the chaos, the Bình Xuyên gang had managed to haul the money away. These explanations, however, quickly fell under a cloud of suspicion. Observers noted that published photographs of the razed headquarters revealed several intact safes

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<sup>69</sup> Alfred L. Cardinaux, “Commentary,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W. Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 89. Cardinaux served as USOM chief of refugee resettlement.

sitting on the rubble.<sup>70</sup> One photograph, in fact, captured Huyền standing next to two vaults with the complex's remnants behind him.<sup>71</sup> What had become of the money?

The government initiated at least two inquiries into the “disappearance,” both of which centered on Phạm Văn Huyền’s role. One inquiry found the matter to be nothing more than administrative incompetence on the part of Huyền.<sup>72</sup> The Ministry of Finance, however, remained circumspect. A secret ministry report alleged that Phạm Văn Huyền had used the missing funds for “suspicious” purposes.<sup>73</sup> Still, the investigations quickly went cold. The fire had conveniently destroyed much of the PTUDCTN’s accounting documents, data that might have resolved the matter. This did not, however, cool the conspiracies.

The lost funds provoked a slew of rumors. One held that, Diệm allegedly used the fire as a cover to divert the money from the PTUDCTN coffers to Bảo Đại. To carry out this scheme, many believed, Diệm ordered Phạm Văn Huyền to clean out the vaults of the PTUDCTN.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Phạm Văn Liễu (General Director of Police, South Vietnam), TCSQG/CSDB/HV/TVK, March 1965, 33, File 30226, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>71</sup> See *Dân Chủ*, April 26, 1956.

<sup>72</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Ministry of Finance, 3190/TU/TC, “Thanh toán các quỹ ứng trước do BS Phạm Văn Huyền làm quản lý,” June 25, 1956, File 4486, PTTĐICH, NACII; “Các tòa nhà của Phủ Tổng Ủy Di Cư sẽ hoàn thành trong vài tuần nữa,” *Thời Luận*, May 4-5, 1956.

<sup>73</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Túy to Minister of Finance, 281 BTC/TT/M (Secret), December 12, 1956, 21, File 4486, PTTĐICH, NACII; Trần Hữu Phương to PTUDCTN, 2374/BTC/KT/4, August 7, 1956, 9, File 4486, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>74</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Duệ, *Nhớ lại một ngày ở cạnh Tổng Thống Ngô Đình Diệm* (Việt Nam Văn Hiến, 2003), 37. The Bình Xuyên allegedly had an agreement with the former emperor. They controlled gambling and prostitution concessions in Saigon and Bảo Đại received a percentage in the form of a monthly stipend reported to be in excess of 1.25 million US dollars. With Diệm’s defeat of the Bình Xuyên, the stipend they paid out to Bảo Đại abruptly ceased.

But Huyền's resignation just three weeks after the clashes gave rise to another rumor: he was conspiring with the Communists. The suspicion was based on two pieces of information. First, upon quitting the PTUDCTN, Huyền allegedly flew to Paris to visit his daughter, Ngô Bá Thành, who was studying law there. Second, Thành was a known Communist sympathizer with connections to the DRV.<sup>75</sup> Had Huyền gone to Paris to deliver the money to North Vietnamese officials? For weeks, this story was the talk of Saigon. But soon Huyền and the missing funds receded from the conversation. A decade later, however, the mystery was resurrected.

In March of 1965, Huyền and two accomplices were arrested for “threatening the national security [an ninh Quốc gia]” of South Vietnam, having allegedly established a pro-Communist organization.<sup>76</sup> Branded a traitor, officials dredged up the earlier suspicions involving Huyền and the money, insinuating that he had funneled it to the DRV.<sup>77</sup> On March 19, 1965, with thousands watching and the entire South Vietnam press corps present, the government expelled the three men from South Vietnam, forcing them to march across the Hiền Lương Bridge at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel into the North.<sup>78</sup> The money, of course, remained missing. Regardless, in May 1955, the PTUDCTN faced a massive budgetary crisis as a result of the lost millions.

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<sup>75</sup> Biên Bản Hỏi Cung (Interrogation), undated, File 30226, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>76</sup> The other two men expelled were Cao Minh Chiếm and Tôn Thất Dương Ky (professor).

<sup>77</sup> Phạm Văn Liễu (General Director of Police, South Vietnam), TCSQG/CSDB/HV/TVK, March 1955, 33, File 30226, PTTCPVNCH, NACII; Biên Bản Hỏi Cung (Interrogation), undated, 41-87, File 30226, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>78</sup> Secret Telegram 1588, March 15, 1965, 4, File 30226, PTTCPVNCH, NACII; Secret Telegram 1615/T, March 16, 1965, 5, File 30226, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

*Bùi Văn Lương and the Self-Reliance Campaign*

The migration officially came to an end on May 18, 1955.<sup>79</sup> By this time, the PTUDCTN claimed the South had received over 810,000 migrants, 655,600 of whom were civilians and the remaining 154,400 were soldiers and their families.<sup>80</sup> All civilians not working for the government became the charge of the PTUDCTN. The various problems already outlined aside, the agency asserted that just 6,994 migrants remained in three temporary shelters in Saigon. The rest had been permanently relocated in permanent sites.

Following Phạm Văn Huyền's resignation, his deputy, Bùi Văn Lương, began the final and longest tenured general-directorship of the PTUDCTN's thirty-nine-and-a-half month existence. He held the post until its dissolution on December 31, 1957. The story of how Lương rose to the position is worth mentioning here for two important reasons. First, it demonstrates the influence that Diệm's elder brother, the Catholic Bishop Ngô Đình Thục, had over the South's leader. Second, Lương subsequently played critical roles in shaping land development projects and land reform policy throughout the RVN period, including the regime's infamous Strategic Hamlets.

Lương grew up the scion of a Catholic landowning family from the Mekong Delta and a member of Vĩnh Long Diocese, where Diệm's older brother, Ngô Đình Thục, dominated as Bishop from 1938 to 1961.<sup>81</sup> In the 1940's, in fact, Thục introduced Diệm

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<sup>79</sup> “Đất thiêng miền Bắc đã vô Nam trong một cuộc rước long trọng tung bưng và muôn vãn cảm động,” *Thời Luận*, May 21, 1955. The regime marked the occasion with parade and ceremony known as “The Welcoming of Sacred Earth” or *Tiếp Đón Đất Thiêng*. At the head of the procession was an iron cask filled with soil collected from across the North.

<sup>80</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Prime Minister, 217/TU/VP/M (Secret), July 15, 1955, 1, File 4041, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>81</sup> He attended the famed Lycée Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon, a classmate of Norodom Sihanouk and Nguyễn Hữu Châu.

and Lương during one of Diệm's sojourns in Vĩnh Long province. Clearly, Thục's seal of approval gave Lương much credibility. Hence, when Diệm set about organizing his government, he initially invited Lương to join the Prime Minister's chief of staff office in July 1954. Five months later, Diệm appointed Lương to the post of deputy Director-General of the PTUDCTN with a directive: to be the prime minister's "eyes and ears."<sup>82</sup> When Huyền stepped down as General-Director, Lương was the obvious choice to replace him.

The first two resettlement chiefs, Đồi and Huyền, had not had close connections to the Ngô Đình household. Their credentials were based on ties with Phạm Hữu Chương, Diệm's first Minister of Social Action. In light of the early failures already discussed, Diệm hoped to appoint someone he trusted. Bùi Văn Lương was just such a person.

But confidence in Lương did not fill the coffers of the PTUDCTN, which was reeling from the devastating loss. In response, Lương immediately asked the USOM for additional funds to help weather the challenges ahead. American officials, perhaps wary of the recent disappearance, gave a lukewarm response that it might take "months" to provide the funds.<sup>83</sup> Lương had to act.

Soon after taking office, Lương introduced *Self-Reliance* or *Tự Lực Mưu Sinh* (TLMS) campaign. It immediately became the centerpiece of GVN-directed resettlement. Ideally, it was intended both to stimulate production at resettlement sites and "eliminate"

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<sup>82</sup> Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao* (San Diego: Mẹ Việt Nam, 1993), 275.

<sup>83</sup> Phạm Văn Huyền, 157/TU/VP/M (Secret), May 3, 1955, 23, File 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

migrant dependency on GVN relief.<sup>84</sup> The campaign called upon *Bắc di cư* to look to local/community-based institutions, in particular the Church and Communal House [Đình], to resolve challenges. By encouraging such an independent spirit, or *tinh thần tự lập*, of the migrant, the GVN could preserve its resources in the struggle against Communism.

At the same time, GVN officials hoped that reducing *Bắc di cư* reliance on the government would induce them to become invested in their new communities and thus promote greater cooperation and unity between southern inhabitants and *Bắc di cư*.<sup>85</sup> Southerners had become hostile and resentful toward the new arrivals, Lương admitted, due to the attention and assistance the latter received, a matter I will return to in chapter two.

Part of a broader multi-prong strategy to promote national unity, *Self-Reliance* was introduced on July 21, 1955, the first anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Accords by French and Communist forces, an event commemorated as *The Day of National Shame* or *Ngày Quốc Hận* in South Vietnam.<sup>86</sup> The PTUDCTN published close to 500,000 pamphlets outlining the program and distributed them throughout the South.

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<sup>84</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Prime Minister, 290/TU/VP/M (Secret), August 23, 1955, 2; File 14744, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>85</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President, 217/VP/TU/M (Secret), July 15, 1955, 3; File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>86</sup> John C Donnell, “Recent Reports in the Republic of Vietnam to strengthen the moral foundation of Vietnamese Society” (M.A. Thesis, Columbia University, 1958); John C Donnell, “Politics in South Vietnam: Doctrines of Authority in Conflict” (PhD. Dissertation, University of California, 1964). The Diệm government also used the occasion to launch a series of campaigns against such ‘problems’ as *attentisme* in the government, disloyalty in the military and the four vices of opium, prostitution, alcohol and gambling. Perhaps the most well known of these campaigns was ‘The Communist Denunciation’ or *Tố Cộng* campaign. The government also introduced the first state-run newspaper in South Vietnam, the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* [National Revolution] daily.

In addition, the agency timed the publication of the inaugural issue of its *Dân Việt* [The Vietnamese People] magazine to coincide with the launching of *TLMS*.<sup>87</sup> As a result, the agency devoted the first issue to publicizing the *Self-Reliance* strategy. Moreover, the PTUDCTN sent teams out to resettlement sites to explain the new campaign and its objectives to migrants.<sup>88</sup>

Just nine months after it initiated *Self-Reliance*, the agency argued that the campaign was permitting *Bắc di cư* to “assimilate (hòa hợp)” into southern life and, as a result, causing the term “*Bắc di cư*” to disappear as a label for the northern migrants.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps it did accomplish some of its goals. However, the *TLMS* campaign did nothing to address the problem of corruption that appeared rampant in the agency. In fact, by demanding that *Bắc di cư* become “self-reliant,” as government officials abused resettlement aid, only further fueled refugee disgust with the PTUDCTN.

#### *“Taking Food Out of Their Mouths”: Corruption at the PTUDCTN*

On October 2, 1955 two members of the Bình Thái camp’s Resettlement Committee were arrested for embezzling 80,000 US dollars in funds allocated to migrant affairs in that site. Within two weeks of these arrests, South Vietnam’s national police had arrested over a dozen officers in the PTUDCTN’s own Bureau of Inspection (Nha Thanh Tra), a unit whose central purpose was to safeguard against irregular and nefarious activities related

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<sup>87</sup> Previously the PTUDCTN had published *Hồn Quê* (The Soul of the Homeland) Weekly.

<sup>88</sup> “Chiến Dịch Tự Lực Mưu Sinh,” *Dân Việt*, July 28, 1955 (#2), 9.

<sup>89</sup> “Trên thực tế sẽ không còn danh từ di cư...,” *Ngôn Luận*, March 27, 1956.

to the Commission's budget.<sup>90</sup> By the end of October, the affair had become front-page news for the South Vietnamese press, which implicated all resettlement administrative committees in a scam to defraud the PTUDCTN of almost one million US dollars in resettlement assistance. Coinciding with the October 23, 1955 presidential election and the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam three days later, the revelations were serious distractions for Diệm.

Lương expressed his frustration to President Diệm downplaying the perception that corruption was endemic, “Though I do not deny that the offices charged with overseeing resettlement are entirely clean [hoàn toàn và tuyệt đối trong sạch]... I do not believe the situation is as bad as accounts claim.”<sup>91</sup> The problem was that the PTUDCTN had gained a reputation as a place for self-enrichment, while demanding *Bắc di cư* to embrace “self-reliance.”<sup>92</sup> This only served to further fuel northern migrant disgust with the regime.

The *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* (National Revolution) Daily—regarded as the regime's mouthpiece—lamented that the *Bắc di cư*,

came South with the noblest of ideals, in search of freedom. They arrived here empty-handed [tay trắng], leaving behind their homes, jobs and land... The GVN and many international friends of Vietnam came to their aid. As a result, the PTUDCTN amassed an impressive reserve with which to provide assistance.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President, 1034 VP/TU/M (Secret), November 6, 1955, 3; File 4485, PTTĐỊCH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> “T.V.,” April 7, 1956, 3; File 4457, PTTĐỊCH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>93</sup> Phong Châu, “Bùa Rìu: Tội Làng Trì,” *CMQG*, December 13, 1955.

However, instead of deploying the funds as intended, the *CMQG* denounced, PTUDCTN officials had used the coffers to enrich themselves, literally “taking the food out of the mouths” of *Bắc di cư*. The unconscionable actions, the editorial concluded, were nothing less than a “felony against the state and the people, [trọng tội phá nước hại dân].”<sup>94</sup> Addressing South Vietnam three weeks later on the occasion of his birthday in 1956, Diệm promised, “to clean up this administration with resolution and impartiality.”<sup>95</sup>

Diệm may have been determined to clean house, but in the eyes of migrants this was a losing battle. These scandals not only chipped away at the funds available to northern migrants—many had not received the assistance promised them—but they also further eroded *Bắc di cư* trust in authorities. Calls for legal action grew loud, including demands that those involved be subject to capital punishment.<sup>96</sup> However, expressing a popularly held belief, one anonymous *Bắc di cư* wrote that if the government were to apply the law to the letter, the GVN would “cease to exist.”<sup>97</sup>

Fraud and mismanagement were not, of course, only reserved for high-ranking officials in Saigon. Reports arose of widespread double dipping by field officers of the PTUDCTN, who were taking salaries as field staff and central commission officials.<sup>98</sup> Another practice among PTUDCTN representatives was the inflation of migrant numbers

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> “Ngô Tổng Thống vị lãnh đạo dân tộc chống âm mưu chia cắt Việt Nam của bè lũ Thực Cộng,” *Ngôn Luận*, January 4, 1956.

<sup>96</sup> “Vạch mặt 24 can phạm vụ ăn cắp 6 triệu đồng quỹ định cư tại Gia Định,” *Tự Do*, December 9, 1955.

<sup>97</sup> “Vạch áo cho người xem lưng,” *Thời Luận*, December 15, 1955.

<sup>98</sup> Trần Hữu Phương to PTUDCTN, 2374/BTC/KT/4, August 7, 1956, 10, File 4486, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

at a particular in order to pocket the additional money of the nonexistent migrants. In Đồng Nai Thượng Province, for instance, officials claimed that the villages of Lam Sơn and Tân Phát had 576 and 3,500 members respectively. An independent inspection by the Ministry of Finance later revealed that the numbers were 350 and 3,250. As a result, almost additional \$15,000 US dollars had been paid to 476 “ghost” individuals.

According to former PTUDCTN staff, the Phú Thọ racetrack became a favored location for officials to gamble away resettlement funds.<sup>99</sup> In mid-December 1957, for example, Saigon police arrested a Mỹ Tho resettlement representative carrying \$10,000 US dollars to the track to pay off a gambling debt. The money was, in fact, intended for northern migrants of Ba Bèo villages. The subsequent inquiry revealed that, over the course of two years, the man had lost undisclosed amounts of resettlement assistance in five gambling establishments as well.<sup>100</sup>

A secret Presidential investigation by Diệm’s chief inspector, Hà Văn Vương, into the operations of the PTUDCTN in the Central Highlands revealed that Nguyễn Ngọc Phòng, the agency’s regional head, exploited his position to buy and sell real estate and pocket perhaps as much as \$200,000 US from the agency’s coffers, while spending his time (and the PTUDCTN’s money) in Saigon.<sup>101</sup> Finally, even Bùi Văn Lương could not avoid the taint of scandal. In May 1957, customs officials at Tân Sơn Nhất airport discovered Lương’s wife carrying money and gifts worth at least \$20,000 US in her

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<sup>99</sup> Trần Văn Bội (General Inspector for the PTUDCTN), 94/TU/KS/M (Secret), December 28, 1957, File 5407, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>100</sup> Trần Bá Thành (Police Commandant), 2254/CSLD-M (Secret), January 27, 1958, 10-11, File 5407, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 76; Hà Văn Vương to President, 33-HVV/M (Secret), June 4, 1956, File 4483, PTTĐICH, NACII.

luggage upon returning from Hong Kong. Though no charges were filed, the money was assumed to come from the PTUDCTN budget.<sup>102</sup> Corruption and mismanagement seemed to infect every level of the agency. Yet, despite the failures and dishonesty eroding the effectiveness of the PTUDCTN, Diệm maintained his expectations for the *Bắc di cư*, they would become self-reliant and integrated members of society.

*Localization: The Fallacy of Bắc Di Cư Privilege*

On October 11, 1956, President Diệm and Director-General Bùi Văn Lương led a ranking delegation of GVN officials as well as Church and foreign dignitaries to Gia Kiệm District (Biên Hòa province) to participate in ceremonies commemorating the second anniversary of the Great Migration. One South Vietnamese newspaper described the stream of vehicles heading to Biên Hòa as a “torrent of cars and buses.”<sup>103</sup> Diệm and Lương were among those who gave speeches encouraging the migrants and hailing the success of resettlement. The occasion was, however, important for another reason: it marked the launching of resettlement’s final phase, *Localization* or *Địa Phương Hóa* (ĐPH).

The objective of *Localization* was that over the course of the next year, the GVN would cease direct oversight of resettlement villages and all administrative functions would be transferred to local authorities. No longer was there to be an official distinction between *Bắc di cư* and southerners. To mark the occasion, President Diệm gave the keynote address, exhorting those assembled to embrace the challenges ahead:

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<sup>102</sup> Hà Văn Vương (Finance Minister) to President, 2075-BTC/VP/M (secret) May 25, 1957, 19, File 10364, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>103</sup> *Đồng Nai*, October 13, 1956.

Refugees were the first to respond age-old call of the Fatherland, leave their beloved homeland for the South to seek and create appropriate conditions for the building of a bright future for the Country. It is both an honor and a responsibility for you... With your historical mission, you must be exemplary, resolute, enlightened citizens, worthy to be the disciplined vanguard of the nation...<sup>104</sup>

The successful “merger (sáp nhập)” of Gia Kiệm into Biên Hòa’s administrative organization, Lương lauded, represented the aim for all sites: the successful blending of *Bắc di cư* and southern communities into “a uniform and mighty bloc for the purpose of building and defending the nation.”<sup>105</sup> *Localization*, wrote Nguyễn Hữu Châu, would put an end to both the distinction between the two communities and any lingering regional animosity.<sup>106</sup> The GVN planned that all *Bắc di cư* villages would be effectively turned over to their respective provincial administrations by the end of 1957, at which time the PTUDCTN would cease to exist.

Nonetheless, by March 1, 1957, five months after *Địa phương hóa* announcement, the PTUDCTN had localized only 41 sites or 12.9% of all resettlement villages under its direction.<sup>107</sup> Despite official optimism to the contrary, conditions in Gia Kiệm district were not representative of those found in the vast majority of resettlement sites. In most cases, the *Tự Do* daily emphasized, conditions were not nearly as favorable.<sup>108</sup> *Bắc di cư* at many sites, wrote Bùi Văn Lương, could not survive without support from the

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<sup>104</sup> *Major Policy Speeches by President Ngô Đình Diệm* (Saigon: Information, 1956), 33-34.

<sup>105</sup> Bùi Văn Lương Speech, Gia Kiệm, Biên Hòa, File B6-224 TĐBCPNV, NACII.

<sup>106</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Châu (Bộ trưởng tại PTT) to all province chiefs, “V/v địa phương hóa các trại định cư,” 1554/BPTT/VP, June 24, 1957, 53, File 4929, PTTĐICH, NACII. Also see Nguyễn Hữu Châu, 1078/BPTT/VP, April 29, 1957, 1, File 10849, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>107</sup> PTUDCTN, “Dân số định cư Nam Phần và Trung Phần,” March 1, 1957, File 10850, PTTĐICH, NAI.

<sup>108</sup> “Lập trường: Chung quanh vấn đề định cư,” *Tự Do*, January 27, 1957.

government.<sup>109</sup> For the most part, northern migrants across the South had yet to find a satisfactory way to manage even their daily needs, let alone “establish long-term roots [an cư lạc nghiệp].”<sup>110</sup> Statistics kept by the PTUDCTN confirm this.

Between October 1956 and July 1957, the PTUDCTN produced a monthly roll of all resettlement villages. The reports provide details of the population and livelihood of inhabitants in each village. Based on a rating system of A, B and C, the PTUDCTN ranked each village’s capacity for self-sufficiency. An “A” designated a village ready for immediate self-sufficiency (tự túc). A “B” signified a village “making preparations” toward self-sufficiency. Finally, a “C” ranking designated a village still requiring considerable external assistance.

*PTUDCTN Village Classification as of March 1957*

Region	A	B	C	ĐPH	Village Total
South	29	98	78	17	205
Center	16	23	24	24	63
C. Highlands	0	15	33	0	48
Class Total	45	136	135	41	316

According to the PTUDCTN’s own figures from March 1957 (see table above), only 45 villages or 14.2% of all resettlement sites received an “A” rating and, thus, had the capacity for *Địa Phương Hóa*. Moreover, the total population living in “A rated” villages accounted for 80,909 *Bắc di cư* or just 15.6% of all migrants officially living under the care of the PTUDCTN. These figures included Gia Kiệm’s seven A-category villages and the 18,736 northern migrants living in them. Of the remaining 271 villages,

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<sup>109</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 994/TU/HC/M, October 22, 1956, 219, File 4401, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>110</sup> “Lập trường: Chung quanh vấn đề định cư,” *Tự Do*, January 27, 1957.

the agency admitted, *none* would be able to realize self-sufficiency by the dissolution of the PTUDCTN on December 31, 1957. “B-class” villages could conceivably accomplish the goal within three harvest seasons (18 months), however the 113 “C-level” sites appeared to be at least “a few years” away from self-reliance.

Despite its own dismal figures, the PTUDCTN pressed ahead with localization. Four months later, on July 1, the number of villages that had undergone *DPH* stood at 265 or 84% of all resettlement locations.<sup>111</sup> Two weeks after that, on July 15, the PTUDCTN dissolved its provincial representative offices (*Ty đại diện định cư*), several months ahead of schedule.<sup>112</sup>

Moreover, between March 1956 and July 1957, the official total population living in PTUDCTN-directed resettlement sites dropped from over 604,000 to 509,000, a 16% decline. To some degree, the decline can be attributed to the poor accounting and/or corruption already discussed. For the most part, however, the decrease in numbers reflected *Bắc di cư* frustration with conditions in resettlement areas and, as a result, the decision by a not insignificant portion to live independently of agency-led sites. Based on the evidence presented here and in the chapters ahead, it is understandable why migrants felt pessimistic about the future in resettlement villages. Why then did the government seem to ignore its own statistics that plainly demonstrated most villages were not prepared for life without GVN assistance?<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> PTUDCTN, “Tổng kết về việc Địa Phương Hóa các trại định cư,” 12 [undated], File 10849, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>112</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to all resettlement representatives, 2492 TU/TPT/5, June 19, 1957, 52, File 4929, PTTĐICH, NACII; also File 10849, PTTĐICH, NACII, 35-36.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

*The PTUDCTN: A Model for Development?*

In part, the answer to the above question lies with the many pressures confronting the government in 1957. For instance, as briefly touched upon in this chapter, Vietnam's Catholic Church had played an important role in resettlement from the outset. Due to the PTUDCTN's anemic field staffing, in fact, the Catholic clergy had become responsible for the local, grassroots administration of 80% of all PTUDCTN-directed resettlement sites. Unfortunately, GVN-Church relations grew acrimonious, leading the Vietnamese Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Assistance Committee (Ủy Ban Hộ Trợ Định Cư) to officially terminate its services on December 31, 1956, thus weakening resettlement services at the village level. I examine this problem further in chapters three and four.

At the same time, also as noted earlier in this chapter, American assistance played the central role in financing GVN-directed resettlement. It was always recognized that this aid would eventually cease. By the autumn of 1956, in fact, authorities in Vietnam were clearly preparing for this eventuality. In an open letter from the PTUDCTN to all *Bắc di cư* almost sixteen months before its closure, the agency stressed that resettlement was nearly finished and that the US was preparing to “terminate its assistance.”<sup>114</sup> Several months later, in March 1957, Vietnamese newspapers quoted Leland Barrows, the chief of USOM in Vietnam, as saying that “Vietnam's refugees have been resettled and no longer need assistance.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> “Bức thư ngõ cùng toàn thể đồng bào tị nạn định cư tại các trại,” *Dân Việt*, September 27, 1956, 4.

<sup>115</sup> *Tự Do*, March 3, 1957.

The GVN was, however, taken by surprise when on May 2, 1957—just 60 hours before President Diệm left for his official US state visit—American officials quietly informed the PTUDCTN that the US Congress had decided to withhold eleven million dollars in aid, in part, tabbed for unfinished resettlement programs in the Central Highlands. The suspension was due to concerns about corruption as well as evidence of the GVN’s failure to properly vet resettlement sites.<sup>116</sup> With the sudden halt of promised assistance, the PTUDCTN had to scramble in response, regardless of refugee preparedness. Nonetheless, though significant, cuts to American aid and Church involvement in resettlement did not entirely explain why GVN officials chose to pursue *Localization* with such alacrity. The other crucial element was, in fact, Diệm himself.

From the president’s perspective, in spite of the many problems looming over resettlement, to call it a failure was shortsighted. Resettlement had, in his eyes, led to the care and relocation of over half a million migrants in sites throughout South Vietnam, an accomplishment few could have imagined thirty months earlier when migrants were flooding the South. Even if nearly 100,000 people had chosen to abandon agency-directed resettlement, it had been a triumph in so many respects. By embracing GVN-directed resettlement, *Bắc di cư* had opened new regions, were helping to increase production, and extending “government authority.”<sup>117</sup> As a result, Diệm viewed it, without reservation, as a model for future land development.

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<sup>116</sup> Phiếu Trình, May 3, 1957, 11; File 10455, PTTĐICH, NACII. This is a transcription of the meeting between Hoàng Ngọc Thân, the General Commission for Land Development (Phủ Tổng Ủy Dinh Điền) chief of staff and the USOM held on May 2.

<sup>117</sup> John C Donnell, “National Renovation Campaigns in Vietnam,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (March 1959), 79.

Therefore, on April 24, 1957 the GVN announced the establishment of a new agency, the General Commission for New Land Cultivation (also referred to as Land Development) or the *Phủ Tổng Ủy Dinh Điền*. It was in charge of land development in areas previously unused or underused. Southerners would compose the majority of “volunteers” participating in its projects.<sup>118</sup> The new agency fashioned its plans after the “experiences” of the PTUDCTN and reflected Diệm’s belief that—in spite of the trouble casting long shadows over resettlement—the PTUDCTN represented a real achievement, one that should be used as a model for future development projects.

In the case of the General Commission for New Land Cultivation, however, not only was the PTUDCTN the blueprint, it became the physical and personnel fount. Between late April 1957 and the dissolution of the PTUDCTN on December 31, 1957, new agency operated out of the Migrant and Refugee Affairs headquarters. Moreover, as the PTUDCTN’s termination drew closer, its officials were increasingly reassigned to the New Land operations. By all indications, Diệm believed that the experience of PTUDCTN officials was not only transferable to the new commission and beyond, but a model for all future land development projects. Thus, the announcement of Bùi Văn Lương as the first New Land chief was no surprise.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the New Land Cultivation agency, not only signaled that the PTUDCTN’s days were numbered, it also further consumed the already limited and underperforming staff of Migrant and Refugee Affairs. These officials now found themselves responsible for both concluding the operations of one agency, while launching another. PTUDCTN officials had to press ahead with *localization* of

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<sup>118</sup> RVN archival evidence indicates that many of these so-called volunteers were forced to move.

resettlement sites as soon as possible in order to shift their attention to the Land Development territories.

Consequently, between the end of April and July 1, one hundred eighty three villages were localized, including forty-six C-grade locations.<sup>119</sup> Among these, the GVN localized sixty-nine of the 96 (71.8%) villages regarded as most troubled.

*PTUDCTN Village Classification as of July 1957*

Region	A	B	C	ĐPH	Village Total
South	37	106	63	172	207
Center	34	17	7	55	58
C. Highlands	5	19	26	38	50
Class Total	76	143	96	265	316

As the province chief of Đồng Nai Thượng (ĐNT) wrote Bùi Văn Lương in August of 1957, *Localization* did little if anything to resolve the problems facing *Bắc di cư*.<sup>120</sup> In reality, the only thing it managed to do, he complained, was shift responsibility for a “complicated situation” on to local administrators. Furious, the province chief concluded that many camps in ĐNT, established as much as two and half years earlier, remained unfinished projects: “How can the PTUDCTN expect the local authority to resolve issues the central government has not?”<sup>121</sup>

Aware of the continuing deficiencies facing migrant resettlement, Bùi Văn Lương explained that the real value of *Localization* lay in its symbolism, “In turning over the resettlement villages to provincial authorities, *Địa Phương Hóa* reminded *Bắc di cư* that

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<sup>119</sup> PTUDCTN, “Dân số định cư Nam Phần và Trung Phần,” July 1, 1957, File 10850, PTTĐICH, NAI.

<sup>120</sup> Đồng Nai Thượng Province Chief to PTUDCTN, 3054/ĐNT/HC, August 7, 1957, 19. File 10850, PTTĐICH, NAI.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

the special treatment they had received over the course of the first two years had come to an end, they had to embrace self-sufficiency and be citizens of the nation.”<sup>122</sup> The habit of distinguishing between northern migrants and southerners was no longer acceptable. Regardless of region, they were all Vietnamese.

Nguyễn Hữu Châu stressed to province officials that *localization* was about *Bắc di cư* taking responsibility for themselves. The government, he wrote, had “helped northern migrants enormously. They now have to embrace *self-reliance* and work to help build a strong Vietnam, just like their southern counterparts.”<sup>123</sup> But reminding northern migrants how much the government had supposedly helped them did little to alleviate the challenges migrants confronted.

On May 4, 1958, GVN officials received a report from Long Khánh province: the *Bắc di cư* of Phúc Lâm resettlement village had disappeared. Authorities had visited the village to discuss the inhabitants’ complaints only to discover that the entire village was gone. For as much as a year, the several thousand migrants of Phúc Lâm had requested assistance on numerous occasions, only to be denied each time. Their pleas described poor quality soil and several unforeseeable disasters. In September 1956, flooding had destroyed corn, potato and soybean crops. Nine months later, in June 1957, just as the village was forced to embrace *localization*, a troupe of elephants bound for a parade trampled their rice crops, destroying 90% of the harvest.<sup>124</sup> The people were desperate. But with the dissolution of the PTUDCTN on December 31, 1957, the government

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<sup>122</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Secretary of State, 3592/TU/BĐC/5, August 19, 1957, 52, File 10850, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>123</sup> Secretary of State, 678/BPTT/VP, March 8, 1958, 116, File 11789, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>124</sup> Long Khánh Province Chief, 2803/HC/LK, May 6, 1958, 4; File 11779, PTTĐICH, NACII.

reminded them that these issues had to be resolved at the provincial and district level. Frustrated, they fled to Biên Hòa.

*Conclusion: Consequences of Directed Resettlement*

Theoretically, state-directed resettlement was intended to do more than just place northern migrants in new homes suitable to their needs. It was also expected to encourage *Bắc di cư* integration into southern society and thus unite *Bắc di cư* and their southern counterparts in the mission of economic development. For a host of reasons, directed resettlement failed to achieve these goals.

From the beginning, the government struggled to keep up and northern migrants suffered as a result. Mismanagement and corruption deepened problems for the agency tasked with the resettlement project thus provoking the distrust of refugees. It further compounded these problems by launching the *Self-Reliance* [Tự Lực Mưu Sinh] campaign, which demanded that migrants look to one another for help. Finally, with the announcement of *Localization* [Địa Phương Hóa] concluding the activities of the PTUDCTN, migrants were left to adapt to their new homes on their own. With over half a million *Bắc di cư* now living in 319 discrete villages across the South, state-directed resettlement guaranteed that these migrants would never fully integrate. As the ensuing chapters show, far from promoting integration and solidarity, GVN-led resettlement provoked conflict across sectional lines between northern migrants and southerners, between the government and *Bắc di cư* as well as authorities and the Church. Ultimately, the process left a legacy of animosity and hostility.

Yet Diệm saw in the resettlement experience a model with which to pursue future land development projects, including New Land Cultivation [Dinh Điền], Agrovilles [Khu Trù Mật] and, most importantly, Strategic Hamlets [Áp Chiến Lược]. Scholarship has generally ignored the imprint left by GVN-directed resettlement. Nevertheless, there have been some exceptions. In *The Politics of Foreign Aid*, John D. Montgomery emphasized the direct lineage between migrant resettlement and its successors. The resettlement of the northern migrants, he wrote, provided Vietnamese officials with valuable skills, skills that they would apply to the New Land Cultivation.<sup>125</sup> Joseph Zasloff, an advisor to South Vietnam's government, once made reference to the role *Bắc di cư* resettlement had played in shaping subsequent land projects in the South.<sup>126</sup> Yet neither Montgomery nor Zasloff made further effort to explain this relationship and its value as a model for the future programs.

Challenging the conventional perception that the Strategic Hamlet program was merely a foreign concept, Philip Catton has persuasively argued that Diệm had his own vision, one based on notions of the Vietnamese village. Thus, Personalism [Nhân Vị] furnished “the ideological inspiration” for the GVN's major land development projects.<sup>127</sup> Catton, however, neglects the importance of *experience* in the development of this vision.

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<sup>125</sup> John D Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 72.

<sup>126</sup> Joseph J Zasloff, *Rural Resettlement in Vietnam: An Agroville in Development* (Saigon: Michigan State University – Vietnam Advisory Group, 1963), 5.

<sup>127</sup> Philip E Catton, “Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961-1963,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (December 1999), 920.

To Diệm, *Bắc di cư* resettlement was a laboratory. As a result, resettlement became the prototype for this and the other ventures. In a speech entitled “Why we must defend the existing regime,” Ngô Đình Nhu, Diệm’s brother and closest advisor, once explained that despite the *struggles* the government had confronted, nonetheless, resettlement had proven a template for subsequent land development projects.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the most prominent Vietnamese officials in the field of land reform initially cut their teeth on *Bắc di cư* resettlement, a point I will return in chapters three and four.

No individual symbolized Diệm’s confidence in state-directed resettlement as a model for future projects more than Bùi Văn Lương. Following his service as chief of both the PTUDCTN and New Lands agency, Lương was appointed Secretary of State of the Interior, a position he remained in well after Diệm’s assassination in 1963.<sup>129</sup> In these positions, Lương played decisive roles in the most important land development programs of the Diệm-era. In fact, as Interior chief, Bùi Văn Lương also headed the Inter-ministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets, making him the highest-ranking official (beside Ngô Đình Nhu) on Strategic Hamlets.<sup>130</sup>

Clearly, this was no accident. For Diệm, *Bắc di cư* resettlement provided a model by which future projects took their cues. Furthermore, Lương’s experience became indispensable even after Diệm’s death. Though sacked following the assassination, Lương

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<sup>128</sup> Ngô Đình Nhu, “Why We Must Defend the Existing Regime.” November 15, 1957, 10.

<sup>129</sup> SL 103-TTP, *Công Báo Việt Nam Cộng Hòa*, April 23, 1957; SL 104-TTP, *Công Báo Việt Nam Cộng Hòa*, April 23, 1957; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress*, 64.

<sup>130</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, “Decision of the Interministerial Committee on Strategic Hamlets,” April 11, 1963, Rufus Phillips Collection, VVA-TTU, Lubbock, TX.

would be rehabilitated and brought back as Minister of the Interior under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.<sup>131</sup>

As this chapter emphasizes, however, the fact that Diệm believed migrant resettlement provided a blueprint for the future, in no way should be mistaken for him privileging the *Bắc di cư*. Despite the promises he made in Hanoi in August 1954, those resettled by the PTUDCTN typically experienced struggle, hardship and alienation, persistent themes in subsequent chapters. Resettled in self-contained villages under the direction of spiritual leaders, Catholic clergy in particular, *Bắc di cư* would remain largely isolated from southern communities. In the next chapter, I examine reception and resettlement as experienced by the *Bắc di cư* and the regional hostility and conflict that arose between southerners and refugees as a result.

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<sup>131</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon, 1971), 13. The return of so many former Diệm-era officials, like Lương, gave rise to a popular opinion among many Vietnamese that subsequent governments were ‘the Diệm regime without Diệm’ or *ché độ Diệm không Diệm*.

## **Chapter 2—“They Eat the Flesh of Children”: Reception, Resettlement and Migrant – Southern Sectionalism**

### *Introduction*

In late March of 1955, a rumor gripped the South. Migrants arriving from the North of Vietnam were abducting southern children and using their flesh to make northern delicacies such as Phở, pressed meat and spring rolls [chả lụa and nem]. The story paralyzed Saigon and its surrounding provinces, an area then home to 25-30% of the South’s entire population, and sheltering the majority of *Bắc di cư*. Newspapers printed sensational headlines, schools and markets emptied and people refused to venture out of their homes. The effect of the rumor forced the city’s then-mayor, Trần Văn Hương, to respond in a public address. “The rumors,” Hương explained, “had no basis.” It was a “sophisticated hoax” by Communist agents seeking to provoke southern “hatred and fear of the *Bắc di cư* and a climate of sectional discord and division.”<sup>1</sup>

As evidence, the GVN noted that North Vietnam’s Communist Party daily, the *Nhân Dân* [The People], had published numerous articles about the “tragedy” and blamed the abductions on the dire conditions endured by *Bắc di cư* in the South.<sup>2</sup> Yet casting the affair as a Communist plot did not answer the central question: why did so many southerners believe this rumor? To answer this question, this chapter examines regional hostility and the role that the migration and state-directed resettlement played in it.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, “Đồng Bào Hỡi Bình Tĩnh,” *Tự Do*, March 26, 1955; “Những tin đồn ghê gớm: ‘giết trẻ nít lóc lấy thịt làm phở tái’ chỉ là một thứ cạm bẫy âm mưu chia rẽ Bắc Nam một lần nữa,” *Buổi Sáng*, March 28, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> “Những chuyện đau lòng ở miền Nam: Một số người di cư vì đói khổ đã ăn thịt con nhỏ,” *Nhân Dân*, April 2, 1955.

Conventional scholarship has been satisfied portraying southern distrust of and hostility toward northern migrants to be the consequence of two factors: religion and favoritism. First, while most southerners were Buddhists, the vast majority of arriving migrants were, like Ngô Đình Diệm, Catholics. Second, as a result, Diệm feted the *Bắc di cư* with favor and privilege.<sup>3</sup> As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the notion of the privileged northern migrant ignored many of the struggles they faced, the corruption and mismanagement by the government and, finally, Diệm's expectations for resettlement.

In spite of this evidence, contemporary scholars continue to adopt the idea that regional conflict was a by-product of privilege and religion. Mark Bradley has recently explained that refugees “were well provided for by Diệm and often allowed to settle on land already occupied by non-Catholic southerners,” thus igniting regional animosity.<sup>4</sup> Seth Jacobs agrees, “Diệm’s pro-Catholic bias disposed him favorably toward... the refugees from the North.”<sup>5</sup> And despite trying to cast the “experiences” of Vietnamese in a more complex light, Jessica Chapman writes that Diệm’s “blatant favoritism” toward Catholic refugees spurred regional distrust.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 200-201; George C Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York, Random House, 1986), 52; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 84; Trần Tam Tinh, *Thập Giá và Lưỡi Gươm* (Hanoi: Trẻ, 1988); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 95; Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York BackBay Books, 2002), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Phillip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford Press, 2009), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam, 1950-1953* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 67.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2013), 9, 85.

Undoubtedly, the perception of government favoritism toward the refugees stirred southern resentment. However, a closer look at the archives reveals a host of other factors involved in the rise of regional animosity, not merely religion and favoritism. In this chapter I examine the roots of this animosity and how the resettlement process inflamed it. I argue that to understand this regional hostility we must look at a variety of issues including economics, cultural distinctions, history and government policy. To begin, let us first explore the role of history.

### *Background: Origins of Regionalism*

While ethnic Vietnamese might trace their “origins” to the north, when northern migrants arrived in the South in 1954, regional distinctions had long been a part of Vietnam. Since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese had been expanding southward in a series of pushes known today collectively as *Nam Tiến*.<sup>7</sup> Over the centuries, this would produce numerous cultural variations as those Vietnamese who went South adapted to local customs and

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Phạm Quỳnh, “Cuộc Nam Tiến Của Dân Việt Nam,” *Nam Phong*, February 1932 (No. 169): 154-156; Phạm Việt Tuyên, *Văn Hóa Miền Nam* (Saigon: Tự Do, 1965); Nguyễn Văn Xuân, *Khi Những Lưu Dân Trở Lại* (Saigon: n.p., 1967); Nguyễn Đăng Thục, “Nam Tiến Việt Nam,” *Sử Địa*, Nos. 19-20 (July – December 1970): 25-43; Phù Lang Trương Bá Phát, “Lịch Sử Cuộc Nam Tiến của Dân Tộc VN,” *Sử Địa*, Nos. 19-20 (July – December 1970): 45-137; Keith W Taylor, “Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southern Expansion.” In *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power and Belief*, edited by Anthony Reid, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 42-65; Keith W Taylor, “Surface Orientation in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of the Nation and Region.” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (1998): 949-78; Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 1998); Nola Cooke, “Regionalism and the Nature of Nguyen Rule in Seventeenth Century Dang Trong (Cochinchina),” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. 29, No. 1 (1998): 122-61 Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang, 1820-1841: Central Policies and Local Response*. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2004.

practices. Li Tana refers to this as *Đàng Trong* culture.<sup>8</sup> This included the development of a more open approach to trade and the presence of outsiders. It also influenced cuisine, language and even the use of land. Though Nguyễn Phúc Ánh ascension as Emperor Gia Long reunited the ‘two halves’ in 1802, political unification was halted with the French arrival and invention of Indochina. By 1883, the French had established three regions, Tonkin or *Bắc Kỳ* (north), Annam or *Trung Kỳ* (center) and Cochinchina or Nam Kỳ (south).

Thus, when French authorities began recruiting northerners (Tonkinois or Bắc Kỳ) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for Vietnamese, the sectional distinctions were real. French authorities, indeed, encouraged regional separation and identity by establishing *Tonkinois* communities.<sup>9</sup> Further influencing southern perceptions about northerners, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, French authorities recruited northerners to come to Cochinchina to work as rubber plantation labor. By 1930, Pierre Gourou estimated 90,000 people had emigrated for these work programs.<sup>10</sup> Many lived in northern communities.<sup>11</sup> French authorities, indeed, encouraged regional identity by establishing *Tonkinois* communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Li Tana, *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program, 1998)

<sup>9</sup> David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2012), 130; Sơn Nam, *Lịch Sử Khảo Hoang Miền Nam* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1994), 274.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Gourou, *Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois: Étude de Géographie Humaine* (La Haye: Mouton, 1965), 278.

<sup>11</sup> The story of men seeking employment in the South during the colonial era was a feature found in literature both before and after 1954. See for instance: Nam Cao, “Lão Hạc,” in *Truyện tập Nam Cao* (Hanoi: 1943); Mai Thảo, “Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non,” in *Tháng Giêng Cỏ Non* (Saigon: Sáng Tạo, 1956); Duyên Anh, “Người Quê Hương,” in *Văn Học Miền Nam*, ed. Võ Phiến (California: Văn Nghệ, 1999), 671-687.

Many of these laborers were either young single men or men who left their families in the North. In the late 1930s, such men had gained reputations as “dangerous lechers,” in part, due to a series of abductions and rapes of southern women along the Đồng Nai River by “roving bands of *Bắc Kỳ* men.”<sup>12</sup> By this time, the term *Bắc Kỳ* referring to the northern third of Vietnam, had become a popular Cochinchinese expression of derision and suspicion for northerners. In Tây Ninh, Mỹ Tho and Cần Thơ, parents scolding children for being “naughty [hư],” might threaten that if they did not behave, “*Bắc Kỳ* will abduct you.”<sup>13</sup> While French colonial rule may have ceased in 1954, the regional stereotypes and distrust persisted.<sup>14</sup>

By 1954, for southerners, the word “*Bắc Kỳ*” had become a catchall phrase referring to northerners’ distinctive linguistic accent, cuisine, customs as well as a host of stereotypes about the northern character such as “insular [hẹp hòi],” “conniving [muru đồ],” “miserly [keo kiệt]” and “untrustworthy.” The flood of migrants, the perceived government assistance afforded the refugees, the failure to integrate resettlement villages and, at the same time, the economic ruin left by the First Indochina War served only to magnify those feelings. And it was into this world that migrants faced the prospect of starting new lives.

### *The Frustrations of Arrival*

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<sup>12</sup> Nguyễn Văn An, “Người Bắc Vô Nam (Part VII): Có Những anh chàng ‘Tích Việt’ Nam Tiến, tự xưng là con cụ tổng, cháu cụ tuần,” *Tự Do*, December 16, 1954.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California, 2010), 6.

On September 21, 1954, just four days after the establishment of the PTUDCTN, thousands of recently arrived migrants housed at the 36 reception centers across the city demonstrated.<sup>15</sup> The protests turned violent as five hundred *Bắc di cư* clashed with Saigon police. By the end of the day, the police had slain five protesters and arrested 50 more. The fact that this clash occurred is not up for debate. The reasons behind it, however, have long remained shrouded in mystery.

Contemporary accounts portrayed the demonstrations as politically motivated. Many claimed that northern migrants had organized the strike to show their collective support for Diệm and his government vis-à-vis General Nguyễn Văn Hinh, the National Army's Chief of Staff. The protests became violent when Hinh supporters in the security apparatus turned on the strikers.<sup>16</sup> The fact that some protesters may have requested to be allowed to return North gave currency to allegations that the DRV had orchestrated the demonstrations. A closer look, however, tells a different story, one of deprivation and fear on the part of *Bắc di cư*.

Demanding the release of those arrested, a letter dated October 9, 1954 from the representatives of all 36 Saigon – Cholon reception centers to Diệm expressed growing *Bắc di cư* frustration and wariness toward the GVN:

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<sup>15</sup> Father Cao Văn Luận, a close advisor to Diệm, claimed that following the protests of September 1954, the then-prime minister had a crisis of confidence. So despondent, in fact, Diệm had two bags prepared for the airport when Luận arrived at the Norodom Palace in Saigon. Luận asserts that he dissuaded Diệm from resigning and leaving Vietnam. Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, 1940-1965*, 246.

<sup>16</sup> Associated Press, "500 Refugees Fight Saigon Police, 2 Die," *New York Times*, September 22, 1954; "5 Refugees Slain in Saigon Clash," *New York Times*, September 22, 1955; "Đại biểu dân di cư cực lực phản đối Việt Minh phá đồn tin có cuộc biểu tình đòi trở về," *Lửa Sống*, October 4, 1954; Trần Tâm Tinh, *Thập Giá và Lưỡi Gươm* (Hanoi: Trẻ, 1988), 124.

We lost everything (mất tất cả) as a result of Communism and came South in search of Justice (Công Lý). If those unfairly incarcerated are not released, then not only will 70,000 *Bắc di cư* currently sheltered in Saigon-Cholon lose faith in the GVN, but all those who have fled South and the 15 million northerners who remain in the North will come to doubt the government as well.<sup>17</sup>

While *Bắc di cư* were prepared to support Diệm's government, the chaos in these camps had instigated the riots and sowed doubt about the GVN in the minds of refugees.

Investigations into the cause of the riots revealed that since the end of August not one of the 36 reception centers in question had received the full stipend promised the *Bắc di cư*. By September 13, 40% of all camps in Saigon were not receiving *any* assistance at all. As a result, migrants were "selling the few belongings they had in exchange for food."<sup>18</sup>

Government-furnished shelter also stirred trouble. The tents donated by the US and French governments were often ill suited to the climate. Account after account depicted South Vietnam's heat transforming the canvas shelters into "ovens" or "furnaces."<sup>19</sup> *Bắc di cư*, Graham Greene described, "lie flat on the ground with their mouths near the canvas edge to get what air there is, and the babies lie under meat-safes

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<sup>17</sup> 314-PTT/VP/BT/M (Secret), October 9, 1954, 51, File 14620, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>18</sup> Đỗ Viết Phúc, "Tình hình tổng quát các trạm chiêu đãi Saigon – Chợ Lớn, September 28, 1954, 4-5, File 14614, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>19</sup> Hữu Loan, *Thoát Chết* (Hanoi: Văn Nghệ, 1955), 26; *Sự Thật Về Những Vụ Dụ Đỡ và Cường Ép Di Cư* (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 1955); Peggy Durdin, "Saigon in the Shadow of Doom," *New York Times*, November 21, 1954; Graham Greene, "Drama of Indo-China: Refugees and Victors," *The Sunday Times* (London), May 1, 1955; *Cuộc Đời Chìm Nổi Của Đồng Bào Bị Cường Ép Di Cư Vào Nam* (Hanoi: n.p., 1957); 31-34.

to keep the flies away.”<sup>20</sup> During the rainy season, storms flooded tents, making them uninhabitable.

Reception centers also lacked the facilities for migrants to bathe and relieve themselves. At Nhà Kiểng, sanitation had become such a serious problem that authorities arrested people for relieving themselves in the street and for improperly disposing garbage. In addition, many of these sites also had little if any access to potable water.<sup>21</sup> The result was predictable. After several months, reception centers, such as Tao Đàn Park and the Municipal Theater, had become “putrid cesspools [nơi cực kỳ bẩn thỉu]” that threatened public health.<sup>22</sup>

Making matters worse, the First Indochina War and the subsequent flight South had left *Bắc di cư* ravaged by malnutrition and illness. Beriberi was rampant among the arriving migrants.<sup>23</sup> Every shipload of *Bắc di cư* brought with it various illnesses. Malaria, dysentery, pneumonia, chickenpox and smallpox were “devastating [phá phách]” migrants in and around Saigon.<sup>24</sup> In February 1955, in one camp alone, smallpox caused the death of twenty people and the hospitalization of 200 more.<sup>25</sup> As a result of

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<sup>20</sup> Graham Greene, “Drama of Indo-China: Refugees and Victors,” *The Sunday Times* (London), May 1, 1955.

<sup>21</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Dương Văn Minh, 093/DNKQ/CA/2, B7-13, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>22</sup> “Đồng bào BV Di Cư,” April 20, 1955, 100-104, File 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII; *One Million Refugees, Victims of Communism from North Vietnam: The Story of the Most Extraordinary Mass Movement of Modern Times* (Saigon: Review Horizons, 1956), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Đinh Xuân Cầu, “Nhà Thương của đồng bào tị nạn,” *Tự Do*, February 22, 1955.

<sup>24</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo (Lạc An migrant) “Tiếng nói của đồng bào di cư: Thuốc cũng cần như cơm gạo,” *Thời Luận*, March 30-31, 1955.

<sup>25</sup> 80/2-GVN, “sur une epidemie de variole,” February 7, 1955, 274, File 14656, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

these problems, even when assistance was available, it too had public health risks. One example of this was powdered milk supplied by the US. Intended to supplement the diets of children, the milk required access to potable water. Without it, many parents fed children the milk dry, causing more bouts of diarrhea.<sup>26</sup>

The PTUDCTN had a mobile Health Unit (or Nha Y Tế Di cư) as well as hospitals and other facilities to treat ailing migrants. Authorities, however, often lacked the resources and doctors to adequately provide care. For instance, at the makeshift hospital in Gò Vấp, there were reportedly 700 patients, 4 and even 5 to each bed, and just four doctors. Moreover, because health workers were often so outnumbered, migrants often tried to administer medication themselves, a fact the GVN later admitted led to the death of dozens of children suffering from chickenpox.<sup>27</sup> In addition to crises surrounding health, shelter and reception services, the temporary camps also confronted other serious dilemmas.

Though supposedly policed by authorities, crime became a regular part of existence in the reception centers. While the stipend distribution reforms were intended to improve migrant access to funds, they also made centers obvious targets for theft and robbery immediately after migrants received resettlement funding. In Phú Thọ, Nhà Khiếu, Vũng Tàu and Biên Hòa, gangs regularly descended on centers during the night taking food and money. Victims described being held at gunpoint.<sup>28</sup> In a single night, these groups could take one million piasters, a sum equivalent to almost \$30,000 US. *Bắc*

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<sup>26</sup> 18-D/IGTP, March 4, 1955, 1, File 14756, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Những ‘ông trộm’ ở Phú Thọ lẽ có phải là những quân... bắt trị không?,” *Tự Do*, January 6, 1955.

*di cư* women also fell victim to rape. The government maintained that the perpetrators were Communists or Bình Xuyên members.<sup>29</sup> No one, however, was apparently charged.

Despite the screams, people generally ignored the cries out of fear they might also become marked. Those who did resist or tried to help might suffer a tragic fate as in the case of Nguyễn Đức Bảy, a 25 year-old migrant from Năm Định, who was stabbed to death.<sup>30</sup> Camps also became sites of prostitution, with some sources estimating “several thousand” women participating.<sup>31</sup> With the lack of security and poor sanitation inside the reception centers, migrants often left in search of safer conditions.

Thus, on the same day that the PTUDCTN announced the closure of the last reception centers/temporary shelters, the commission’s general-director admitted that large numbers of *Bắc di cư* remained in Saigon and many were resorting to “panhandling” and sleeping on the city’s streets.<sup>32</sup> In central Saigon, migrants lay cloth or traditional Vietnamese rice mats, called *chiếu*, in front of shops, establishing makeshift homes. The *New York Times* reporter, Robert Alden, described one girl sweeping the sidewalk just as she might tidy up her family’s home.<sup>33</sup> Illustrating the turmoil outside Saigon’s Notre Dame Cathedral, one Vietnamese journalist described finding a middle-age woman sleeping with all of her belongings next to her. This amounted to some cloth

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> National Police Director (Nguyễn Văn Tôn), 21137/PC.1/M, September 25, 1954, B7-13 TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>31</sup> Phạm Lang, “Đốt: Biết trước mà,” *Lửa Sóng*, October 20, 1954; Hoàng Công Khanh, “Nhà đồ biển thành trường học” *Nói Thật* (Hanoi), March 17-23, 1955, 4; Hữu Loan, *Thoát Chết*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Prime Minister, August Report, September 17, 1955, 35, File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII; PTUDCTN, 6526 VP/TB, October 24, 1955, 80, File 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Alden, “Refugees’ Misery Evident In Saigon,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1955.

and “a red can containing a bit of rice.”<sup>34</sup> Yet if one imagined that the newcomers would arouse the sympathy of their southern compatriots, he/she was mistaken.

### *Resettlement and Sectional Conflict*

From the outset, South Vietnamese officials expressed fears about sectionalism between northerners and southerners. In late October 1954, a secret memorandum directed to all Ministries and Commissions of the new government of South Vietnam admitted:

In recent days, the sight of arriving migrants in South Vietnam has produced [phát sinh ra] a new regional mindset, what might be called the Cochinchina [lục tỉnh] viewpoint. It is marked by southern jealousy toward the *Bắc di cư*, to whom the government is providing housing and relatively ample assistance.<sup>35</sup>

To prevent antagonizing southerners, some suggested that the enormous aid package needed to be “terminated immediately [chấm dứt ngay]” before it proved detrimental to the “spirit of solidarity” that the government hoped to promote.<sup>36</sup> Southerners, another official observed, had survived the First Indochina War with great material difficulty and then watched as the government “thoughtfully” looked after the resettlement of *Bắc di cư*.<sup>37</sup> In late 1954, US officials also noted:

Already there is friction. Southern Vietnamese resent the housing projects built for evacuees...*Bắc di cư* must become self-supporting as quickly as possible but the people of the Center and South are afraid that refugees may step in and take away their jobs.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Tiếng nói của đồng bào di cư,” *Thời Luận*, March 30-31, 1955.

<sup>35</sup> “Chi phí tuyên truyền gây đoàn kết giữa đồng bào Nam Bắc tại các làng định cư năm 1955,” October 23, 1954, 8, File T4-2488, TĐBCPNP, NACIL.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Ellen Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina*. Palo Alto: Stanford University, 1966, 351.

As migrants, their needs were many, but the apparent “special treatment” *Bắc di cư* received aggravated the existing cultural differences.<sup>39</sup> This hostility and suspicion, wrote the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* [National Revolution] daily, the GVN-controlled newspaper, was giving way to what it called “the local mindset” (*óć địa phương*), by which people only trusted those from their community.<sup>40</sup>

The First Indochina War may not have had the devastating impact on the South that it did on Vietnam’s northern half, nonetheless, the war badly disrupted the southern economy. The 1954 and 1955 harvests of major crops such as rice and sugarcane were lower than those of the pre-World War II years.<sup>41</sup> Gerald Hickey writes that, “There was widespread damage to systems of communication, and vast areas of paddy fields [were] abandoned by peasants who fled to the urban areas.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, in the spring of 1955, hundreds of thousands of farmers from the Mekong Delta remained displaced.<sup>43</sup> Many eked out existences in Saigon or other large towns, living in makeshift shelters and shanties, a problem nearly as grave as that of the arriving migrants.<sup>44</sup>

The end of French colonial rule also created an uncertain business climate effecting southern labor. French companies responded by reining in costs including

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Hansen, “The Virgin Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954-1965,” 237.

<sup>40</sup> “Xây Dựng: Óć Địa Phương,” *CMQG*, February 24, 1956.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Fall, “South Viet-Nam’s Internal Problems,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (September 1958), 247.

<sup>42</sup> Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven: Yale, 1982), 2.

<sup>43</sup> Trần Ngọc Sơn, “Tìm hiểu để giải quyết thực trạng của nạn thất nghiệp,” *Tiếng Chuông*, April 12, 1955.

<sup>44</sup> “Lập trường: Tỵ nạn và hồi cư,” *Tự Do*, May 21, 1955.

Vietnamese employees wages and scaling back operations.<sup>45</sup> In December 1954, employees of the Bến Củi rubber company went on strike in response to both wage reduction plans and poor working conditions.<sup>46</sup> The strike led to a general work stoppage by over 10,000 workers across the city in support of the rubber company employees.<sup>47</sup> Three months later, one thousand Vietnamese employees walked out of the Bastos cigarette factory in Saigon claiming the company forced them to work long hours with no additional pay.<sup>48</sup> By late 1955, one report estimated that over 700,000 people in the Saigon capital region faced unemployment, a crisis that many southerners blamed on the *Bắc di cư*.<sup>49</sup>

The northernmost portion of South Vietnam confronted perhaps the greatest challenges. A region already known for its poor agriculture, the war and a terrible harvest season in 1954 placed hundreds of thousands of southerners in Quảng Trị, Quảng Nam, Phú Yên, Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định provinces on the edge of famine and a million more only slightly better off.<sup>50</sup> However, due to the migration crisis, those ministries tasked with assisting the victims of the growing famine saw much of their budgets redirected to the PTUDCTN.

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<sup>45</sup> “Đồng bào BV di cư không thay thế anh em đình công,” *Tự Do*, December 17, 1954.

<sup>46</sup> “Tổng Đình Công,” *Buổi Sáng*, January 6, 1955.

<sup>47</sup> “Trên 10,000 công nhân thuộc ngành vận tải đình công cảnh cáo,” *Tin Mai*, November 30, 1954.

<sup>48</sup> “Chủ hang ‘Bastos’ ra lệnh đóng chặt cửa,” *Tiếng Chuông*, April 13, 1955.

<sup>49</sup> “Ai gây nên nạn thất nghiệp ở miền Nam,” *Thời Luận*, January 18, 1956.

<sup>50</sup> Nguyễn Mạnh Bảo to Diệm, 1192 XH/HC/KT, March 26, 1955, 3, File 29215, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

In 1955, for instance, the budget of the Ministry of Social Action and Health was cut from 50 million piasters (1.43 million USD) to 7.2 million piasters (about 205,000 USD). Unable to cope with the famine, the ministry projected that by that summer between 30-50,000 civilians in Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định alone would perish.<sup>51</sup> While none of these crises was attributable to the arrival of northern migrants, the fact that the government was providing them assistance while many southerners struggled did not help sectional relations. Northern migrants came to represent the face of policy that southerners did not like.

The regional hostility caused by the demands of the migration was felt even inside the GVN. In August of 1954, the government “asked” every southern official to give a portion of his salary to help migrant civil servants build homes. Offices recorded each person’s contribution. The pressure to participate was, in the words of one official, “immense.”<sup>52</sup> Concurrently, the government furnished northern migrant civil servants with two-month advances on salaries, a special lunar new year stipend and a portion of any back pay owed them.<sup>53</sup> As one might expect, southern bureaucrats felt slighted

Perhaps as an expression of resentment, several ministries led by southerners refused to employ supposedly qualified *Bắc di cư*. In a memorandum sent to all GVN offices, then-minister of the interior Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ warned that any “delay [*sự trì hoãn*]” or “refusal [*khước từ*]” to fulfill the Prime Minister’s promise to provide employment to *Bắc di cư* would have serious repercussions. The northern migrants had

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ to all ministries and offices, 22-BNV/CV/NNV, September 15, 1955, File 3945, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>53</sup> Prime Minister to all ministries, 66-CV, December 16, 1954, File 3945, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

made the life-altering decision to flee South, in Thơ's estimation, the GVN had an obligation to provide for these arrivals.<sup>54</sup>

Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, head of the Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee, feared that relocated migrants would be construed as the handmaidens of antagonistic GVN policy as well as the regime's favored group and that this would fuel sectional conflict. As a result, in May 1955, the Bishop floated a scheme to reorganize and expand the PTUDCTN into one General Commission for War Victim Relief [Phủ Tổng Ủy Cứu Trợ Nạn Nhân Chiến Tranh]. The new agency would consist of two committees, one responsible for *Bắc di cư* and the other for southern evacuees.<sup>55</sup> The idea gained support from several high-ranking officials in the GVN and several Vietnamese newspapers. Diệm and the PTUDCTN, however, do not appear to have taken heed of the initiative.<sup>56</sup> As I demonstrate in the next chapter, in fact, Chi's suggestions in all likelihood aggravated tensions between northern Catholic Church clergy and the government.

Instead of expanding assistance to include southerners as well as northern migrants, the government chose to launch programs that emphasized self-reliance and intended to, among other things, strengthen ties between southerners and *Bắc di cư*. To these ends, the PTUDCTN initiated two campaigns [chiến dịch], *Self Reliance* or *Tự Lực Mưu Sinh* and *North – South Compassion* or *Thông cảm Nam Bắc*. Not only did they not

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<sup>54</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ (Minister of the Interior), 19-BNV/CV/NNV, September 4, 1954, File C0-66, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>55</sup> Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi to Diệm, 1099/CDC, May 8, 1955, 1-2, 14757, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>56</sup> “Lời hiệu triệu của Đức GM Phạm Ngọc Chi,” *Tự Do*, August 5, 1955. Three months later, Bishop Chi appealed directly to northern migrants to contribute a portion of their resettlement stipends to a fund assisting southern war victims in the Mekong Delta.

improve sectional relations, as I demonstrate, these operations strained them further and produced conditions of communalism.

*Tone Deaf: The GVN's Regional Compassion Campaign*

In the spring of 1955, the GVN introduced the *North – South Compassion Campaign* with the aim of forging “an environment of understanding among people of different regions.”<sup>57</sup> The PTUDCTN dispatched teams of speakers to educate communities about cultural differences. For instance teams of northern refugees would visit southern villages to discuss their lives, customs and reasons for fleeing the north. Conversely, groups of southerners met with *Bắc di cư* communities to explain their culture and the expectations they had for new arrivals.<sup>58</sup>

Such cultural outreach also took print form. For example, the government published a volume entitled *Thất Giải Đồng Tâm* [*Hearts United*] presenting aspects of local southern cultural practices, customs and language for northern readers.<sup>59</sup> In perhaps the most inventive effort, it produced a dictionary that presented hundreds of southern words and phrases side by side with their northern analogs.<sup>60</sup> The expectation being that if regional linguistic differences were overcome, it would reduce the growing hostility

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<sup>57</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to the Office of the President, November 22, 1955, File 4042, PTTDICH, NACII; “Lập Trường: Thông cảm Nam Bắc,” *Tự Do*, October 12, 1955.

<sup>58</sup> T4-2488, TĐBPCP, Delegate to the Minister of Social Affairs, 926-HCSV, “Tuyên truyền gây đoàn kết giữa đồng bào Nam Bắc định cư tại các làng định cư,” March 4, 1955, 1; Ministry of Social Affairs, “Kế hoạch,” October 23, 1954, 88; File 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>59</sup> Trịnh Khánh Vàng, *Thất Giải Đồng Tâm* (Saigon: Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Cứu Quốc, 1955).

<sup>60</sup> Mặt Trận QG Cứu Quốc “Đề đồng bào NV và BV hiểu biết và thân ái nhau hơn (5 parts),” *Tự Do*, January 1-7, 1955.

discussed above. Language and cultural differences, indeed, played roles in sectional friction, a matter I will examine closely in *chapters four* and *five*. However, efforts to build sympathy also became politicized, a fact that deepened regional animosity.

Literature, movies, newspapers and folk songs about the migration emphasized the supposed root causes of the exodus. If southerners could learn of the struggles that their northern compatriots had suffered, it was assumed, then they could not help but feel compassion. Produced in 1956, the film *Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống* [We Want To Live] was set in northern Vietnam between 1952-1954. During the First Indochina War, the film's protagonist, Vinh, served in the Vietminh.

The film depicts Vinh to be extremely patriotic and prepared to die for the sake of the Vietnam. With the success of the Communist revolution, however, Vinh's parents fall victim to a Land Reform struggle session. Despite their innocence, they are sentenced to death and buried alive. The first major motion picture to be produced in the RVN, the film was said to capture Communism's "blood thirsty [khát máu]" machinations.<sup>61</sup>

In its inaugural issue, the *Sáng Tạo* Journal published an article by a *Bắc di cư* writer named Mai Thảo. The article was entitled "Sài Gòn Thủ Đô Văn Hóa Việt Nam." Arguably one of the most important and innovative intellectual journals of the RVN period, the *Sáng Tạo* was established by a collection of *Bắc di cư* intellectuals that included Mai Thảo.<sup>62</sup> With the Communist takeover in the North, Mai Thảo argued,

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<sup>61</sup> "Điện Ảnh Việt Nam Đang Vươn Lên: Phim Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống đã đánh dấu thành công về vang," *Thời Luận*, October 29, 1956.

<sup>62</sup> The four others were Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Doãn Quốc Sĩ, Trần Thanh Hiệp, and Nguyễn Sĩ Tế. For details about the journal's establishment refer to Dương Nghiễm Mậu, "Thanh Tâm Tuyền và những người bạn trước khi có tạp chí Sáng Tạo," *Hợp Lưu*, No. 111 (August-September, 2010). (online [http://www.hopluu.net/D\\_1-2\\_2-126\\_4-1302\\_5-9\\_6-4\\_17-38\\_14-2\\_15-1/](http://www.hopluu.net/D_1-2_2-126_4-1302_5-9_6-4_17-38_14-2_15-1/), accessed December 10, 2011).

Saigon had replaced Hanoi as the heart of Vietnamese “national life [sinh hoạt dân tộc],” and it was the *Bắc di cư* who had carried the torch of Vietnamese culture across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel in order that it might “shine” in the South.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, poetry also proved a popular vehicle for instilling regional compassion. One early example was Lục Y Lang’s *Thập Nhị Bất Hiếu* [The Undutiful Twelve].<sup>64</sup> Though based on the Chinese poem *Nhị Thập Tứ Hiếu* [The Exemplary Twenty-Four] praising twenty-four model individuals, Lang’s characters serve a very different purpose, embodying dishonor.<sup>65</sup> Set during the First Indochina War, all of its characters, for one reason or another, lose their way and become “slaves” to Communism. In perhaps the most graphic of the poem’s twelve parts, the character Vũ Trới, bitter over his father’s death, leaves his mother and three sisters without a trace. At the conclusion of the war against the French, he suddenly returns with four soldiers who, it turns out, are Chinese. Trới demands his mother make dinner for them. As the evening wears on the men get drunk and make advances on the sisters and mother. This section ends with Trới helping to hold his mother down on a wooden bed as the other man rapes her.<sup>66</sup>

The poem characterizes Communism as anathema to the sanctity of the Vietnamese nation, the family and the mother. By embracing Communism, Trới defiles all three, having unceremoniously left his mother and sisters only to return to assist Chinese soldiers in raping them. The poem implied that refugees faced a decision

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<sup>63</sup> Mai Thảo, “Sài Gòn Thủ Đô Văn Hóa Việt Nam,” *Sáng Tạo*, No. 1 (October 1956), 2.

<sup>64</sup> *Thập Nhị Bất Hiếu* was written in the classic Vietnamese *double seven, six eight* (song thất, lục bát) quatrain style.

<sup>65</sup> The poem dates to the Yuan Dynasty.

<sup>66</sup> Lục Y Lang, “Thập Nhị Bất Hiếu” (part 6), *Tự Do*, January 7, 1955.

between respecting Vietnamese tradition and family—the supposed bedrock of the Vietnamese nation—and remaining in the North. By fleeing South, they had demonstrated loyalty to the nation.

Yet this propaganda ignored several critical issues. First, many southerners had ties to the Vietminh and/or Communism. In particular, tens of thousands of southern Vietminh and their dependents had *regrouped* [tập kết] to the North following the Geneva Conference in 1954. For southerners with such connections who remained behind, anti-communist rhetoric served to alienate them. Second, by memorializing the exodus from Communism as embodying national sacrifice, the government cast northern migrants as the face of the regime.

Third, while demanding poor and dispossessed southerners sympathize with the northern migrants, the GVN was *officially* bestowing vast amounts of aid on *Bắc di cư* during the resettlement stage. At the height of resettlement, 604,384 refugees had been “securely relocated” by the PTUDCTN at 250 resettlement sites across the South in less than 18 months.<sup>67</sup> By the autumn of 1956, those living in PTUDCTN resettlement areas had built 83,758 homes and a total of 6,669 wells had been excavated. Each family that completed a home received 3000 piasters (\$86 US) for their labor and expenses.<sup>68</sup> Migrants also had access to medical treatment and medicine, according to the PTUDCTN. In August 1956 alone, 2,282 people had been treated and over 50,000 visitors received medicine. At the same time, 1,555 classrooms were serving 71,829 *Bắc*

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<sup>67</sup> PTUDCTN to the President of RVN, “March 1956 Report,” 588/TU/HC/M (Secret), April 19, 1956, 4, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>68</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1958), 148.

*di cư* children.<sup>69</sup> Ostensibly they also received land, the resettlement stipend discussed earlier, draught animals, seeds and fertilizer.<sup>70</sup> By mid-1957, the GVN was publicly boasting that 83 million US dollars had been spent on resettlement, equivalent to “nearly 100 US dollars a person.”<sup>71</sup> It was immaterial that such statistics did not represent the actual experiences of northern refugees. The official figures relating to resettlement further confirmed for southerners the perception that the regime was privileging the *Bắc di cư* and thus deepened southern resentment of the new arrivals. It was under these conditions that migrants arrived at permanent relocation sites.

### *Land and Regional Hostility*

Suddenly whole villages of northern refugees appeared in places with little if any consideration given either to the capacity of the sites in question or the local customs—in particular land use practices. In Chợ Lớn province, the PTUDCTN transferred over 2000 *Bắc di cư* to Cầu Xáng village without consulting with provincial authorities. The province chief, Võ Văn Ngọ, was furious.<sup>72</sup> The commission had assured officials that resettlement would be based on each province’s capacity. However, his province was already well over the numbers of *Bắc di cư* it could manage.

In response, the agency asked the province to understand, “everyone needed to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 191-192.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 182; Bui Van Luong, “The Role of Friendly Nations,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University), 50.

<sup>71</sup> “Mỹ chắm dứt viện trợ định cư,” *Tự Do*, February 20, 1957.

<sup>72</sup> Chợ Lớn Province Chief to PTUDCTN, 189-VP/HC, February 9, 1955, 3-6, File 14758, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

sacrifice.”<sup>73</sup> Ngô fired back that the PTUDCTN had missed the point. Whatever hardships migrants faced, the province chief wrote, their arrival was antagonizing local inhabitants. For instance, the reason soil in Cầu Xáng had been found in this condition was that during the 1940s, its inhabitants had been forced to evacuate due to the chaos of the war. For years the land remained empty. The evacuees, however, now wanted to “return (hồi cư).” If the government insisted on allowing *Bắc di cư* to occupy this land, the province chief warned, conflict would be unavoidable as southern families “livelihoods [bát cơm]” were at stake.<sup>74</sup> Land disputes became a common source of hostility between southerners and northern refugees throughout the South.

In the Central Highlands, disputes arose between *Bắc di cư* and non-ethnic Vietnamese over land around the region of Lạc Lâm. The new arrivals began using uncultivated lands near their village settlement. Claiming the land as their own, local Rhade demanded the migrants stop. Demonstrating little concern for Rhade customs and sensitivity, GVN officials described non-ethnic Viet approaches to land claims this way: “the practice of the savage [dân mồi] is basically, if they can see it with their eyes, the land belongs to them.”<sup>75</sup>

Preparing for the arrival of several thousand migrants in 1954 and 1955, Cần Thơ officials ordered local inhabitants to cease the use of certain “deserted lands.” Inhabitants

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<sup>73</sup> Ngô Ngọc Đồi, 25/TU/VP/TT, November 2, 1954, 2, File 14758, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>74</sup> Chợ Lớn Province Chief to PTUDCTN, 189-VP/HC, February 9, 1955, 6, File 14758, PTTCPVNCH, NACII. Ngô’s protest was not purely out of concern for southern returnees or maintaining good sectional relations. The letter makes clear that he was also acting out of self-preservation. If a confrontation erupted between *Bắc di cư* and southern returnees, Ngô remarked, the blame would fall squarely on him.

<sup>75</sup> PTUDCTN to Prime Minister, 4453/TU/VP/M, July 26, 1955, 14, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

protested claiming the GVN was “confiscating” their property. The Cần Thơ province chief alleged that he explained to the protesters that the land in question belonged to the state and, therefore, they had no claim. The local inhabitants, of course, rejected this. The people of the region, they argued, had long utilized these lands. The problem in the cases of Lạc Lâm and Cần Thơ was two-fold. First, land use practices did not fit with government plans. Second, the GVN desperately needed to relocate the northerners.

Riots erupted. Soldiers were called in to put down the “uprising,” an action that left ten people dead and 17 injured.<sup>76</sup> Two weeks later, with the tragedy still in the minds of local inhabitants, *Bắc di cư* began to arrive from Saigon. Unwittingly, northern migrants became the personification of hated policy. The government’s answer to the conundrum was the *Self-Reliance* or *Tự Lực Mưu Sinh* campaign.

#### *Self-Reliance: Invoking Regionalism*

Recall from *chapter one*, mismanagement and corruption caused tremendous problems for the General Commission for Migrant and Refugee Affairs (PTUDCTN). The commission’s solution was the *Self-Reliance* campaign. In addition to overcoming the pitfalls related to state-directed resettlement, however, authorities also believed the campaign would compel migrants to cooperate with their southern neighbors. Resettlement villages and centers would no longer be “distinct and isolated” areas, but instead integrated and contributing members of their new communities. Ultimately, *Self-*

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<sup>76</sup> Cần Thơ province chief, 232-M/QS (secret), “Vụ Đỗ Văn Bình bị bắn ở La Ghì,” November 1954, File B7-21, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

*Reliance* would help form a united “citizens bloc [khối công dân],” one blind to regionalism.<sup>77</sup>

The hope that the campaign would somehow forge warm and cooperative relations between refugees and southerners ignored the critical problems underlining state-directed resettlement. Among them, in the eyes of local inhabitants, the government had taken the ‘deserted’ land from southerners and presented it to the new arrivals. Moreover, migrants were not settled amongst southerners in existing villages, rather 319 corporate resettlement villages were established solely for *Bắc di cư*. Third, the government had turned to northern leaders, in particular Catholic clergy to provide leadership in these new villages. These factors coalesced making the incorporation of northern migrants into southern society nearly impossible. Rather than promoting cooperation, *Self-Reliance* functioned to create deeper rifts.

Such an ill conceived approach to resettlement fueled southern resentment of northern migrants and ensured that southerners would not be willing partners in the GVN’s *Self-Reliance* scheme. At the same time, however, migrants faced a host of problems in their new homes. Among them were overcrowding and poor land. The PTUDCTN’s failure to distribute funds to migrants, wrote the USOM refugee resettlement chief, “cast a dark shadow” over the entire program.<sup>78</sup> An internal report by

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<sup>77</sup> Đê Quyên, “Phổ biến những luật lệ hiện hành tận mỗi trại định cư để sửa soạn cho việc Địa Phương Hóa đồng bào tỵ nạn,” *Dân Việt*, September 27, 1956, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Alfred L Cardinaux, “Commentary,” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 89.

the PTUDCTN echoed this assessment and noted that overpopulation had forced the government to rush to find relocation sites.<sup>79</sup>

In late February 1956, the Ministry of Agriculture's director on farming received word from the commission that it was arranging to resettle migrants in several locations around Ban Mê Thuột's Krong Buk Valley and Dak Mil. The director replied simply, "Do not resettle people there, it will be a disaster."<sup>80</sup> The PTUDCTN had claimed that the tens of thousands hectares selected could support two rice crops each year. The farming chief explained that even under the best of circumstances the region could only sustain one crop per year. A subsequent soil survey, however, revealed that at present it "could not support life." Because of the state of the land it might take several years for the soil to yield an adequate rice crop. A further complication would challenge resettlement on the site. First, northern migrants would have to learn new rice growing techniques suitable to hillsides. Second, access to drinking water could not be guaranteed, as digging wells in the rocky location was almost impossible.<sup>81</sup> The director frustratingly scolded the PTUDCTN for having "just one standard in selecting land: is it available."<sup>82</sup>

Another example of this shortsighted approach to selecting land occurred at Lạc An in Biên Hòa province. 16,339 migrants arrived at their new home prepared to farm. The area was well suited to their skills, they were told. Authorities would provide each of

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<sup>79</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Prime Minister, 5421 VP/TU, September 5, 1955, 59, File 14769, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>80</sup> Director of Farming Bureau, 260/CN, February 27, 1956, 71, File 4483, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>81</sup> Bùi Văn Lương (Phủ Tổng Ủy Dinh Điền), 558/TUĐĐ/DĐC, June 12, 1957, 17, File 10848, PTTĐICH.

<sup>82</sup> Director of Farming Bureau, 260/CN, February 27, 1956, 73, File 4483, PTTĐICH, NACII.

the 3,000 families one hectare of land to till and the promise of more in the future, as the surrounding area was “lightly inhabited.”<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the migrants of Lạc An quickly discovered that only about one half of the land promised was available to them as Đại An, a neighboring village of local inhabitants, claimed the land as its own. Moreover, repeated requests to the PTUDCTN for farming implements and irrigation pumps had gone ignored. Thus, more than two years after moving to Lạc An, the over 3,000 families had managed to cultivate just 20 hectares of rice and 150 hectares of vegetables, a mere fraction of what had been hoped. To cope with the deficiencies, the head clergyman of the Lạc An had organized teams to collect wood from the surrounding forest with the intention of selling it either in the nearest district town of Tân Uyên or in Saigon. This, however, also became untenable when the six bridges leading into Lạc An suspiciously collapsed. GVN authorities blamed the collapse on Communist agents who aimed to disrupt village life.<sup>84</sup>

In the face of these struggles, Lạc An clergy submitted their first request in late 1955 that several thousand migrants be reassigned to Cần Thơ. The appeal seems to have been accepted as by July 1957, the total population of Lạc An had been reduced to 10,636.<sup>85</sup> Despite the reduction in population, by 1957, one newspaper reported, the *Bắc di cư* of Lạc An were worse off than in the North.<sup>86</sup> Lạc An’s many “burial mounds,”

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<sup>83</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President, 505/TU/VP, November 19, 1955, 19-21; File 4042, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> PTUDCTN, “Dân số tại Nam Phần, Trung Phần (Cao Nguyên và Trung Nguyên) tính đến ngày 1-7-1957,” July 1, 1957, File 4933, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>86</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Trại Định Cư Lạc An với sức sống đang dâng lên,” *Thời Luận*, January 1, 1957 (Part 2).

people lamented, were testament to the outbreak of chickenpox that ripped through Lạc An during 1955-1956, leaving dozens of children dead.<sup>87</sup>

Even in 1957, the Lạc An migrants still had no regular water source to irrigate crops and use for drinking. The closest freshwater stream was 4 kilometers away and efforts to dig wells had proven unsuccessful. The water supply from those 40 wells dug with PTUDCTN assistance, provided water that was “undrinkable (không được uống).”<sup>88</sup> Finally, they still had not received farming implements, a problem that also faced the almost 25,000 inhabitants in neighboring Hồ Nai. The situation in Lạc An was no aberration either.

In the Mekong Delta and Chợ Lớn, the soil in places chosen for resettlement suffered from high concentrations of alum [nước phèn], making it difficult to cultivate rice and the water undrinkable. Father Huân, the spiritual leader of Chợ Lớn *Bắc di cư*, claimed that the water quality was so poor that it could be used for no more than a month without treatment.<sup>89</sup> In numerous places in the Delta, land had been left uncultivated during the First Indochina War and was now overgrown. According to estimates by officials, it would take five years to create conditions for “stable” agriculture.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 338/TU/HC/M (Secret), January 21, 1956, 8, File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>88</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Trại Định Cư Lạc An với sức sống đang dâng lên,” *Thời Luận*, January 7, 1957 (Part 3).

<sup>89</sup> Võ Văn Ngộ to PTUDCTN, 23/M/VP/HC, February 11, 1955, 9, File 14758, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>90</sup> Chợ Lớn Province Chief to PTUDCTN, 189-VP/HC, February 9, 1955, 3-6, File 14758, PTTCPVNCH, NACII; Thiều Tá Nguyễn Huỳnh (Tinh trưởng Mộc Hóa), “Dời trại Định cư Bà Bèo (Mỹ Tho) lên Mộc Hóa,” 204-KT, May 25, 1956, 8, File 4421, PTTĐICH, NACII.

In mid-September 1955, the residents of Đốc Mơ (Gia Kiệm, Biên Hòa) filed a grievance with the PTUDCTN. They had built 869 homes for which each family should have collected 3,000 piasters. They had received none. In addition, 935 *Bắc di cư* of Đốc Mơ had received no living stipend and another 1000 had been given just a portion of the promised funds. Despite outbreaks of chickenpox, no medicine had arrived despite an outbreak of chickenpox. Finally, living in a forest, they were unable to farm.<sup>91</sup>

As a consequence, the factors detailed above dictated migrants rely on themselves to resolve the many challenges they faced. For instance, in Biên Hòa and Tay Ninh, living near forests and having few alternatives, parishes organized families into wood collection teams and established a lumber factory. Once gathered, the wood was carried to Saigon for sale.<sup>92</sup> And in Bà Rịa, the poor soil content forced parishes under the direction of Father Trần Đình Cảnh to capture tigers roaming the forests around their new home. Despite the risks, the reward for each tiger was too attractive, 20,000 piasters per animal. The migrants in this community had no training, but as one in the flock noted, “What choice do we have? We must risk our lives to save our lives.”<sup>93</sup>

Navigating the problems of daily existence on their own, migrants reproduced many of their northern regional and religious institutions, in the process, further straining relations with local inhabitants and ensuring that they would lead largely segregated lives. I will discuss these institutions and the impact they had in *chapters four and five*.

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<sup>91</sup> PTUDCTN, 5464/TU/VP, “Xét đơn khiếu nại của trại Đốc Mơ,” September 7, 1955, 19-20, File 14768, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>92</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Các trại định cư Biên Hòa mong muốn những gì?,” *Thời Luận*, April 13-14, 1955.

<sup>93</sup> “4 Mảnh Hồ Bà Rịa bị hạ trong vòng nửa tháng,” *Tự Do*, February 15, 1957.

Here, however, I draw our attention to one very important consequence of corporate *Bắc di cư* villages/parishes and refugee – southerner hostility: the rise of militarized regionalism.

*“Are we not all Vietnamese?”: Militarizing Sectionalism*

On December 13, 1956, Hồ Bảo Lộc, President Ngô Đình Diệm’s representative, arrived in Cần Thơ province to meet with leaders of both local and *Bắc di cư* communities. His mission was to reaffirm the government’s objective to stress the value of “Localization [Địa Phương Hóa]” of migrants, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the “integration [sáp nhập]” of the two populations. The northern migrants, however, were unmoved and instead demanded that their community be allowed to remain independent. “We,” the *Bắc di cư* argued, “share neither common language (ngôn ngữ) nor customs (phong tục) with the southern people.” Shocked and frustrated, Hồ Bảo Lộc erupted:

This discussion is absolutely absurd (hết sức vô lý). *Are we not all Vietnamese [Chúng ta đều là người Việt chứ]?* Despite regional variation, we speak only one language. As for customs, North or South, those have been transmitted from our ancestors since time immemorial!”<sup>94</sup>

With that, Lộc abruptly walked out of the meeting and left Cần Thơ.

Three weeks later, Lộc submitted a report detailing his extensive travels through the South to meet with *Bắc di cư* and local authorities. In his account, he confessed that among northern migrants there existed widespread fear of GVN expectations. In particular, they resented the government’s demands resettlement areas integrate with the

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<sup>94</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc (Government Delegate), “Hợp thức hóa tình trạng hành chánh của các Trại định cư trong Nam Phần Việt Nam,” December 15, 1956, 31, File 4929 PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

local villages. “Many migrants I spoke with,” Lộc wrote, “hoped to remain separate and apart (tách riêng).”<sup>95</sup>

Save the forced blending of refugees and local inhabitants in villages, the reality was that the government could do little to compel them to integrate as a community. The government had established 319 northern refugee villages comprising over half a million people. At the same time, it preached to them the importance of resolving struggles on their own. One area that grew troublesome was the realm of security.

Living far from GVN security forces, northern migrants demanded that the government provide funding to establish so-called *armed self-defense teams*. One senior priest, Father Nguyễn Quyền, recommended that the government equip each of these teams with a small arsenal to defend each village. The establishment of this force, it was argued, represented the central tenets of the GVN’s Self-Sufficiency campaign. Many *Bắc di cư* clergy supported the proposal, pointing to recent history in the Red River Delta during the First Indochina War.<sup>96</sup>

In the late 1940s, Bishop Lê Hữu Từ had established a paramilitary known as the *Tự Vệ Quốc Gia* (National Self Defense) force. Primarily concentrated in Phát Diệm and Bùi Chu Dioceses, each had parish organized its own branch under the direction of a parish priest.<sup>97</sup> With deep concerns about security, GVN officials assented to the establishment of such a force.

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<sup>95</sup> Summary (Tóm Lược): Phúc trình ngày 7.1.1957 của Ô Đại biểu CP, 35, File 4929, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>96</sup> PTUDCTN to Father Nguyễn Quyền, 4075/TU/DC/HC4, July 11, 1955, 74, File 14764, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>97</sup> Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Huy, *Giám Mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm, 1945-1954* (Saigon, 1973), 29; Nguyễn Nhã. In interview with author. Hồ Chí Minh City, November 2, 2011.

On August 19, 1955, in a secret memorandum to the province chiefs of South Vietnam, a representative to the prime minister outlined the establishment of this self-defense apparatus allowing each resettlement village to defend itself.<sup>98</sup> In this spirit, the GVN instructed that each village organize a “self-defense committee (ban tự vệ),” the size of which would be based on the village’s population.<sup>99</sup> For every 10 families, a militia would have two members. Each militia was presumably supposed to operate under local authority as an extension of the provincial military apparatus.<sup>100</sup> The primary duty of self-defense committees was to defend against the “machinations of reactionary elements” allegedly seeking to undermine Vietnamese solidarity.<sup>101</sup> By November of 1955, the “US Department of Defense” indicated it would provide ten million US dollars that could be used to organize village level self-defense forces in South Vietnam.<sup>102</sup>

In its effort to establish defense forces for *Bắc di cư* villages, the GVN promoted militias consisting entirely of northern migrants that further provoked regional cleavages. Moreover, these forces were organized with a nebulous directive: defend the villages

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<sup>98</sup> GVN Delegate to all province chiefs, 84-M/HC/SV (Secret), August 19, 1955, 1-2, File N21-10, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>99</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President, 331/TU/HC/M (Secret), August 1955 report, September 16, 1955, 10, File 4041, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>100</sup> PTUDCTN, “Tổ chức Tự vệ tại các trại định cư,” November 5, 1955, 1-6; File 9489, PTTĐICH, NACII; GVN Southern Delegate to all province chiefs, 84-M/HCSV (secret), August 19, 1955, 1-2, File N21-10, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>101</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President Diệm, Monthly Report (August 1956), 895/TU/HC/M (Secret), September 25, 1956, 15, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>102</sup> PTUDCTN to the Minister of Defense, 28/VP/TU/M (Secret), November 5, 1955, 4, File 4463, PTTĐICH, NACII. The US referred to these militias as ‘Combat Youth.’

against “marauding bands [những kẻ lưu manh phá hoại]” and “blood thirsty [khát máu]” Communist forces.<sup>103</sup>

Some GVN officials voiced concerns about what the establishment of such self-defense forces might mean for relations between northern migrants and southerners. Nguyễn Hữu Châu, Diệm’s secretary of state and brother-in-law, wrote that the establishment of such special police forces and militias would militarize the existing regional hostility.<sup>104</sup> Once this happened the government might not be able to subdue conflict.

Bùi Văn Lương worried that organizing armed militias under the direction of spiritual leaders, Catholic clergy in particular, who held the reins of authority in these communities, could lead to a “Catholicization” of the growing regional hostility. At a national conference on land and migrants in early October 1956, Lương warned, “We must take extreme care in the possibility that arming villages may provoke a Catholic – Buddhist conflict.”<sup>105</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In a recently declassified CIA history about land pacification in Vietnam, Thomas Ahearn wrote of US efforts to help Diệm employ Catholic villages as militias in service against Communism in rural South Vietnam:

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<sup>103</sup> PTUDCTN, “Tổ chức Tự vệ tại các trại định cư,” November 5, 1955, 1-6, File 9489, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>104</sup> PTUDCTN, 26-TU/LN, March 30, 1956, File 814, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>105</sup> Summary of minutes from Cuộc Hội Thương, October 4, 1956, 16, File 4399, PTTĐICH, NACII.

Diệm's own Catholicism and favoritism toward his fellow communicants encouraged the CIA to try and create an archipelago of anti-Communist islands out of villages built around Catholic parishes.<sup>106</sup>

American officials would later refer to this project affectionately as the "Fighting Fathers" program. In the early 1960s, these militias gained popular notoriety in the United States when *The Saturday Evening Post* published an article entitled "The Report the President Wanted Published."<sup>107</sup> Written by Edward Lansdale, the article highlighted the efforts of these militias, these 'fighting fathers' to oppose Communism.

What such accounts failed to recognize was that these regional-religious militias were a by-product of state-directed resettlement's many failures and the sectional animosity between northern refugees and southerners. Rather than forming a productive defense against the GVN's foe, they guaranteed that battle lines would be drawn based on local conditions and hostility. Moreover, as the next chapter demonstrates, the notions that *Bắc di cư* were the privileged class of Diệm's South Vietnam and that Vietnam's Catholic Church could be counted on to support Diệm policy are at best misleading and, in fact, untrue. As the next chapter reveals, efforts to relocate northern refugees in 1956 and 1957, particularly to the Central Highlands, unleashed anger of both migrants and elite Church elements toward the regime.

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<sup>106</sup> Thomas L Ahearn, Jr., *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam* (n.p.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 73.

<sup>107</sup> An American Officer, "The Report the President Wanted Published," *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1961.

*Post-Script: Specter of Communism*

Looming in the background of this dissertation, though not treated in detail, is the specter of Communism. Recall that the chapter began with a rumor of northern migrants eating the flesh of children, a rumor that the government claimed was hatched by Communist agents. In fact, the Great Migration appears to have served as a prominent vehicle for the DRV to both infiltrate and give the impression of infiltrating the South and thus sowing seeds of doubt and fear. In addition to propagating division between southerners and refugees, this also served to unravel relations between the government and segments of the *Bắc di cư* population.

On March 31, 1955, based on evidence demonstrating that the North was exploiting the migration, then-Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm sent a secret directive to all leading officials involved with security and resettlement. In it, Diệm announced a program organizing certain camps for migrants with so-called “special backgrounds.” These individuals in question were suspected of being Vietminh agents. The centers were designed as reeducation camps with two objectives: instruct “residents” about the aims of the GVN and keep them under surveillance. The locations came under the joint direction of the PTUDCTN, National Police and Department of Psychological Warfare.<sup>108</sup>

One of those who fell under suspicion and wound up in a camp was Nguyễn Lộc, the founder of the Vietnamese martial art Vovinam (Việt Võ Đạo). Born at Sơn Tây province in 1912, Lộc excelled at marital arts from an early age. In 1938, he introduced Vovinam in Hanoi and it quickly caught on as a “national” martial art for Vietnamese. In

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<sup>108</sup> Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm, 111-PTT/HTN/M (Secret), March 31, 1955, 38, File 14764, PTTCPVNCH, NACII. It is worth noting that the offices of the PTUDCTN and Diệm’s secret police shared the same block on Trần Hưng Đạo (Galliéni Street).

1946, as Vietnam prepared for war, the Vietminh recruited Lộc to establish a unit of martial arts experts, which he did. By 1951, however, Lộc had left the Vietminh and in 1954 fled South with the waves of migrants.<sup>109</sup> While he might have proven useful to the southern regime, Lộc never gained favor with the Diệm government, in part, due to his murky past. He was followed constantly and died under mysterious circumstances in 1960.

Remarkably, even Catholic refugees from Ba Làng (Thanh Hóa province), whose flight from Communism became legend in the South, fell under the suspicion of GVN officials. In the spring of 1955, the ICC (International Control and Supervision Commission) arranged for 3,387 Ba Làng inhabitants to be transported to Saigon aboard the Polish ship, *Jan Kilinsky*. Upon arrival, PTUDCTN officials discovered that the ship had 3,513 people on arrival, or 126 more passengers than the official manifest. The discrepancy became a cause célèbre. South Vietnam's security chief in charge of the matter, Hoàng Thụy Nam, accused the North of using the migration to sabotage its authority.<sup>110</sup> Further stoking the allegations, many of the migrants arrived carrying anti-Diệm literature. The passengers claimed they had been forced to take the paraphernalia when they boarded.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Lê Sang, *Việt Võ Đạo* (Saigon: n.p., 1964).

<sup>110</sup> PTUDCTN, 61-T4/VP/M (Secret, Extremely Urgent), March 18, 1955, File B7-13, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>111</sup> Tin Tức Đồng bào di cư: Tàu Kilinski của Ba Lan vừa cho lên bộ người tị nạn ở Ba Làng vào," *Thời Luận*, March 23-24, 1955; "Bầy đồng bào di cư chết trên tàu Cộng Sản Kilinsky," *Tự Do*, June 24, 1955; "Sixth Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, December 1955-July 1956," (London, 1957).

Though the GVN ultimately accepted the Ba Làng migrants, authorities remained distrustful. The discrepancy in passenger figures was never resolved. Fearing that *Bắc di cư* aboard the Kilinsky were “organized by the Vietminh to disseminate propaganda,” the PTUDCTN sent the passengers to Phú Quốc Island. Circumstances had cast suspicion upon *all* of the passengers. The island, one PTUDCTN official wrote, would provide both an environment for the fisherfolk aboard and “a remote location in which to monitor them.”<sup>112</sup> Clearly, the DRV seized upon the transmigration to provoke distrust and fear. And this too became another legacy of the exodus and resettlement. I will again touch upon the specter of Communism in *chapter four*; for now, let us now turn to the problem of relocation in the Central Highlands and growing hostility between the government and *Bắc di cư* Catholic Church.

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<sup>112</sup> 1895-TU/DC/NS, “V/v định cư đồng bào Ba Làng ra đảo PQ”, March 29, 1955, 3, File D32-4, TDBCNP, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City. This move by the PTUDCTN would have an unintended consequence for one of the most important staples of the Vietnamese diet, *nước mắm* or fish sauce. It began the transformation of Phú Quốc from a lightly inhabited island into, arguably, Vietnam’s *nước mắm* capital.

### ***Chapter 3—“Poisoned Waters”: Forced Resettlement and Church – State Confrontation***

#### *Introduction*

On February 15, 1957, several hundred northern migrants led by Catholic clergy descended on the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon shouting slogans including, “we affirm our support of President Ngô.” The gathering was, however, by no means a rally in support of Diệm. The crowd had come to the palace in order to submit a petition to the president. It detailed the alleged misery the refugees had suffered in the North at the hands of the Communists and their struggles since arriving in the South two years earlier. Finally, the petition concluded, “We beg of you President Ngô, please do not force us to relocate to the Central Highlands.”<sup>1</sup>

Did Diệm read the petition? Perhaps. What is certain, however, is that the palace guards forcibly dispersed the crowd and arrested 50 or more of the demonstrators, including several Catholic priests.<sup>2</sup> So how do we understand this confrontation and the forcible resettlement of migrants, which seem to contradict the long held assumption that northern Catholic migrants and the Catholic Church provided the loyal backbone of the Diệm regime?

Conventional scholarship about Vietnam and the Vietnam War has long embraced the old chestnut regarding Diệm’s relationship with both *Bắc di cư* and the Church. The Catholic priest Trần Tam Tĩnh wrote about the “Catholic bloc” from the North that

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<sup>1</sup> Báo Cáo (Secret), March 1, 1957, 14, File 14629, PTTCPVNCH, NACII; “Đồng bào ở Phú Thọ lều đĩnh xin vào yết kiến Tổng Thống,” *Tự Do*, February 16, 1957. Accounts varied on the number of protesters.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

provided the foundation of support for Diệm.<sup>3</sup> Bernard Fall and George Kahin wrote that the arrival of that “tightly knit community” provided Diệm his major political power base.<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Young described the arrival of the *Bắc di cư* as “an imported political resource for Diệm, a substantial and dependent bloc of loyal supporters,” due in no small part to their common religion.<sup>5</sup> “Diệm’s pro-Catholic bias,” wrote Seth Jacobs, “disposed him favorably toward any program that gave more assistance to the refugees from the North.”<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, Jacobs cites an exchange between US Ambassador Heath and Bishop Lê Hữu Từ in 1954 that is worth emphasizing. According to Jacobs, Từ told Heath that Diệm “had no popular support... and was unfit to head a government.”<sup>7</sup> Who was Từ? Why does this meeting matter? Until that July, Từ was the Bishop of Phát Diệm in northern Vietnam’s Red River Delta. One of the two most important centers for Catholicism in the North, Phát Diệm was also home to tens of thousands of migrants who fled South. Từ’s influence over the Catholic migrant population should not be underestimated and his characterization of Diệm should give us further pause in assuming both *Bắc di cư* absolute loyalty to and Church support of Diệm.

At the same time, the clash in front of the Presidential Palace complicates scholarly interpretations of the regime’s efforts to develop the Central Highlands in the

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<sup>3</sup> Trần Tam Tĩnh, *Thập Giá và Lưỡi Gươm* (Hanoi: Trẻ, 1988), 126.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard B Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 153-154; George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 75.

<sup>5</sup> Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam, 1950-1953* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 67.

<sup>7</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University, 2004), 57.

mid- and late-1950s. To date, the literature about the Central Highlands focuses, understandably, on the confrontation between ethnic upland groups and the regime. Yet this scholarship tends to treat the northern migrants sent to live in the Highlands in the mid-1950s as extensions of the GVN.

Therefore, in *Free in the Forest*, Gerald Hickey characterizes the *Bắc di cư* as both witting partners in this process—receiving choice land and opportunity—and, as such, the face of GVN power. Research by scholars such as John Donoghue, Oscar Salemink and Stan Tan also echoes this reflexive belief about the role of northern migrants in the Central Highlands.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, these analyses neglect the perspectives of northern migrants, who clearly were not interested in moving to the region and ultimately were forced by threat of violence.

This chapter examines GVN efforts in mid-1956 and 1957 to relocate northern migrants from locations in and around Saigon to the Central Highlands. I argue that this publicly exposed the limits of the relationship between northern refugees and the regime. It also pitted certain important factions within Vietnam's Catholic Church against the Diệm household. Finally, it reveals the many reasons why migrants had little interest in moving to the uplands, the region that ethnic Vietnamese referred to superstitiously as the land of poisoned waters [nước độc].<sup>9</sup> Before we continue, however, let us consider the

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<sup>8</sup> John Donoghue, *Ethnographic Study Series: Selected Groups in the Republic of Vietnam, The Rhade* (Washington DC: SORO, 1965), 48; Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2003); Stan B-H Tan, "'Dust Beneath the Mist': State and Frontier Formation in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, the 1955-1961 Period" (Ph.D. Diss., Australian National University, 2006); Stan B-H Tan, "'Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages': State Formation among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam under the First Republic, 1955-1961," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1-2 (February-August 2006), 216.

<sup>9</sup> Dương Nghiễm Mậu, *Phấn Đâu* (Saigon: Văn, 1966).

Central Highlands and the migrants' lack of desire to move there in the context of recent history.

### *Background*

Ethnic Vietnamese have long distrusted the Central Highlands for numerous reasons. Its inhabitants, who are not ethnic Vietnamese, have different agricultural practices. The region's soil is not hospitable to lowland Vietnamese rice growing customs. Finally, Vietnamese long believed that the streams of the Central Highlands flowed with poisoned waters or *nước độc* and its "mountains were the abode of evil spirits."<sup>10</sup>

Under French colonial rule, the region was referred to as the Domain of the Crown. Though under the de facto rule of the Nguyễn dynasty, the French maintained the region as an economic preserve for exploitation by French planters. Ethnic Vietnamese were kept out. Following World War I, French inhabitants of the region established plantation style farming, which brought them into conflict with the local inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> As one member of the Rhade minority described, "It was an invasion of our lands and impinged on local agricultural practices," particularly shifting agriculture. In reaction, numerous revolts erupted in the 1930s in the region. Though the French departed in 1954, this did not mean a reassertion of local rule.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gerald C Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald C Hickey, "Preliminary Research on the High Plateau," Michigan State University Group, June 1957; Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group Collection, VVA – TTU, Lubbock Texas.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography Of The Central Highlanders Of Vietnam: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 190.

With the French gone, a determined Diệm wanted to extend *Vietnamese* power into the region, while promoting development. In 1971, the *Chính Luận* newspaper conducted an interview with Bùi Văn Lương, in which the Interior Minister explained that Diệm-era GVN land program for the Central Highlands had borrowed heavily from French development plans for the region. For Diệm, Lương claimed, the most compelling aspect had been the proposed relocation of large numbers of Vietnamese to the uplands, which would resolve three significant problems.<sup>13</sup>

First, the plan would relieve the overpopulation caused by northern migrant resettlement in areas such as Saigon and its environs. Second, Diệm believed, populating the Central Highlands with northern migrants would provide a measure of security against Communist infiltration. Third, Diệm hoped to “Vietnamize” the indigenous, non-ethnic Vietnamese population—such as the Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade and Koho—by assimilating them “into the Vietnamese cultural sphere.”<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, officials believed, this would bring economic development to the highlands and “modernity” to its people.<sup>15</sup> “Within two or more years,” one province chief eagerly explained, “we hope to bring all highlanders in a single city... and in another generation, their tribal customs will be just a

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<sup>13</sup> Gerald C Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. The four groups became the founders of the Bajaraka and, subsequently, the FULRO (Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées) movements.

<sup>15</sup> See Stan B.H. Tan, “‘Swiddens, Resettlements, Sedentarizations, and Villages’: State Formation among the Central Highlanders of Vietnam under the First Republic, 1955–1961.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1-2 (February/August 2006), 210-252; Stan B.H. Tan, “‘Dust Beneath the Mist’: State and Frontier Formation in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, the 1955-1961 Period,” PhD diss., The Australian National University, 2006.

memory.”<sup>16</sup> In the process, Diệm imagined the Central Highlands becoming a key engine of agricultural development in Vietnam. It was no wonder that Diệm repeatedly referred to the region as “the California of Vietnam.”<sup>17</sup>

Plainly, government planning, history and Vietnamese chauvinism all encouraged the hostilities of the indigenous population toward the Diệm regime. Yet, as the next sections show, northern refugees were not interested in participating in the settlement of the Central Highlands. As a result, Diệm’s efforts to use the *Bắc di cư* population to achieve his land development projects did nothing to endear the regime to the migrants or *Bắc di cư* Catholic Church hierarchy.

### *Strained Relations*

The many failures and shortcomings of resettlement, already discussed in this dissertation, left the PTUDCTN and, more broadly, the GVN searching for new alternatives. In addition to such campaigns as *Self-Reliance* and *Regional Compassion*, the government also looked to engineer new, better-planned resettlement centers. Officials imagined these would become the blueprint for the future of agricultural and land development in South Vietnam, thus in the words of one GVN slogan, creating conditions for a “*strong country and wealthy people* [nước mạnh dân giàu].”<sup>18</sup> Four centers were founded: Cái Sắn (in the western Mekong Delta), La Ngà (Đồng Nai Thượng), Pleiku (Central Highlands) and Ban Mê Thuột (Central Highlands). As the best

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<sup>16</sup> John D Montgomery, *Cases in Vietnamese Administration* (Saigon: Michigan State University Group, n.p.), 165.

<sup>17</sup> “Buôn Ma Thuột: Californie của Việt Nam,” *Ngôn Luận*, February 23, 1957.

<sup>18</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957), 161.

known of the four sites, I will examine Cái Sắn closely in *chapters four and five*. It is crucial to understand that *Bắc di cư* became the guinea pigs for these and future land development projects.

The problem of overcrowding caused by northern migrants also compelled the government to launch this next-generation of resettlement sites. During September of 1954, Biên Hòa authorities had informed the PTUDCTN that the province could manage at most 100,000 migrants. By early 1956, its *Bắc di cư* population stood at over 128,000. Likewise, in 1954, Gia Định province had warned that it could manage just 10,000 refugees. Yet eighteen months later, the province's northern migrant population had reached almost 164,000. And in Saigon, over 41,000 migrants were living in five camps. So desperate was the situation, in early 1957, tens of thousands even continued to occupy cemeteries, including at least 2500 people living on the grounds of Lăng Cha Cả and 4500 in Tân Sơn Hòa.<sup>19</sup>

By February of 1956, as GVN-led resettlement population figures crested, the PTUDCTN was officially in charge of 604,384 migrants living in 250 centers dotting 30 provinces and cities across the South.<sup>20</sup> A closer look at the figures, however, exposes a dreadful lack of balance in population distribution. Though 30 cities and provinces had participated in PTUDCTN resettlement, only 12 cracked the barrier of 10,000 *Bắc di cư*. Of these, nine resided in the capital region and immediately surrounding provinces: Saigon-Cholon, Bà Rịa, Bến Tre, Biên Hòa, Chợ Lớn, Gia Định, Mỹ Tho, Tây Ninh and Thủ Dầu Một. At the time, these nine locations comprised 144 or 58% of the 250 existing

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 164. The site of Father Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Béhaine's mausoleum

<sup>20</sup> PTUDCTN to the President of RVN, 588/TU/HC/M (Secret), April 19, 1956, 4, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII.

camps/villages in South Vietnam and officially accounted for 459,614 or 76% of all migrants under the authority of the PTUDCTN. Compounding the asymmetrical figures, they did not account for those refugees living in the Saigon capital region independently of the PTUDCTN, such as civil servants, soldiers and their families or those who deserted resettlement. Nor did they factor in the southerners displaced by the First Indochina War either.<sup>21</sup> For the capital of South Vietnam and the surrounding provinces, overcrowding had quickly become a national security crisis.

Seeking to reduce the numbers of *Bắc di cư* living in Saigon, Biên Hòa and Gia Định, the GVN announced two related programs: urban population reduction [giảm bớt dân số đô thị] and land reacquisition [giải tỏa đô thành].<sup>22</sup> The plans involved removing migrants from the overcrowded areas. In particular, the government focused its attention on migrant communities living on lands that had been used as temporary reception centers in Saigon between 1954 and 1955. Though the government had dissolved these shelters in conjunction with the conclusion of the reception stage in September 1955, nonetheless, the GVN had refrained from expelling the migrants, it claimed, out of respect for the hardships they had faced as refugees.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Sóng Thần*, January 15, 1969. In the late 1960s, one Vietnamese observer recalled that the conditions were so formidable that they even affected the rigging of the 1955 presidential election.

<sup>22</sup> Bộ Kiến Thiết giải thích về việc giải tỏa vài khu trong Đô Thành,” *Tự Do*, February 16, 1957; “Danh sách đầy đủ các khu nhà bị giải tỏa,” *Tự Do*, June 26, 1957; “Giai đoạn một của chương trình giải tỏa Đô Thành,” *Tự Do*, June 27, 1957; Lý Thắng, “Sắp giải tỏa 1 khu vực rộng lớn gồm gần 70 mẫu với 30,000 dân,” *Tự Do*, November 30, 1957.

<sup>23</sup> From Minister of Defense to President, 3131/QPHNK/HC/1, 1-3 [undated], File 9855, PTTĐICH, NACII.

The result, shantytowns began to replace these centers. By mid-1956, thousands remained and their numbers had been augmented by refugees who had deserted PTUDCTN-directed resettlement. The camps included Bình Đông, Xóm Mới and Tân Sơn Hòa as well as locations such as Hồ Nai district in Biên Hòa province. Based on general PTUDCTN figures, the government efforts to reduce the population were aimed to affect between 75-100,000 *Bắc di cư*.<sup>24</sup> Among the locations slated for GVN migrant population reduction was Phú Thọ Lều.

Prior to 1954, Phú Thọ Lều had been a series of deserted fields in Saigon belonging to the State of Vietnam's Army and Ministry of Education. Faced with the arriving *Bắc di cư*, the government transformed it into a reception center, capable of sheltering 10,000 people. By 1956, Phú Thọ Lều had become, in the words of Bùi Văn Lương, "a blight [ảnh hưởng xấu]" on Saigon.<sup>25</sup> Cyclo and taxi drivers nicknamed the area Phú Thọ Lều (*Lều* meaning Tent) due to its makeshift appearance.<sup>26</sup> It was an overcrowded labyrinth of tents and crude homes made of scrap and a population of over 15,000 people. In spite of these conditions, a significant portion of the *Bắc di cư* of Phú Thọ Lều and, more broadly, Saigon, refused to leave. In fact, of the 100,000 people the government hoped to lure out of area, only 200 people had registered by mid-October 1956.<sup>27</sup> What possessed these migrants to want to remain in haphazardly organized areas,

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<sup>24</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 994/TU/HC/M (Secret), October 22, 1956, 219, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>25</sup> Như Phong "Trở ngại đầu tiên trong kế hoạch giải tỏa Đô Thành: Trại Phú Thọ Lều," *Tự Do*, February 18, 1957.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> PTUDCTN to President's office, 946/TU/NĐC/M (Secret), October 10, 1956, 63, File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII.

without land, GVN assistance or means of making a steady living? Several reasons help explain *Bắc di cư* unwillingness to move.

*The Currents of Dissociation and the Bắc di cư Refusal to Move*

For large numbers of migrants, the flight South in 1954 was not their first evacuation. By the time they reached Saigon, many had been on the move for nearly a decade. The war, famine and natural disasters that had ravaged the North since the Second World War meant many northerners had experienced several evacuations over the years. By 1956-1957, numerous migrants had been in an almost perpetual state of relocation for years.

The famed *Bắc di cư* writer Dương Nghiễm Mậu stressed this feeling of uncertainty in an article entitled, “The Currents of Dissociation [Những dòng sông phân ly].”<sup>28</sup> In 1947, during the early stages of the First Indochina, Mậu’s entire village in Hà Đông province was forced to evacuate as the French set fire to it, leaving the population to scatter. His family wound up in Hanoi, from where they fled South in 1954. Once in southern Vietnam, Mậu and his family spent time in Huế and Nha Trang before finally settling in Saigon in 1957.<sup>29</sup> For many *Bắc di cư*, Mậu stressed, the Great Migration was just another stage in a long and painful process of displacement.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, landing in South Vietnam had not brought an end to the dislocation.

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<sup>28</sup> “Những dòng sông phân ly” appeared in two parts as Dương Nghiễm Mậu, “Quanh bàn viết: Sông Đáy,” *Thời Tập*, February 14, 1975 (#20), 87-90; Dương Nghiễm Mậu, “Quanh bàn viết: Những dòng sông khác,” *Thời Tập*, March 5, 1975 (#21), 75-79.

<sup>29</sup> Phí Ích Nghiễm, Interview by Jason Picard, Hồ Chí Minh City, April 30, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Dương Nghiễm Mậu, “Quanh bàn viết: Sông Đáy,” *Thời Tập*, February 14, 1975 (#20), 89.

Thus, GVN demands that *Bắc di cư* move yet again were met with both anger and dismay. Writing under the penname *Lê Di Cư* [Lê the Migrant] in late 1957, one migrant expressed despair:

I began my life in Kiến Xương (Thái Bình province). To avoid war I migrated to the Thái Bình Province seat in 1951. I then evacuated to Hanoi in 1953. In late 1954, I fled South, taking up shelter in Phú Thọ Lều in 1955. Forced to leave Phú Thọ Lều, I took up residence in Tân Sơn Hòa last year. I am now being forced to settle elsewhere. My family is exhausted [kiệt sức]. We do not have much money and what we have has been put into starting new lives in each destination. What do I do? <sup>31</sup>

Years had passed and many migrants remained unsettled.

In December 1957, A Saigon newspaper sympathizing with their plight published the following political cartoon entitled “The Future: The migrant species on the moon [Viễn tượng tương lai: Loài người di cư lên cung Quảng].”

“The Future: The migrant species on the moon”



<sup>31</sup> Lê Di Cư, “Về đâu? Khi gió mưa...,” *Tự Do*, December 6, 1957.

*Tự Do* [Liberty] Daily, December 9, 1957

In it, the father exclaims, “We have not even settled on the moon here and now we have to move to Mars!” Humorous, perhaps, but the cartoon expressed the insecurity and lack of stability migrants felt.

The GVN had promised the refugees an opportunity to select a secure place to live where they could settle down. Instead, they were being sent to places incapable of sustaining life. *Bắc di cư* trust in the government was decaying. As one migrant at Tân Sơn Hòa camp expressed to PTUDCTN officials:

How can we trust you? If we move, where will you send us? To the Central Highlands? To the land of poisoned waters [nước độc]? We have been living in the South for three years and have established some normalcy. But now you want our families to move again, to start over again. Why? Because our presence is a blight (xấu)? Can you promise that in a few more years we will not have to move again?<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, *Bắc di cư* suffered from both exhaustion and frustration with the GVN.

As the tirade also suggests, however, migrants were, in the words of a resettlement representative, “afraid of what awaits them,” if they leave Saigon.<sup>33</sup> As already demonstrated in this dissertation, resettlement had never lived up to the early promises. Thus, by the time, GVN officials approached refugees in 1956 about moving, the stories and rumors regarding the difficulties *Bắc di cư* encountered in the southern countryside were legion. They included the tales of disease, a general lack of assistance and violence already addressed here.

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<sup>32</sup> Vân Huyền “Đi thăm đồng bào thuộc khu đất bị trưng dụng tại xã TSH,” *Thời Luận*, December 9, 1957.

<sup>33</sup> PTUDCTN, “Phiên họp ngày 24/7/1956... Đưa đồng bào đi định cư tại Pleiku,” July 24, 1956, 31, File 9856, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

Stoking the fears of migrants, the sinking of a cargo vessel, the *Nam Việt*, proved to be one of the most significant obstacles impeding GVN relocation efforts. On August 31, 1955, as the ship was transferring hundreds of refugees from a temporary location up the Soài Rạp (a tributary of the Saigon River), the *Nam Việt* was attacked. The incident left seventeen *Bắc di cư* dead and 50 more injured.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, the Central Highlands were particularly undesirable to northern migrants. Vietnamese generally regarded the uplands as the place where “poisoned waters flowed...a region peopled by savages” and filled with evil spirits.<sup>35</sup> Vietnamese had long considered life in the mountainous regions a form of “exile” into a foreign land.<sup>36</sup>

In part, this reflected Vietnamese superstition and an aversion to living with the upland peoples. However, there were also practical reasons for these beliefs. Agriculture in the mountains differed significantly from the Delta/lowland region. In trying to attract migrant interest to the region, officials offered detailed comparisons, like that of the table below, demonstrating that cultivation in Central Highlands typically produced higher yields in less time.

#### Crop Production in the Mekong Delta and the Central Highlands

Crop	Time needed before productive		Annual production	
	Delta	Central Highlands	Delta	Central Highlands

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<sup>34</sup> PTUDCTN to Ministry of Justice, 576/NĐC/HC6-M (Secret), April 14, 1956, 2, File 4460, PTTĐICH, NACII. The government claimed that the assailants were remnants of the recently-defeated Bình Xuyên.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Nguyễn Thái, *Is South Vietnam Viable?*, 58.

Orange	5 years	4	300 fruit	400
Pomelo	5 years	5	100	500
Mandarin	3 years	3	400	500
Lemon	3years	3	400	500
Coffee	NA	3	NA	10 kg
Tea	NA	3-5	NA	10 kg
Pepper	3 years	3	1000k/acre	2 tons/acre

File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City

Circulated amongst *Bắc di cư* in Saigon, Biên Hòa and Gia Định in the summer of 1956, the table suggests that agriculture in the Central Highlands could offer migrants a better return on their labor than the Mekong Delta. However, this ignored migrant concerns. First, soil in the highlands was different and required different techniques for cultivation. Second, on a related note, most Central Highlanders practiced swidden agriculture, a form of cultivation alien to the *Bắc di cư*. Third, *Bắc di cư* agriculturalists traditionally farmed rice—a crop noticeably absent from the table.

As a result, northern migrants preferred remaining in Saigon. Leaders of the community in Phú Thọ Lều submitted a petition requesting they be allowed to make their permanent residence there:

We risked everything to escape the Communist hordes and find freedom in the South. Arriving in Saigon we were brought here, to Phú Thọ, where we have lived for almost two years. Life has not been easy. In order to survive, we were even forced to sell the few belongings we had in order to supplement the stipend the government gave us. Despite any hardships we faced, we were happy to work together for our collective existence and have managed to find peace.<sup>37</sup>

The petitioners used the government's propaganda regarding *Bắc di cư* sacrifice to their advantage. They had, indeed, given up so much for the nation and, in 1954, the President himself had promised them the right to select their new homes. Now, instead, they were being forced to move again. This was a betrayal in by the GVN.

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<sup>37</sup> Migrants of Thánh Tâm Phú Thọ to the President, June 1956, 13, File 9855, PTTĐICH, NACII.

Simultaneously, across town, migrant representatives occupying the Bình Xuyên's former Grande Monde gambling establishment petitioned the GVN through Phạm Ngọc Chi that they not only be allowed to remain on the site, but the government also cooperate in transforming it into a permanent resettlement area.<sup>38</sup> Their appeal offered a practical argument. The cost of moving them again would be expensive to the government, particularly if they were being relocated out of Saigon. They would need another resettlement stipend of at least 700 piasters (20 US dollars/person) and 3000 piasters/family housing allowance, to name just a few.<sup>39</sup>

The GVN refused to consider these requests. The move, Bùi Văn Lương wrote, was “compulsory.” Those who either did not comply with the order or returned to Saigon, Lương added, would be viewed as “local inhabitants” and receive no assistance.<sup>40</sup> Migrants remained undeterred. To avoid being forced to move, in fact, many *Bắc di cư* pretended they were not farmers.<sup>41</sup>

One other problem faced the regime in its efforts to attract *Bắc di cư* to the Central Highlands. Many migrants refused to move without their spiritual or community leaders. Catholics, in particular, proved implacable. For Catholic migrants to relocate to remote areas, Bishop Lê Hữu Từ emphasized, “they needed their spiritual leaders by their sides, not merely for religious reasons but also to comfort them in the difficult endeavor

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<sup>38</sup> Migrant Representatives (Nguyễn Xuân Khánh, Ngô Thế Xương, Nguyễn Thánh Tâm), 3136-TU/ĐDDT, June 22, 1956, File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Defense to President, 0553/QP/HNK/HC/1, June 13, 1956, 28, File 9855, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>40</sup> PTUDCTN, “Cuộc Hội Thương ngày 27.7.1956 tại Phủ Tổng ủy Di cư Ty Nạn,” July 28, 1956, 26, File 4399, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>41</sup> PTUDCTN, Conference Notes, July 24, 1956, 27, File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII.

of resettlement.”<sup>42</sup> Yet decisions about clergy assignments were not so simple. They had to be determined by the Council of Bishops.

But as Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi argued, the migrants’ expectation that they be relocated with clergy was also a consequence of state-directed resettlement, which had transformed the parish priest into both spiritual and secular leader of these communities.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in an effort to excite interest in the region, the GVN tried to appeal to *Bắc di cư* priests. On September 11, 1956, President Diệm met with a dozens of clergy representing migrants in Saigon and Gia Định to inform them of the dissolution of all resettlement sites in the city over the next several months.<sup>44</sup> Diệm asked the priests to act as his intermediaries in persuading migrants to accept the unwanted move to the Central Highlands. The priests proved unenthusiastic.

The government tried again four weeks later, inviting several delegations of migrant leaders to visit the uplands and report back to their constituents. One such group included Fathers Vũ Kim Loan, Nguyễn Đức Nhan and Đỗ Thành Nhân who, to the consternation of the PTUDCTN and Diệm, reported that the conditions in the region were “not advantageous for our flocks [không tiện cho các giáo dân].” A frustrated Bùi Văn Lương wrote the President, “I have exhausted every option to mobilize the *Bắc di cư*

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<sup>42</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Bishop Lê Hữu Từ, 817/TU/VP/K, February 19, 1957, 2, File 4930, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>43</sup> Võ Thanh, “Vì Dân, Vì Nước: Bên Lề Cuộc Mưu Sát tại Ban Mê Thuật,” *Đường Sống*, March 2-3, 1957.

<sup>44</sup> PTUDCTN to President’s office, 4291/TU/NDC/HC4, September 12, 1956, 62, File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII.

transfer to the Central Highlands with little effect.”<sup>45</sup> If the PTUDCTN wanted to relocate the northern migrants, it would have to use alternate methods.

### *Coercive Measures*

In Saigon, police visited Phú Thọ, Tân Sơn Nhất, Tân Sơn Hòa and Gia Định to urge migrants to reconsider. “Life here,” as the officers explained might become *uncomfortable* [không yên]” (my italics). On July 25, 1956, in a secret memorandum to President Diệm, Lương revealed that these visits had been a GVN-sanctioned activity, intended to “instill fear into the [collective] psyche” of migrants.<sup>46</sup>

The government also used the alleged Communist threat to force migrants to move. In Gia Định Province, Communist elements reportedly mobilized southerners to cut off all trade and communication between the resettlement centers and the province. The agents provocateurs then “destroyed crops and burned down resettlement sites, leaving *Bắc di cư* homeless,” according to Nguyễn Hữu Châu.<sup>47</sup> The GVN denounced the act as a failed effort to divide the Vietnamese people.

The apparent attack, nonetheless, proved convenient to the government seeking to relocate many of the over 140,000 *Bắc di cư* living in Gia Định.<sup>48</sup> Within six months, 30,000 migrants had been transferred away from the province, many of them to the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> PTUDCTN to President Diệm, 768/TU/VP/M (Secret), July 25, 1956, 19, File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>47</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Châu, 924/BPTT, [undated], File 9856, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>48</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President Diệm, “October 1956 Report,” 1109/TU/HC/M, November 22, 1956, 3, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII.

Central Highlands.<sup>49</sup> Though no evidence exists linking the destruction of Gia Định resettlement sites to the government, whatever the case, the affair further fueled *Bắc di cư* distrust of the GVN.

Most notable, however, during February and March of 1956, 1957 and 1958, waves of fires struck key resettlement sites in Biên Hòa, Gia Định and Saigon. Though it is unclear if foul play was involved, the fires proved convenient in the government's effort to relocate *Bắc di cư*. In a five-week span of 1956, fires left over 17,000 northern migrants homeless. For the Tết Lunar New Year alone, authorities reported no less than 15 blazes.<sup>50</sup> The largest of these occurred on February 16, 1956 at Tân Mai Resettlement camp, leaving almost half of the roughly 13,000 *Bắc di cư* residents without any shelter.<sup>51</sup> The resulting investigation determined the cause of the tragedy to be an oil lamp knocked over during a domestic dispute. Ten days later a fire broke out at Trảng Bom Market in Hồ Nai leaving at least one thousand homes destroyed and at least 5,000 people homeless.<sup>52</sup> Investigations concluded *all* the fires to be *accidental*, stressing the fact that wild fires were indeed common during those dry months. Perhaps, but migrants believed them to be the result of arson. Ultimately, the fires still proved convenient to a government seeking to move the population into upland areas such as Ban Mê Thuột.<sup>53</sup> In

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<sup>49</sup> Trần Hưng Ký (PTUDCTN Chief inspector), "Dân số định cư," July 1, 1957, 6, File 4425, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>50</sup> "Vụ cháy lớn, Bến cỏ và Chí Hoà," *Ngôn Luận*, February 17, 1956, 1.

<sup>51</sup> PTUDCTN, 880TU/VP, "Trại định cư Tân Mai bị hỏa hoạn," February 17, 1956, File 4273, PTTĐICH, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Tòa ĐBCPNV (Nha Hành Chánh sự vụ). 924-HCSV/Pl. February 26, 1956, 4, File 4273, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* Though scant proof exists implicating the government of arson, the timing, location and scope of the fires, as well as the GVN's response raise considerable suspicion about its role.

the case of Saigon's Phú Thọ Lều, however, officials used more straightforward tactics to evict *Bắc di cư*.

### *Dissolving Phú Thọ Lều*

On November 9, 1956, GVN officials of Saigon Water and Electricity [Ty Thủy Điện] shut off water service to the camp. Sanitation services were discontinued and the camp's only pharmacy was closed. The timing of these measures was no accident.<sup>54</sup>

A report from Bùi Văn Lương marked "Extremely Urgent" and dated November 12 reveals that efforts to persuade *Bắc di cư* to move from overcrowded resettlement locations had fallen far short of the GVN objective. While the government hoped to move "tens of thousands" of migrants from among other places Biên Hòa, Gia Định, Bình Thuận, Saigon and Tây Ninh, only 281 people had agreed to move.<sup>55</sup> On January 11, 1957, a mysterious fire left over 1000 residents homeless. Many of the camp's migrants suspected the government of being responsible. A suspicion confirmed, in the eyes of *Bắc di cư*, by the government's insistence that those affected by the fire accept immediate relocation. Despite GVN demands, however, the migrants remained. The government was on a collision course with *Bắc di cư* and religious authorities.

On February 14, 1957, the day before the scheduled dissolution of Phú Thọ Lều, the Saigon Archdiocese stepped in, ordering Father Trần Ngũ Nhạc out of the camp. In a scene of mass confusion, thousands of residents of the camp filled the streets, effectively blocking the priest's departure. The police and army were called into help "restore

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<sup>54</sup> Như Phong, "Trở ngại đầu tiên trong kế hoạch giải toả Đô Thành: Trại Phú Thọ Lều," *Tự Do*, February 18, 1957.

<sup>55</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 258-TU/DC/HC4, November 12, 1956, 5, File 4423, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

order.” A riot ensued, however, leaving scores injured and several dead. After much effort, Father Nhạc persuaded camp residents that there was little he could do and begged them in an open letter to “accept the government order” and leave peacefully.<sup>56</sup>

The government promised to compensate migrants in Phú Thọ Lều, Tân Sơn Hòa and other locations in Saigon for homes built on these sites. Moreover, the GVN explained, they were being moved to the Central Highlands, a region into which the government was preparing to lavish much assistance. A rich land, Ngô Đình Diệm hailed the Central Highlands as “the California of Vietnam.”<sup>57</sup> To demonstrate the government’s determination, it organized an enormous festival, called the *Hội Chợ Ban Mê Thuột* and made 1957 “the year of the Central Highlands.”<sup>58</sup> The GVN invited spiritual leaders and representatives from Saigon and Gia Định to the inaugural event and visit the sites on which the GVN planned to resettle the *Bắc di cư*. On February 22, 1957, President Diệm led a delegation to the festival’s inauguration in Ban Mê Thuột, at which he would give the keynote address. As it happened, the government’s worst fears came to pass.

Just six days after the chaos in Phú Thọ Lều, on February 22, 1957, a gunman attempted to assassinate the president as he prepared to give his speech. Though Diệm survived unscathed, the episode left the Minister of Agriculture wounded. Witnessed by members of the *Bắc di cư* community visiting the festival, the attempted assassination only served to amplify northerners existing concerns about leaving the relative security of Saigon.

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<sup>56</sup> Như Phong, “Trở ngại đầu tiên trong kế hoạch giải toả Đô Thành: Trại Phú Thọ Lều,” *Tự Do*, February 18, 1957.

<sup>57</sup> “Buôn Ma Thuột: Californie của Việt Nam,” *Ngôn Luận*, February 23, 1957.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

For *Bắc di cư* Catholic leaders, they were caught between the fears of their followers and the government's expectations. The clergy had become embedded as leaders in 280 of the resettlement villages. Yet many Catholic officials, particularly Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, the head of the Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee, did not want to be seen as associated with hated GVN policy. In March of 1957, the existing fissures in this problematic relationship erupted publicly, in the process, exposing long-standing distrust on the part of Diệm and his family toward the northern migrant Church.

*"Lost Trust": Catholic Church – GVN Relations and the Bắc di cư*

In its first issue following the attempt on Diệm's life, the Catholic weekly *Đường Sống* published, "On the edge of the failed assassination at Ban Mê Thuột."<sup>59</sup> The editorial, like other newspapers of the RVN, expressed the "jubilation" and "relief" that the Vietnamese people felt upon learning Diệm had survived unscathed. However, the newspaper's editor, Father Vũ Đình Trác (writing under his pseudonym Võ Thanh), added cryptically that the *Bắc di cư* were praying for the President "*to recover the trust of the people that he initially enjoyed* (Italics in the original)."<sup>60</sup> The Catholic weekly could not be ignored.

The *Đường Sống* was not just any Catholic newspaper. Founded in 1954 as a resource for Catholics arriving from northern Vietnam, the weekly's influence had quickly grown within the new community due to its chief benefactor, Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, the former Bishop of Bùi Chu and chief of the Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement

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<sup>59</sup> Võ Thanh, "Vi Dân, Vi Nước: Bên Lề Cuộc Mưu Sát tại Ban Mê Thuột," *Đường Sống*, March 2-3, 1957. Note: Ban Mê Thuột and Buôn Ma Thuột are used interchangeably.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Committee or Ủy Ban Hỗ Trợ Định Cư. Chi was the most senior Vietnamese Catholic involved in resettlement.<sup>61</sup> His committee had a considerable budget of its own and formally oversaw all clergy involvement in resettlement.<sup>62</sup> Chi's headquarters at Huyện Sĩ Church lay just one hundred meters from the Đường Sống offices and the paper was widely regarded as the mouthpiece of Bishop Chi and his committee.<sup>63</sup> To mobilize the *Bắc di cư* to move to the uplands, Diệm needed the assistance of the Chi and the clergy.

However, to Bishop Chi and the entire Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee, the clergy's role in the resettlement had been a source of concern almost from the moment it assumed its responsibilities. Resettlement failures and corruption, Chi had argued, reflected poorly on the clergy, particularly because in many cases parish priests were the conduit between the government and *Bắc di cư*.<sup>64</sup> Migrants, some observers reported, had come to view their own parish priests as inept in light of these problems.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi served as Bishop of Bùi Chu from 1950. He, along with Bishop Lê Hữu Từ, played a critical role in the organization of anti-Communist Catholic forces in Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm during the First Indochina War. While Lê Hữu Từ's power diminished quickly upon arrival in the South (Từ died in 1967), Bishop Chi was a powerful figure to both the migration and subsequent resettlement. Following his work in Saigon as *Bắc di cư* chief, Chi became Bishop of Quy Nhơn. He died in Quảng Nam in 1988.

<sup>62</sup> Trần Tam Tinh, *Thập Giá và Lưỡi Gươm*, 215. Some have estimated the committee's war chest to have been over fifty million US dollars.

<sup>63</sup> The Đường Sống took up residence at 63 Bùi Thị Xuân in Sài Gòn. Bishop Chi's headquarters were located at 1 Bùi Chu (Huyện Sĩ Church).

<sup>64</sup> Phạm Ngọc Chi to President Diệm, 018/7/VP, January 29, 1957, 15-16, File 22403, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>65</sup> Alfred Cardinaux, "Commentary," in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 97.

Compounding Chi's anxieties, as early as the summer of 1955, was the increasingly negative portrayal of parish priests by government officials. GVN authorities charged that they had received numerous reports of priests inexplicably "deducting [khấu]" 200-500 piasters from the *Bắc di cư* housing stipend of 3000 piasters without explanation.<sup>66</sup> In April of 1956, Secretary of State to the President Nguyễn Hữu Châu received an anonymous letter accusing Father Đoàn Phi Hùng of colluding with the PTUDCTN to extract money from migrants in Chợ Lớn.<sup>67</sup> Father Hùng claimed he had collected contributions from supportive migrants in order to build a Church. He emphasized that the contributions were "voluntary." According to the letter, however, the migrants feared "punishment" if they refused his appeals. When an investigation was mounted into the charges, Father Hùng began to claim that he had been forced to comply with police officers demands for kickbacks from resettlement assistance. Hùng petitioned the President and Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi initiate their own inquiries.<sup>68</sup>

In Tây Ninh, a report by the national police detailed how Fathers Quý and Khương "taxed" all *Bắc di cư* activities. For instance, the government had provided 300 piasters to each family for bedding, of which the priests only gave 80. Another 100,000 piasters were earmarked for ceramic containers to collect water, yet the two men allegedly kept 98% of these funds for personal use. They added 2200 names to the camp

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<sup>66</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, "Chuyện Đồng Bào Di Cư: Các vị trái trường kể cả những vị Linh Mục cần làm sáng tỏ hành động của mình," *Thời Luận*, July 25, 1955.

<sup>67</sup> Anonymous letter to Nguyễn Hữu Châu, April 7, 1956, 2, File 4457, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>68</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 606/VP/M (secret), April 26, 1956, 6, File 4457, PTTĐICH, NACII.

scrolls to receive additional funding and, treating the land as their own fiefdom, they forced the people in the community to pay a tax on all the wood they collected.<sup>69</sup>

Chi and the Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee felt betrayed by the government. A frustrated Vũ Đình Trác, the *Đường Sống* editor and Bishop Chi's lieutenant, wrote that priests were "eating their own rice, while carrying the elephant's tusks on their shoulders [ăn cơm nhà vác ngà voi]," a reference to feudal-era corvee labor practices.<sup>70</sup> Clergy were serving as resettlement administrators without any assistance and when certain people did not agree with the way they directed these tasks, they made up allegations about malfeasance, according to Trác. While priests may have taken a portion of the resettlement assistance provided each individual and family, he explained, their motives had nothing to do with personal gain. Instead, in the face of many resettlement problems, priests had deducted the funds for the purpose of establishing community support services. By and large, Trác wrote, the allegations made against clergy were "without merit (vô căn cứ)."<sup>71</sup>

Fearing the decline of the clergy's reputation, Bishop Chi repeatedly asked the government to relieve parish priests of their administrative role. For instance, on October 7, 1955, the Committee announced its intention to cease participation in government-directed services by January 1, 1956, explaining that the clergy's chief obligation was to "the Gospel and Canonical Law."<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Chi argued, Catholic priests were not

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<sup>69</sup> National Police, 10767/PC1/M, May 5, 1956, 100-101, File N21-13, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>70</sup> Vũ Đình Trác, "Một Tiếng Chuông về Câu Chuyện Đồng Bào Di Cư," *Thời Luận*, August 30, 1955.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ban Hộ Trợ Định Cư, 48/TU. SG, October 10, 1955, 1-2, File 4042, PTTĐICH, NACII.

trained for civil administration. Only out of patriotic duty and concern for the people had it accepted leadership of migrant resettlement. Chi reminded that the Church was not trained for such service. Its only real qualification was its role as spiritual leaders.<sup>73</sup>

But over the course of time, there was really little that could be done about the parish priests' function. Without an administrative alternative, Bùi Văn Lương explained, the clergy could not relinquish their duties without serious repercussions to the migrants. As Lương described it, this would be akin to “bringing one's child to the market and abandoning it [mang con bỏ chợ].”<sup>74</sup>

While the Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee officially concluded its operations on December 31, 1956, the northern migrant Church leaders would continue to agonize over the role of clergy.<sup>75</sup> In a letter confirming the dissolution of the committee, Lương wrote to the Council of Bishops in South Vietnam that with all resettlement sites being merged into provincial government apparatuses, the services of the clergy would no longer be needed.<sup>76</sup> With the committee gone, however, authorities still expected Catholic priests to function as intermediaries between government and *Bắc di cư*. This included assuaging the refugees' fears about moving to such locations as the Central

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<sup>73</sup> Võ Thanh, “Vì Dân, Vì Nước: Bên Lễ Cuộc Mưu Sát tại Ban Mê Thuột,” *Đường Sống*, March 2-3, 1957.

<sup>74</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, 577/VP/M, April 14, 1956, 20, File 4423, PTTĐICH, NACII. It appears that the Vatican took the side of the GVN in this matter when Bishop Caprio, Rome's Special Envoy wrote to Chi, “Though Vatican Code does not permit clergy to hold official office, present conditions are a special case and we should proceed according to the wishes of President Diệm.”

<sup>75</sup> The ongoing dispute in all likelihood deepened further when the GVN announced the Directive 57/4 (October 23, 1956), which placed all private schools under the authority of the government. See Phạm Ngọc Chi to President Diệm, 018/7/VP, January 29, 1957, 15-16, File 22403, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>76</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 79 TU/VP/K, January 5, 1957, 2, File 4942, PTTĐICH, NACII.

Highlands. Yet as already demonstrated, many priests were reluctant to give their support.

To Diệm, however, this unwillingness reflected a much deeper problem. He saw all of this as a manifestation of a long festering rift between *Bắc di cư* Catholic elites, led by Bishop Chi, and the Ngô Đình family. And the *Đường Sống* editorial seemed to confirm those fears.

Due to his integral role in *Bắc di cư* resettlement, one might imagine Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi and Diệm were natural bedfellows. However, it was only circumstance that drew Diệm to Chi. As I discussed in *chapter one*, in August 1954, the Vatican's then-Apostolic Delegate apparently authorized Bishop Chi to oversee care of Catholic *Bắc di cư* in the South.<sup>77</sup> If Diệm was going to seek Church assistance on the migration crisis, he had to cooperate with Chi. An irony, since by 1954, Diệm (and his clan) seem to have developed a visceral distrust of the prelate, a suspicion so intense that in an interview years after Diệm's death Chi noted candidly, "The Ngô clan despised me [không ưa gì]."<sup>78</sup>

Born at Kim Sơn district (Ninh Bình province) in 1909, Phạm Ngọc Chi began his religious studies in Thanh Hóa province as an eleven year old. Known for his intelligence as well as obedience, in 1927, Chi was selected to study university in Rome. He became a priest on December 23, 1933 and then continued his studies in Paris. He returned to Vietnam in 1936 to assume duties as a professor at the Phát Diệm seminary. A decade later, at the request of Bishop Lê Hữu Từ, Chi accepted the seminary directorship. In his

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<sup>77</sup> *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám*, 1964 (Saigon: Sacerdos, 1964), 267.

<sup>78</sup> Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Huy, *Giám Mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm, 1945-1954* (Saigon, 1973), 248.

position, Chi was Bishop Từ's most trusted advisor on politics and law.<sup>79</sup> In all likelihood, the Ngô Đình household's distrust of the future prelate began with his relationship with Bishop Lê Hữu Từ.

Due to his role as advisor to Hồ Chí Minh's government in 1946 and, later, Bảo Đại beginning in 1949, some viewed Lê Hữu Từ as a "scheming" political opportunist.<sup>80</sup> In particular, Từ's connection to the Vietminh—real as well as alleged—was unconscionable.<sup>81</sup> Từ had been an associate of Ngô Đình Khôi, Diệm's eldest brother, when Vietminh agents murdered Khôi and his son. Rather than speak out against the murders, Từ instead accepted the position as spiritual advisor to the Vietminh government.<sup>82</sup> Chi later claimed it was because of this position that in 1946 Từ and he were able to successfully intercede on behalf of Trần Lệ Xuân, Ngô Đình Nhu's wife, and her parents when Vietminh agents detained them. However, the Ngô Đình family could not apparently forgive Khôi's death.

Compounding this animosity, Diệm was suspicious of Từ and Chi's wartime 'collaboration' with the French. In October 1949, Bishop Từ reached an agreement with French forces establishing the special autonomous zone (Khu Tự Trị) of Phát Diệm and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>80</sup> Hoành Linh Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi* (California, Văn Nghệ, 1986), 196

<sup>81</sup> The Vietminh apparently campaigned hard to attract the support of Bishop Từ. At his ordination on October 29, 1945, a high-ranking Vietminh delegation, including Phạm Văn Đồng and Võ Nguyên Giáp, was in attendance and delivered a letter from Hồ Chí Minh congratulating "his eminence." Then, in February 1946, Hồ Chí Minh himself visited the Bishop to request the Bishop become the new government's "Supreme Advisor [Cố Vấn Tối Cao]." According to Phát Diệm Diocese lore, Hồ even asked the prelate to baptize him. For more on relations between Hồ and Từ see Đỗ Quang Hưng, *Vấn đề tôn giáo trong lịch sử Cách Mạng Việt Nam: Lý luận và thực hiện* (Hanoi: NXB Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2005), 311.

<sup>82</sup> Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Huy, *Giám Mục Lê Hữu Từ và Phát Diệm, 1945-1954*, 36.

Bùi Chu. (The next year Chi was ordained as the Bishop of Bùi Chu). Confirming Diệm's feelings about the relationship, when French forces began to pull back from the Red River Delta in 1954, Từ fled in the first hours of Operation Auvergne leaving behind tens if not hundreds of thousands of frightened followers, according to the historian Nguyễn Quang Hưng.<sup>83</sup> Initially wanting northern Catholics to stay put in order to challenge the Vietminh, Hưng suggests that Diệm may have regarded Từ and Chi's departure as a sign of weakness. This distrust of the northern prelates only intensified during the first years after the Geneva Agreements.

Upon reaching the South, Father Hoàng Quỳnh, apparently acting on the instructions of Từ, began to assemble a *Bắc di cư* regiment in Saigon with the financial backing of the Bình Xuyên gang.<sup>84</sup> Most viewed the relationship between the prelates and Bình Xuyên as merely a gambit to buttress *Bắc di cư* self-defense in the South, not a move against Diệm. The new prime minister, however, perceived the maneuver as a direct challenge to his own authority, according to a close Diệm confidante, Father Cao Văn Luận.<sup>85</sup> In the North, Từ and Chi had established an autonomous zone. What was to prevent them from pursuing a similar strategy in the South? Adding insult to injury, as noted in the introduction, in 1954, Bishop Từ spoke disdainfully of Diệm to US then-

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<sup>83</sup> Nguyễn Quang Hưng, *Bước đầu khảo cứu cuộc di cư của đồng bào Công Giáo Bắc Kỳ sau hiệp định Gionevơ Nam 1954* (Hanoi: University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2005), 35.

<sup>84</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon, 1971), 41. Father Hoàng Quỳnh served as commander of the self-defense militias of Bùi Chu – Phát Diệm Autonomous zone (Tổng Chi Huy Tổng Bộ Dân Quân Tự Vệ). The regiment was known as the *Bắc Tiến* or Northward March.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

Ambassador Donald Heath, telling him that Diệm had “no popular support... and was unfit to head a government.”<sup>86</sup>

While Từ’s public role largely diminished after 1955, Chi’s did not.<sup>87</sup> As official leader of the Catholic *Bắc di cư* community, Chi represented a powerful force. Chi again seemed to confirm Diệm’s anxiety, initially becoming involved in southern politics.<sup>88</sup>

Just prior to the South’s presidential election, the Bishop announced the establishment of a new political party, the Catholic Citizens Group [Tập Đoàn Công Dân Công Giáo].

Though Chi disbanded the group, the attempt to organize a political organization, independent of the then-Prime Minister further poisoned the relationship.<sup>89</sup> Thus, it is no surprise to discover that by 1956, the government had informants inside Chi’s operations collecting intelligence and reporting back to the President’s office.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, further straining relations between Diệm and Bishop Chi was Diệm’s eldest living brother, the Bishop of Vĩnh Long Diocese, Pierre Martin Ngô Đình Thục.<sup>91</sup> Though he had no official government title, Thục was Vietnam’s senior [niên trưởng]

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<sup>86</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 57.

<sup>87</sup> Lê Hữu Từ passed away in Gò Vấp (Sài Gòn) in 1967.

<sup>88</sup> Cao Văn Luận played an instrumental role in the establishment of the University of Huế in 1957, where he served as university rector from July 1957 to August 1963. Amidst the tumult of 1963, however, Diệm forced Luận to resign claiming the cleric lacked the hardline methods to deal with the Buddhist students who were challenging the regime. As a Catholic priest, Luận believed the approach to the students had to be “delicate and compassionate.”

<sup>89</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử*, 1940-1965 (Saigon, 1971), 260. It should be recalled that Diệm was also concerned about the Geneva Accords’s stipulation calling for a nationwide election to be held in 1956. Diệm was desperate to tamp down all suggestions of opposition in the South.

<sup>90</sup> Report 187-A-5, March 28, 1957, 17, File 22403, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>91</sup> Thục played a critical role, if not the principal role, in the establishment and operation of the regime’s Personalism Training Center (Trung Tâm Huấn Luyện Nhân Vị). Organized on land donated by the elder Ngô, the school ran under his supervision.

Bishop, having served since 1938, *and* the eldest son [anh trưởng] of the Ngô Đình clan.<sup>92</sup> In this capacity, Thục held enormous influence over his brother.

Conventional scholarship has identified Thục's stature as substantive proof of both the president's warm relationship with the *Bắc di cư* Church and the favor he bestowed on migrants. This argument presumes Vietnam's Catholic Church was a monolithic institution, free of conflict. Evidence, in fact, demonstrates that *Bắc di cư* priests and Bishop Thục disliked each other. When the Vatican announced in September 1955 that Nguyễn Văn Hiền would become the first Bishop of the Saigon Diocese, Thục was furious. As the eldest living Vietnamese Bishop, Thục wanted the promotion. His family stood by him. Bishop Chi and most *Bắc di cư* priests, however, championed Hiền's selection. Thục may not have forgiven the northern migrant clergy.

It was this feud that became the backdrop for Catholic migrants struggling to survive. In Biên Hòa, Father Nguyễn Đại Bằng devised a plan to organize the families of several parishes in the province into wood collection teams and establish a lumber factory. Such ingenuity and creativity seemed to reflect the core ideals of *Self-Reliance*. It also provided an alternative for a community of rice farmers recently resettled on land unsuited for cultivation. Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi threw his support behind the project and

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<sup>92</sup> Writers have long emphasized the role familial relations played in the Diệm government. Particular focus has been paid to the relationship between Diệm and his younger brother, Nhu. Yet with the exception of the events of 1963, very little is known about the Thục and Diệm's relationship. Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, 1940-1965* (Saigon, 1971), 305; Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon, 1971), 196; Hoành Linh Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương Tôi* (California, Văn Nghệ, 1986), 238.

proposed a strategy to transform the northern migrant community of Biên Hòa into furniture makers.<sup>93</sup> The government, however, rejected the scheme.

On July 25, 1956, Diệm's secret police, the benignly named *Service for the Study of Politics and Society* [Nha Nghiên Cứu Chính Trị và Xã Hội], raided the lumber factory and arrested several members of the management team.<sup>94</sup> The factory was closed and the migrants were denied use of the forests. Vĩnh Long Diocese under the direction of Bishop Thục held the exclusive rights to exploit the lumber from the woodlands. While it remains unclear who gave the order for the arrests and closure, most assumed Thục had a hand in it. Moreover, many viewed the arrests as an attack on Bishop Chi. The animus between *Bắc di cư* clergy and Bishop Thục had reached a point of irreparable damage.

In 1957, several *Bắc di cư* priests visited the prelate at Vĩnh Long Diocese regarding an unrelated matter. Thục showed no patience for the group, according to Diệm's chief of secret police, Trần Kim Tuyền.<sup>95</sup> Instead, in a fit of anger, the prelate dismissed the priests, "You northern migrant clergy have issues!" Stunned, the eldest priest of the group allegedly shot back, "Bishop, that is completely inappropriate. Why would you drag the migration into this matter?"<sup>96</sup>

This hostility and conflict between the *Bắc di cư* Church and Ngô Đình house came to a head over GVN demands for northern migrant relocation in the Central

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<sup>93</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, "Các trại định cư Biên Hòa mong muốn những gì?," *Thời Luận*, April 13-14, 1955.

<sup>94</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, 788/TU/VP/M, August 1, 1956, 16, File 4463, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>95</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khai Minh, *Làm Thế Nào để Giết Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon, 1971), 43.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

Highlands. On March 7, 1957, just two weeks after the attempt on Diệm's life and days after the *Đường Sáng* editorial, over 200,000 people assembled in downtown Saigon to commemorate Hai Bà Trưng Day (Vietnam's Women's Day), a celebration highlighted by Madame Ngô Đình Nhu's keynote address.<sup>97</sup> Speaking about the importance of sacrifice, Madame Nhu astonished the crowd when she began to criticize *Bắc di cư* in and around Saigon for not accepting their responsibility. Living in unacceptable conditions, their presence was a blight on the city and a drain on government resources. The government had tried on numerous occasions to move them but to no avail. The northern migrants were "lazy and shallow," she continued:

They live wretched existences in tent ghettos [túp lều ô chuột], causing both material and spiritual decline and ensuring a future of shame [tủi hổ], chaos [hỗn độn] and darkness [tối tăm] for our country. Meanwhile, our country has so much deserted fertile land that needs hands to exploit it... Their intransigence is stifling the Nation's development...<sup>98</sup>

Blaming *Bắc di cư* obstinacy on their spiritual leaders, Madame Nhu decried "criminals wearing the robes of clergy tricked" them into remaining in Saigon.

The *Đường Sáng* responded in its next issue publishing an editorial entitled "Độc Bà Nghị [Read Madame Representative]," directed at Madame Nhu.

You portray us as waiting for alms. If we are lazy how have we managed to survive? Relief assistance has been small, we have never sponged [bám] on the kindness of others. We left the North and our property behind, with nothing but our empty hands. To my mind, this is the most profound expression of our endurance, our will [ý chí] to reestablish our lives... Today, the residents of these ghettos fight to survive.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> "Ngót 200,000 người đã lòng trọng làm lễ kỷ niệm Hai Bà Trưng," *Tự Do*, March 8, 1957.

<sup>98</sup> Người dân ô chuột, "Độc Bà Nghị," *Đường Sáng*, March 16, 1957.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

The real questions, the *Đường Sống* concluded, were why the tent cities continued to survive and why did people not want to move? The answers, it emphasized, were far more complicated than just “shallow thinking” on the part of migrants. It represented the GVN’s failure to live up its promises.

In Diệm’s eyes, this was an affront to his family and the government. In what became known as the *Đường Sống* affair, the government immediately shut down the newspaper and arrested its editor, Father Trác, sentencing him to 18 months in prison.<sup>100</sup> Though GVN authorities never implicated Chi in connection with the *Đường Sống* affair, it was apparent that in closing the newspaper and arresting Trác, Diệm’s real aim was the Bishop himself. In July 1957, perhaps as a way to ease tensions, the Vatican “promoted” Bishop Chi to head the Quy Nhơn Diocese in southern central Vietnam, away from Saigon. The damage, however, was done. Migrants were forced to move to the uplands.

### *Conclusion*

By the end of 1963 and the fall of Ngô Đình Diệm, the South seemed to be coming unhinged along religious fault lines. In early 1964, newspapers across South Vietnam published stories that sought to explain the trend of growing religious tensions between Catholics and Buddhists. One of the more prominent factors highlighted in these accounts was the existence of a Regime of the Clergy or *Linh Mục Chế*. The argument maintained that Catholic clergy had abused their power to establish closed, corporate resettlement villages—much like the parishes left behind in the North—which resisted integration into

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<sup>100</sup> Report 187-A-5, March 28, 1957, 17, File 22403, PTTĐICH, NACII.

broader southern society. This condition, many observers concluded, explained the roots of religious conflict between Buddhist and Catholics that, by 1964, were now commonplace.<sup>101</sup>

The post-1963 RVN government blamed Diệm for this dynamic. The former president “plotted” to use the *Bắc di cư* in order to rule the South. He did so by exploiting his close ties to the Church. His scheming led to the fissures threatening “national solidarity” and had fomented southerners’ collective distrust of the GVN.<sup>102</sup> However, as efforts to relocate northern migrants to the Central Highlands demonstrate, the situation was far more complex.

In 1956, Saigon and the surrounding provinces faced dire overcrowding. The government, seeking to reduce the population, planned new relocation centers, among them Buôn Mê Thuật in the Central Highlands. *Bắc di cư* living in the capital region were asked to move.

On the move for years, many of the northern refugees were uninterested in being uprooted again. Moreover, while conditions in Saigon were never ideal, they feared moving to unknown, lightly populated areas, like those in the Central Highlands. To persuade the migrants to move, the government sought the assistance of migrant leaders, especially, Catholic clergy. Church officials, however, were not eager to oblige, recognizing that the numerous resettlement setbacks would affect their Catholic followers trust in them. The rising friction between Diệm and Church officials came to a head in

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<sup>101</sup> “Thế nào là ‘Linh Mục Ché,’” *Thăng Tiến*, February 2, 1964.

<sup>102</sup> Ủy ban TW Lãnh đạo Quốc Gia, 080/TV, November 8, 1966, 13, File 333, UBLĐQG, NACIL.

1957 following the attempt on the President's life. Far from being a key source of support, northern clergy represented a significant challenge to Diệm.

This chapter further illuminates the numerous divisions that arose as a result of resettlement. Those who claim that migrants became a privileged bloc have generally viewed the process of resettlement through the myopic lens of Vietnam War politics and assumptions about the relationship between northern migrants, the Catholic Church and Ngô Đình Diệm. They ignore the struggles migrants confronted and the demands made and even coercion by the government regarding resettlement. The Church authorities could not merely act as GVN cheerleaders without risking their own credibility.

Diệm, however, was undeterred by the myriad of problems. He remained convinced that *Bắc di cư* resettlement was a template for land development across South Vietnam. The establishment of “special” resettlement sites, like those found in the Central Highlands, not only provided *Bắc di cư* with land but also technical assistance and plans for real economic development.<sup>103</sup> The fact that the new arrivals feared this land of ‘poisoned waters’ was of little concern to Diệm.

In the next chapter, I examine the most important of these *special projects*, the Cái Sắn resettlement region in the lower Mekong Delta. Universally regarded at the time as *the* model resettlement site, Cái Sắn became a laboratory for future land development plans, including the infamous Strategic Hamlet [Áp Chiến Lược] program.<sup>104</sup> As I show, however, whatever successes were achieved at Cái Sắn, the so-called “miracle of the Mekong,” the project was marked by momentous failures that caused deep regional

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<sup>103</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam*, 72.

<sup>104</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, “Cuộc gặp nhau,” *Chính Luận*, September 14, 1971.

divisions between *Bắc di cư* and local southern inhabitants and further discord between the Diệm government and *Bắc di cư*.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Estabrook, “Vietnam’s Gone Far ‘From Scratch’,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1957.

## *Chapter 4—Hostile Designs: Bắc di cư Resettlement In the Lower Mekong Delta, 1956-1963*

### *Introduction*

On October 13, 1956 at 6 am, Ngô Đình Diệm sat reading a copy of the *Đường Sống* Catholic weekly in his Gia Long palace living quarters.<sup>1</sup> The President's staff had highlighted a front-page open letter entitled "The Echo from Cái Sắn [Tiếng Vọng từ Cái Sắn]." Penned by northern migrants [*Bắc di cư*] settled at Cái Sắn, the most important South Vietnamese resettlement region located in the lower Mekong Delta, the letter's appearance in the Saigon press marked the second time in four days. Striking hard at the government, the writers alleged that the government of South Vietnam had "renege" on its early promises to provide land to northern migrants in the region; a promise affirmed by no one less than President Diệm during his nationally publicized visit to the region on April 24, 1956.<sup>2</sup> Yet not six months later, the exasperated petitioners claimed, Cái Sắn *Bắc di cư* found themselves forced to sign tenant contracts with "nameless landlords."<sup>3</sup> The letter demanded an explanation from Nguyễn Văn Thời, Diệm's Minister of Agrarian Reform, for the about-face and warned that nothing less than the GVN's prestige was at stake.

Diệm fumed. The president viewed Cái Sắn as the jewel of resettlement. It was, as mentioned in the last chapter, one of four "special" resettlement centers launched in late

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống*. (Saigon: n.p., 1971); Nguyễn Kinh, Interviewed by Jason Picard, Vườn Xoài Parish (Ho Chi Minh City), September 18, 2011. Nguyễn Kinh served as a member of the palace guard between 1954 and 1963. He describes the newspaper ritual as well as Diệm's "very simple" eating habits.

<sup>2</sup> "Mỗi gia đình được cấp 3 mẫu tây đất để khai khẩn," *Ngôn Luận*, April 26, 1956.

<sup>3</sup> "Tiếng Vọng từ Cái Sắn," *Đường Sống*, October 13, 1956.

1955 and 1956 to deal with the pitfalls of early resettlement. These included overcrowding, poor sanitation, rising unemployment, insufficient housing and water, all of which threatened the basic welfare.<sup>4</sup> Coupled with the political intrigue that beset the new regime, Diệm's government faced a potential disaster. These centers—Pleiku and Ban Mê Thuột in the Central Highlands, La Ngà in Đồng Nai Thượng province and, of course, Cái Sắn in the lower Mekong Delta—were to help alleviate this crisis.

But it was Cái Sắn that excited Diệm the most. With plans to resettle 100,000 *Bắc di cư* on 77,000 hectares of allegedly uncultivated lands in the lower or western Mekong Delta, Cái Sắn would establish a bulwark of supposed loyalist support in the region. As a result, Diệm envisioned Cái Sắn as *the* prototype for all subsequent land development projects: New Lands [Dinh Điền], Agrovilles [Khu Trù Mật] and, most famously, Strategic Hamlets [Áp Chiến Lược]. Now, ten months after migrants began arriving in Cái Sắn, the *Đường Sống* newspaper, the de facto voice of both Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi and Catholic resettlement, had published this petition both denouncing the government's handling of Cái Sắn and, in the process, embarrassing Diệm.

To contemporary western observers, however, Cái Sắn was an unmitigated success. For instance, in 1957 Robert Estabrook observed in *The New York Times*, that the achievement of Cái Sắn had resulted in the establishment of “other Cai Sans around the country.”<sup>5</sup> And in 1961, Wolf Ladejinsky gushed, “Less than six years ago,”

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance: “Tổng Đình Công...,” *Buổi Sáng*, January 5, 1955; “Một cuộc đình công,” *Buổi Sáng*, February 18, 1955; “Sa thải những công nhân gác ngọ là hành động bất tức thời,” *Buổi Sáng*, March 23, 1955; “Chủ hàng Bastos ra lệnh đóng chặt cửa không cho anh em vào làm việc sáng qua,” *Buổi Sáng*, April 13, 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Estabrook, “Vietnam's Gone Far 'From Scratch',” *Washington Post*, November 17, 1957.

“[Cái Sấn] was abandoned, a weed-growing wilderness, a hide-away for bandits. It is now a thriving settlement. The refugee-settlers of Cai San, with the simplest of tools, dug 17 canals totaling 125 miles in length, and built their huts atop the embankments. The American-aid tractors were there with ex-taxi drivers to run them. The results speak well for the remarkable performance of the settlers, for the Vietnamese administrators who rose to the challenge, and the American aid, which boldly and intelligently provided the financial means for the venture. The promise of only five years ago is now a reality. The settlers received their three-hectare holdings virtually as a gift. They are harvesting good crops, paying their own way, and are refugees no longer... the refugees have become productive farmers and full members of Vietnam’s body-politic.”<sup>6</sup>

Even Bernard Fall, who “doubted any other area in Free-Vietnam could meet all the conditions met in Cai San,” nonetheless marveled at the region itself, “with its village-lined canals, it’s 90,000 inhabitants, its churches, hospital... It is certainly one of the most ambitious undertakings anywhere.”<sup>7</sup> Yet by the late 1960s, Cái Sấn disappeared from Vietnam War- and RVN-related scholarship.

Since 2000, however, Cái Sấn has attracted new attention from both Vietnamese and Western scholars. David Biggs’s monograph about the Mekong Delta presents an account of the Cái Sấn project under Ngô Đình Diệm. Tracing the impact of modernization and nation-building as they collided with local landscapes and history, Biggs observes, that from the outset “deep divisions” existed between the mostly Catholic refugees and their priests and “politically connected landowners and government authorities.”<sup>8</sup> Judith Ehlert relates how conflict between *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants

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<sup>6</sup> Wolf Ladejinsky, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” in *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence*, ed. Wesley R Fishel (East Lansing: Michigan State, 1961), 163.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard B Fall, “Commentary on Father Harnett,” in *Vietnam: The First Five Years*, ed. Richard W Lindholm (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 94.

<sup>8</sup> David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2010), 168.

over land-use patterns persist even today.<sup>9</sup> Trần Hữu Hợp's basic history of Cái Sắn, examines the formation and development process of the Cái Sắn community.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the anthropologist Nguyễn Đức Lộc has conducted extensive ethnographic research in Cái Sắn, recording a particularly useful account of the "reproduction of parish community structures based on the traditional village model of the North."<sup>11</sup>

This chapter draws from these arguments to chronicle the establishment of Cái Sắn and the struggles northern migrants confronted there between 1956 and 1963. Having already explored the problems facing resettlement writ large, in this chapter, I seek to examine the impact of resettlement in one place, Cái Sắn. As the jewel in the resettlement crown, how did Cái Sắn represent the promise and pitfalls of state-directed resettlement in South Vietnam? More specifically, how did it effect societal relations and governmental policies? In tackling these questions, I reassess the misperceptions that have preoccupied the historiography, while narrating a far more complicated story about the *Bắc di cư* experience in the lower Mekong Delta and South Vietnam as a whole.

### *Background: Cái Sắn's Origins*

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Ehlert, *Beautiful Floods: Environmental Knowledge and Agrarian Change in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), 132.

<sup>10</sup> Trần Hữu Hợp, "Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Cái Sắn từ năm 1956 – 1975" (MA Thesis, Institute of Social Sciences, Southern region, 2000), 8; Trần Hữu Hợp, "Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long" (PhD Diss., Institute of Social Sciences, Southern region, 2005), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Nguyễn Đức Lộc, "Cơ Cấu Tổ Chức Cộng Đồng theo Giáo Xứ của Người Việt Công Giáo Di Cư năm 1954 tại Nam Bộ," *Phát Triển KH&CN*, Vol. 13, No. 12 (2010), 4; Nguyễn Đức Lộc, "Cấu trúc Cộng Đồng của Người Việt Công Giáo Di Cư Năm 1954 tại Nam Bộ (nghiên cứu trường hợp cộng đồng Công giáo Hồ Nai – Đồng Nai và Cái Sắn – Cần Thơ)," (PhD Diss., Vietnam National University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hồ Chí Minh City), 2010; Nguyễn Đức Lộc, *Cầu Hình Xã Hội: Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Bắc Di Cư tại Nam Bộ* (Hồ Chí Minh: Đại Học Quốc Gia, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2013).

Throughout the late 1950s, the GVN promoted Cái Sắn as a source of “succor and stability,”<sup>12</sup> an engine of economic and agricultural development,<sup>13</sup> a key element of “the national policy of land reform”<sup>14</sup> and “a great victory for freedom over Communism.”<sup>15</sup> Cái Sắn was also seen as a model for future Diệm-era land projects, including Agrovilles and Strategic Hamlets. Through the construction of a new canal system, the Cái Sắn project was supposed to harness the region’s environment to improve transportation and trade and to settle and pacify a “wild (hoang vu)” territory inhabited by “bandits, pirates, Hòa Hảo and Việt Cộng.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, Cái Sắn became a must-see destination for foreign dignitaries visiting South Vietnam to witness the GVN’s tremendous success in the lower Mekong Delta.<sup>17</sup>

The Cái Sắn resettlement project was erected upon a rectangular territory of the lower Mekong Delta, 60 kilometers long and 25 kilometers wide, enclosing 110,000 hectares.<sup>18</sup> The towns of Rạch Giá, Long Thạnh, Thốt Nốt and Long Xuyên marked the project’s four corners. Canals bounded Cái Sắn on the east and west perimeter. The

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<sup>12</sup> “Đặc Biệt của Thời Cuộc: Cái Sắn, đất hứa hẹn của Nông dân cô thế,” *Thời Cuộc*, April 24-26, 1956.

<sup>13</sup> *Cái Sắn: The Dramatic Story of Resettlement and Land Reform in the ‘Rice Bowl’ of the Republic of Viet-Nam* (Saigon: Secretariat of State of RVN, 1958), 22.

<sup>14</sup> “Chương trình tái canh Cái Sắn: một điểm quan trọng vào bậc nhất trong quốc sách CCĐĐ,” *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*, July 7, 1956.

<sup>15</sup> Hoài Văn, “Cái Sắn trưởng thành,” *Dân Việt*, July 7, 1956 (31), 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> The list included then-Vice President Richard Nixon, Bishop Caprio, the Vatican’s Special Envoy, Joseph Buttinger, Ellen Hammer, Bernard Fall, Wesley Fishel, Walter Mode, Wolf Ladejinsky, Edward Lansdale, Alfred Cardinaux, General John W O’Daniel, Leo Cherne, and Leland Barrows.

<sup>18</sup> Trần Hữu Hợp, “Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Cái Sắn từ năm 1956-1975,” 12.

Bassac River defined its northern boundary and the Gulf of Thailand lay to the south. The Sỏi Canal (also known as the Cái Sắn River) bisected the region.<sup>19</sup> The only major road in the region, Inter-province Route 8A (today National Route 80), ran parallel to the Cái Sắn River. The main town in Cái Sắn was Tân Hiệp, over 200 kilometers southwest of Saigon. The GVN's Ministry of Information described the land prior to Cái Sắn's establishment as an "immense plain with endless fields of wild grass extending to the four horizons," with the peaks of the Thất Sơn Mountains in the west being the only blemishes to the landscape.<sup>20</sup>

The region's economy was shaped by the dynamics of local agriculture, security, the tropical environment and a demographic order that distinguished it from those areas in the eastern Red River Delta where most of the Cái Sắn *Bắc di cư* migrants originated. In the North, peasants generally farmed two and even three rice harvests annually. In the Cái Sắn region (and the lower Mekong Delta region more generally), farmers cultivated just one harvest each year of a discrete type of rice known as *floating rice* [cây lúa nổi].<sup>21</sup> Peasants supplemented their income through two methods of fishing.<sup>22</sup> Many had fishing holes for year round use, in which they raised aquaculture.<sup>23</sup> In times of war and disorder,

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<sup>19</sup> The Rạch Sỏi was first dug in 1920s.

<sup>20</sup> *Cai San: The Dramatic Story of Resettlement and Land Reform in the 'Rice Bowl' of the Republic of Viet-Nam*, 6-7; Thanh Tao. "Đây! Cái Sắn: 1 – Từ địa đầu Cái Sắn đến vùng định cư còn xa lắc xa lơ!" *CMQG*, March 27, 1956, 1.

<sup>21</sup> "Mách Nghề," *Tự Do*, February 10, 1957, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc to Ngô Đình Diệm, 32-VPĐB/M (Top Secret), January 14, 1957, 3-11, File 10865, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>23</sup> Group interview, interview by Jason Picard, May 10, 2010, Cần Thơ. They claimed there were never any significant issues between those local southerners living on the land year round and those who came during the flood season to fish.

these ponds became particularly important to locals, supplementing income and diet. For instance, during the First Indochina War, “insecurity (tình thế bất an)” further complicated rice cultivation.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, by the late 1940s, fishing became “the chief source of income (huê lợi chánh) [for local inhabitants].”<sup>25</sup> Between August and December, the monsoons submerged the region in two to three meters of water, which filled up with anabas, catfish, snakehead fish, shrimp and prawns. During this season, poor farmers and tenants from surrounding areas descended on the flooded lands to go fishing. Local inhabitants tolerated this seasonal influx of “floating people” because local population pressures were relatively low.

*Bắc di cư* arriving at Cái Sắn in the mid-1950s found a population density far different from that of the north they left. In 1931, the lower Mekong Delta’s population averaged 63 people/km<sup>2</sup> and in Rạch Giá, where Tân Hiệp is located, the average dropped to 49 people/km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>26</sup> The Cái Sắn’s regional population was roughly 10,000 in 1939 and 12,439 in 1955.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, in the Red River Delta (home to the future *Bắc di cư* migrants) population density averaged 430 people/km<sup>2</sup>. And some parts of Ninh Bình and Nam Định provinces boasted densities as high as 3900 people/km<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc to Ngô Đình Diệm, 32-VPĐB/M (Top Secret), January 14, 1957, 3-11, File 10865, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> A. Terry Rambo, *A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Viet-Nam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution* (Monograph Series III) (Carbondale: Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University, 1973), 169.

<sup>27</sup> “Hệ thống hành chánh hỗn hợp, địa cá tranh chấp,” 118-VPĐB/M March 8, 1957, 4, D32-17, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

Differences in agriculture, demographics, climate and economy, scholars have argued, coalesced to promote village life distinct to region. In the lower Mekong Delta, a sparse population and a relatively gentle climate factored significantly in the rise of open, linear villages set along canals and roads.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, in the northern Red River Delta, a large population, more severe flooding and land shortages encouraged the ‘corporate’ structure commonly found there. Faced with a far more demanding environment, northerners relied more on village institutions, particularly the parish church or communal house (đình), than their southern counterparts.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1930s and early 1940s, authorities deliberated over how to create stability in the lower Mekong, a region they understood to suffer from economic backwardness, underpopulation and banditry. In 1935, French officials organized a special commission to seek a solution to these problems. Impressed by the northern peasantry’s “genius” for maximizing land and space, the commission promoted the organization of new settlements in the lower Mekong by Red River Delta migrants.<sup>30</sup> French plans were also driven by a desire to lessen over-population in the north, which officials believed could be alleviated through settlement on the southern lowlands.<sup>31</sup> Colonial plans, however, yielded meager results. By 1943, the Governor-General’s proposal of resettling 750,000

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<sup>28</sup> Gerald C Hickey, “The Social Systems of Northern Vietnam” (PhD Diss., University of Chicago, 1958); A. Terry Rambo, *A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Viet-Nam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2010), 111.

<sup>31</sup> A. Terry Rambo, *A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Viet-Nam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution*, 169.

northerners had resulted in the movement of only 750 families from Thái Bình and Nam Định provinces.

Other colonial attempts at agricultural development exposed the tenuous nature of local tenant land claims and how threats to land use sparked local- newcomer conflict, despite their shared peasant backgrounds. In 1904, after the completion of the Sỏi-Bassac Canal, officials granted participants in the excavation permission to remain on and cultivate the surrounding lands. In the ensuing years, the Sỏi-Bassac canal peasants paid rent and “poured their sweat, tears and blood [đổ mồ hôi nước mắt và máu] into the soil.”<sup>32</sup> By the mid-1930s, they demanded that the government recognize their claims to the land by giving them permanent ownership. But colonial officials denied the request. Instead, the governor general authorized a Vietnamese Canton chief in the region, Lê Quang Liêm, to sell lands of the future-Cái Sắn to regional landowners, treating the land as “virgin.” The new landlords were expected to “transform” it into a profitable, rice-producing area.<sup>33</sup> The new owners angered the local inhabitants by hiring outsiders. Shortly after the arrival of the new settlers, a violent confrontation erupted between the two sides,

“Opposing the occupation, locals responded by massacring (đổ máu chém giết) dozens (mấy chục) of [new tenants]. The slaughter left its mark and came to be known as the Thạnh Quới Affair.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Đặc Biệt của Thời Cuộc: Cái Sắn, đất hứa hẹn của Nông dân cô thế—Từ vụ Lê Quang Liêm cướp đất của dân Thạnh Quới đến công cuộc khai thác Cái Sắn ngày nay,” *Thời Cuộc*, April 24, 1956, 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* These new landlords were referred to as *người hóa*, literally “transformer.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

The government was horrified by the episode and feared further violence. It responded by immediately returning the new settlers to their previous homes, compensating the landlords and restoring land use rights to the original local inhabitants. Officials did not, however, give them permanent ownership as requested.

On the eve of Cái Sắn's establishment, three institutions figured in the GVN's efforts to manage the region: the Hòa Hảo religion, the Catholic Church and the Communist Party. Peasants of the region had gravitated toward Hòa Hảo following its founding in 1939. They were attracted to the religion's emphasis on aid to the poor and the idea of 'farming as religious practice.' By the 1940s, the religion was dominant among the local population. On the other hand, Catholicism gained little traction in the Cái Sắn region prior to 1956. According to the Church, in 1939, the future-Long Xuyên Diocese, which encompassed Cái Sắn, boasted a population of about 20,000 Catholics in seven parishes.<sup>35</sup> The vast majority congregated in or near towns such as Long Xuyên, Rạch Giá, Hà Tiên and Châu Đốc, *not* in Cái Sắn. As for Communism, official histories claim a communist presence in the Cái Sắn region during the First Indochina War but this is difficult to verify.<sup>36</sup>

The government viewed resettlement as a means to strengthen its position in the region vis-à-vis anti-GVN forces including members of the Việt Minh and the Hòa Hảo.<sup>37</sup> Hòa Hảo forces led by Lê Quang Vinh, aka Ba Cụt, continued to "control and influence"

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<sup>35</sup> *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám 1964* (Saigon: Sacerdos, 1964), 385.

<sup>36</sup> *Kiên Giang kháng chiến chống Mỹ, 1954-1975* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Văn hoá Sài Gòn, 2009); *Lịch sử Kháng Chiến Tây Nam Bộ, 1945-1954* (Vol 1) (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Minh Châu, "Trên đường kiến thiết QG: góp một ý kiến với PTUDCTN về chương trình định cư tại Cái Sắn," *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*, February 25, 1956, 2.

the region, Bùi Văn Lương observed, even after the defeat of the sects in 1955.<sup>38</sup> And the GVN agonized over Communist propaganda that encouraged divisions between *Bắc di cư* and the local inhabitants.<sup>39</sup>

### *Administrative Foundations and Local Response*

In September 1955, COMIGAL submitted a proposal for “an over-all resettlement and rehabilitation program.”<sup>40</sup> This formed the basis for USOM Project Agreement 030-82-075, which included 167 projects totaling 1,043,861,103 đồng (almost thirty million USD). The program committed between 30 and 40 percent of the total funds to Cái Sắn.<sup>41</sup> It became the largest and most famous resettlement site in South Vietnam. And as an MSUG expert noted, “it was also the costliest.”<sup>42</sup> With money secured for resettlement, Bùi Văn Lương requested that he be allowed “to apply Ordinance 7 in locating new resettlement areas (những khu định cư mới).”<sup>43</sup> Issued On February 5, 1955, Ordinance 7

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<sup>38</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc (Government Delegate) to President Diệm, 118-VPDB/M (Secret), Hệ Thống hành chánh hỗn hợp địa cá tranh chấp, March 8, 1957, 1, File D32-17, PTTCPVNCH, NACII. Lương went on to contradict himself. “In Political terms,” Lương wrote, “moving refugees to the region chuyển would avoid any obstacles [không gặp trở ngại gì] as there are no southerners [vì đồng bào Nam ở đây không có]. Therefore, the government need not worry about disputes [between *Bắc di cư* and locals] related to making a living.”

<sup>39</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, Document 100 VP/TU/M, “V/v tình hình định cư hiện tại,” November 11, 1955, 12, File 4042, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Zasloff, *Rural Resettlement in Vietnam: An Agrovillage in Development* (Saigon: Michigan State University, Vietnam Advisory Group, 1963), 21.

<sup>41</sup> “Giải – Đáp: các câu hỏi của Báo ‘Ngôn Luân,’” January 13, 1958, 5, File 11787, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>42</sup> John D Montgomery, *The Case of Vietnamese Administration* (Saigon: Michigan State University, Vietnam Advisory Group), 57.

<sup>43</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, Document 100 VP/TU/M, “V/v tình hình định cư hiện tại,” November 11, 1955, 12, File 4042, PTTĐICH, NACII.

restored production of abandoned lands in order that they might facilitate the resettlement of *Bắc di cư*.<sup>44</sup>

On January 17, 1956, President Diệm signed Order 233-TTP/KH establishing a seven-man committee to oversee Cái Sắn. The members were high-ranking officials drawn from five cabinet-level agencies who reported directly to the President.<sup>45</sup> They included Bùi Văn Lương, Trần Văn Lắm, the GVN delegate in the South [Đại biểu Chánh Phủ tại Nam Phần], Huỳnh Văn Diễm, General Director of Planning, and Trịnh Văn Hi.<sup>46</sup> Diệm granted the committee “power to intervene...whenever necessary” on all matters related to the northern migrants of Cái Sắn.<sup>47</sup> The committee’s formation, however, also exposes limitations to Diệm’s power.

Efforts to extend authority into the region through *Bắc di cư* resettlement bound President Diệm to Mekong Delta landed elites, local officials and his elder brother, Bishop Ngô Đình Thục. Conventional scholarship has argued that this exposed Diệm’s “carpetbag” roots, as a native of central Vietnam’s Quảng Bình province and Huế. In fact, his approach to forming networks was common Vietnamese political practice. Perhaps not an insider to southern politics, however, Diệm also was introspective his

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<sup>44</sup> “Phiếu trình kết quả đầu tiên cuộc điền tra về hà lạm và gian,” October 10, 1956, 44, File 10454, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>45</sup> Document 233-TTP/KH, 4-5, File 10015, PTTĐICH, NACII; President Ngô Đình Diệm, 233/TTP/KH, January 17, 1956, 50-51, File N21-11, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 5.

regional handicap. “Southerners,” Diệm argued, “must be proportionally represented in the government.”<sup>48</sup>

Hence, Diệm turned to powerful landed forces in the Delta to assist him. Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ (Vice President and Minister of Economics), Nguyễn Văn Thời (Minister of Land Reform), Nguyễn Hữu Châu (Secretary of State of the President’s office and, as of April 30, 1956, Minister of Internal Affairs)<sup>49</sup> and Bùi Văn Lương (Commissioner of PTUDCTN)<sup>50</sup> held key cabinet-level posts, while Dương Văn Minh held high rank in the military.<sup>51</sup> All five men came from large landowning families in the Delta and knew the region far better than Diệm.<sup>52</sup> These men could use this advantage to secure personal gain. Whether or not they committed malfeasance, their involvement in GVN land development schemes for the Mekong certainly created the impression of conflicts of interest.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh. *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống*. Saigon, 1971.

<sup>49</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Châu was also married to Trần Lệ Chi, the older sister of Trần Lệ Xuân (better known as Madame Nhu), who was married to Ngô Đình Nhu. Thus establishing a familial bond as well.

<sup>50</sup> Recall from *chapter one*, Lương hailed from the Diocese at Vĩnh Long, which at the time was led by Diệm’s brother, Bishop Ngô Đình Thục.

<sup>51</sup> See Order 69-NV, April 30, 1956, CBNCH, 1956, 1144; Order 73-TTP, May 16, 1956 CBNCH 1956, 1207. In addition, Dương Văn Minh, who led government forces against the Hòa Hảo in 1955 and 1956, came from a landlord family in Mỹ Tho.

<sup>52</sup> The five also, like other southern landed elite, attended the *Chasseloup-Laubat school*.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, Thơ was born into a wealthy landowning family in the lower Mekong Delta, whose property included tracts in the Cái Sắn region. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Thơ served as the province chief of Long Xuyên. About half of the Cái Sắn region lay within Long Xuyên. Subsequently, in April 1956, Thơ took Ba Cụt’s surrender in Cần Thơ. In a twist of irony, decades earlier, Ba Cụt’s adoptive parents had lost their land to Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ’s father, a large landowner in the region.

The establishment of the Cái Sắn committee embodied this conflict of interest and Diệm's limitations. Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ and Nguyễn Văn Thời managed to place clients and kin on the seven-member committee. For instance, Trịnh Văn Hi was the nephew of Thời and Huỳnh Văn Điem was a brother-in-law of Thơ. As General Director of Planning, Huỳnh Văn Điem controlled the purse strings of Cái Sắn. Of the seven members, Diệm chose only Lương and Lắm. Moreover, though many of Bùi Văn Lương's subordinates in Cái Sắn appear to have initially been northerners, by October 1956, dozens of them stood trial in court for fraud and malfeasance.<sup>54</sup> Their dismissals further opened the way for Diệm's southern advisors to replace them with southerners.<sup>55</sup> The impact of southern landlords on the resettlement at Cái Sắn should not be underestimated.

Nguyễn Văn Thời, the Minister of Agrarian Reform, established a second office in Tân Hiệp town, where he is said to have spent two weeks each month to direct Cái Sắn. Thời, however, appears to have had motives beyond Cái Sắn's success. Thời and his wife apparently held substantial amounts of property in the region.<sup>56</sup> General Dương Văn Minh led the Thoại Ngọc Hầu campaign against the remaining Hòa Hảo elements in the region during the first months of 1956. As a result, when Diệm reconstituted the committee in Cái Sắn he turned to Minh for help.

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<sup>54</sup> Ty Hình Căn Lưu Đông, 20118/CSLD/M (Secret), 2, File 10454, PTTĐICH, NACII; File N21-14, TĐBCPNP, TTLTQGII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>55</sup> Minister of Finance (Hà Văn Vương) to President, 2317/BTC/TU/M (Mật), November 11, 1957, 99-100, File 10867, PTTĐICH, NACII; Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, 62-PT/VP/M, February 16, 1957, 81, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>56</sup> David Wurfel, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," *Far Eastern Survey*, 26 (June 1957), 88.

No one, however, played a more significant role in the lower Mekong's administrative apparatus than Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ. Prior to 1954, Thơ had been the province chief of Long Xuyên and Diệm trusted Thơ for his “tremendous understanding of the people of the Mekong, particularly the three provinces of Rạch Giá, Châu Đốc and Long Xuyên.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, Ngô Đình Diệm asked Thơ to recruit southern functionaries and landlords. The first province chiefs in Long Xuyên, Rạch Giá and Châu Đốc, the region containing Cái Sắn, reflect Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ's maxim that “only Mekong men should rule the Mekong.”<sup>58</sup> Not only were they Mekong men, they were Thơ ‘appointees,’ that is, introduced to Diệm by Thơ. In Long Xuyên, Major Đỗ Kiến Nhiễu, a close friend of Thơ, became the first province chief after 1954. Nhiễu would be replaced by Major Nguyễn Văn Minh in 1957, another Thơ man.<sup>59</sup> To run Rạch Giá province, in which much of Cái Sắn was located, Diệm chose Nhân Minh Trạng—Thơ's nephew—as the province chief. Although removed in 1958 due to an undisclosed corruption scandal, Trạng faced no punishment and instead became Thơ's chief of staff and later the Gia Định province chief. Trạng would be known as the founder of Cái Sắn. Only in the aftermath of Trạng's dismissal did Hoàng Văn Lạc become the first *Bắc di cư* province chief in the lower Mekong Delta.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống*, 120.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Remarkably, Nhiễu dismissal from the position was the result of a ‘love scandal.’ Nhiễu allegedly had fallen for the wife of a Hòa Hảo leader. Unable to pry her away from the husband, he had the man arrested (and maybe executed) in order to steal her away. Furious, Diệm sacked Nhiễu.

<sup>60</sup> Hoàng Văn Lạc's role in the province of Rạch Giá – Kiên Giang, dominated by Cái Sắn, is worthy of considerable examination. He would later become Nhu's right hand-man on Strategic Hamlets.

In addition to landlords of the Mekong Delta, Bishop Ngô Đình Thục figured prominently in Diệm's Delta network. Diệm's eldest surviving brother, recall that Thục had been Bishop of Vĩnh Long Diocese since 1938. While little is known about the Bishop and his 22-year reign in Vĩnh Long, he apparently built a prominent network. Certainly, evidence indicates that Thục had amassed considerable amounts of land on behalf of the Church—by some estimates as much as 370,000 hectares—in southern Vietnam, in particular the Mekong Delta. Did Thục's power (and resources) in the Delta play a role in the decision to establish Cái Sắn? To date no answer exists.

The GVN plan for Cái Sắn proposed a three-stage project (known as Cái Sắn I, II and III) to resettle between 100-120,000 *Bắc di cư*.<sup>61</sup> It aspired to complete the resettlement process by 1958. During the first year of the project, 20,000 settlers with the cooperation of local southerners would dig 17 canals, each about 11 kilometers in length. The canals were to become key transportation conduits for inhabitants and important means for cleansing the soil of salts and alum. The pre-existing town of Tân Hiệp became Cái Sắn's administrative and commercial center. The government outfitted each *Bắc di cư* family with three hectares of land for cultivation. Each canal-community was supposed to have a clinic, an elementary school and a Church.

Unfortunately, implementation of the Cái Sắn project ignored the government's supposed efforts to safeguard local inhabitants from land grabbing. According to Ordinance 2 of 1955, the GVN guaranteed local land use rights in the face of claims by

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<sup>61</sup> PTUDCTN Circular, 26-TU/VP/TT, June 28, 1956, File N21-14, TĐBCPNP, NACII. Other documents claimed there would be two resettlement phases bringing 200,000 people to the region.

landlords.<sup>62</sup> The ordinance included “the right of contract between landlord and tenant.” While the contracts disappointed peasants hoping for the termination of their tenancy through GVN land reform, they did offer assurances to local peasants that they would not be removed from the land. Therefore, many locals “signed the government contracts... guaranteeing that they could work the lands for at least three years (through 1958).”<sup>63</sup> In early 1956, however, these same lands were cordoned off without any explanation. When the inhabitants tried to enter, the police informed them that the area was “off limits [bị cấm không được vào].”<sup>64</sup> Over the coming weeks and months the land was occupied by *Bắc di cư* brought to Cái Sắn.

As local residents discovered, the government employed a narrow definition for land use. If left *uncultivated* for even a year, the GVN viewed land as unused. Fishing ponds did not meet government standards for *cultivation* and, as such, were subject to expropriation. As a result, at least 800 families lost these ponds during the first four months of 1956.<sup>65</sup> Local inhabitants pleaded with President Diệm to recognize their claims to the fishing holes. They explained that the region’s normally low rice yields, the result of “poor soil quality [đất xấu],” had been worsened by “wartime instability” of the past ten years.<sup>66</sup> For these reasons, they had embraced the local environment and dug fishing holes. A Saigon daily pointed out that, in light of the poor soil content, improved

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<sup>62</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc to Ngô Đình Diệm, 32-VPĐB/M (Top Secret), January 14, 1957, 3-11, File 10865, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>63</sup> The people of xã Tân Hiệp to the President, December 22, 1956, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “Tình hình tại Cái Sắn,” March 13, 1957, N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

rice production in the lower Mekong Delta required major expenditures to construct necessary dyke or canal systems.<sup>67</sup> The local population did not have the financial resources to tackle such an enormous undertaking. And now that “they were losing an essential source of their income,” what would they do?<sup>68</sup> The stage was set for southern hostility toward the government and arriving *Bắc di cư* who would settle on these lands.

### *Bắc di cư Arrival and Local Inhabitants*

Having appropriated land for resettlement, the GVN sought volunteers for Cái Sắn. On January 2, 1956, several RVN newspapers published a call for 100,000 *Bắc di cư* to settle in Cái Sắn.<sup>69</sup> The announcement, one MSUG official declared, inspired many *Bắc di cư* with a sense optimism that “a golden age for refugees” was at hand.<sup>70</sup> Bùi Văn Lương boasted that 50,000 *Bắc di cư* had volunteered to settle on the uncultivated lands of the region within two weeks of the original announcement.<sup>71</sup>

Consequently, the number of *Bắc di cư* settlers expanded rapidly during the ensuing months. On January 28, 1956, the first migrants arrived, when 602 newcomers, led by Father Lộc of Hà Nội, reached Tân Hiệp town.<sup>72</sup> During the ensuing five months,

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<sup>67</sup> “Sáp nhập 16 kênh định cư tại Cái Sắn vào nền hành chính tỉnh,” *Tự Do*, September 28, 1957.

<sup>68</sup> “Về việc xem xét sự thiệt hại địa bào của dân địa phương,” January 25-26, 1957 N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII. A partial list from 7 canals includes the names of 748 local families who lost ponds.

<sup>69</sup> “10 vạn nông dân được định cư tại Tây Nam Bộ: Mỗi gia đình được cấp 4 mẫu ruộng, nhiều máy móc viện trợ Mỹ được sử dụng vào công cuộc khai thác,” *Ngôn Luận*, January 2, 1956.

<sup>70</sup> John D Montgomery, *The Case of Vietnamese Administration*, (Saigon: Michigan State University – Vietnam Advisory Group, undated), 53.

<sup>71</sup> “50.000 người tình nguyện đi định cư ở vùng Cái Sắn,” *Thời Luận*, January 17, 1956, 3.

<sup>72</sup> “600 đồng bào di cư tình nguyện định cư tại Cái Sắn,” *Ngôn Luận*, February 1, 1956.

tens of thousands of *Bắc di cư* came to Cái Sắn. Between March and April, nearly 1000 people arrived every other day.<sup>73</sup> By June 30, 1956, the northern migrant population, according to official statistics, totaled 42,427, a remarkable figure considering that six months earlier, the number of *Bắc di cư* in Cái Sắn stood at zero.<sup>74</sup>

Resettlement, however, had another consequence. The influx of *Bắc di cư* threatened to overwhelm the inhabitants of the region. By the summer of 1956, northern settlers outnumbered their local counterparts nearly 3.5 to 1 and the Cái Sắn population had more than quadrupled.<sup>75</sup> With the establishment of Cái Sắn and the arrival of the *Bắc di cư* to cultivate the land, an adviser to Diệm later admitted, many challenges arose for the local peoples as they suffered the loss of “certain rights they had enjoyed for a long time.”<sup>76</sup> Local inhabitants suffered government land seizure and then watched helplessly as it was granted to newcomers. GVN policies were inadvertently creating the perception that the government favored the *Bắc di cư*.

Government assistance to northern migrants further stimulated this view. During the first year in Cái Sắn, newcomers were provided a daily stipend of 4đ/person/day for nine months, food, rice mats and mosquito nets. They were given temporary housing, in

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<sup>73</sup> Đoàn Văn Sáo (Resettlement director), 3353/TU/DC/HC3, “V/v công cuộc định cư tại Cái Sắn,” May 16, 1956, 1-2, N21-14, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>74</sup> “Hồ sơ về hoạt động tại khu định cư Cái Sắn năm 1956-1958,” 11, File 11787, PTTĐICH, NACII; “Báo cáo hoạt động tháng năm 1956 của Phủ Tổng ủy Di cư Tỵ nạn,” 2, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>75</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc (Government Delegate), 118-VPDB/M (Secret), Hệ Thống hành chánh hỗn hợp địa cá tranh chấp, March 8, 1957, 1, File D32-17, PTTCPVNCH, NACII. The GVN divided Cái Sắn into three districts: Thạnh Đông, Tân Hiệp and Thạnh Quới. According to government population figures *Bắc di cư* numbered 42,550 and local inhabitants 12,439.

<sup>76</sup> Vũ Văn Mẫu to the Vice President, 999/BPTT/VP/M, May 8, 1957, 25, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

the form of Quonset huts from the USOM.<sup>77</sup> Once a canal was finished, northern families were permitted to build permanent housing. The government *paid* each family 3000 đồng for a completed home. The government also paid participants for digging the new canals (35đ/ meter). The GVN also promised assistance with farming in the form of land, draught animals, seeds, paddy and equipment such as tractors, shovels, hoes, axes and saws.<sup>78</sup>

In spite of the overwhelming size of the new population and the special assistance it received from the government, GVN authorities hoped that *Bắc di cư* would integrate into the local community. The government publicly emphasized “the collective rights” of the people, while downplaying newcomer benefits.<sup>79</sup> A cabinet official declared that the government must build stable camps for northern migrants to help them “quickly integrate (hòa mình)” into Cái Sắn.<sup>80</sup> The *Ngôn Luận* daily wrote that the ultimate expectation was that a time would come when, “the term ‘migrant’ no longer exists, as resettlement efforts help *Bắc di cư* to be self-sufficient [tự túc] and live harmoniously [sống hòa hợp] with the southern community.”<sup>81</sup> Bùi Kiện Thành, a Presidential economic adviser, argued that economic assistance to the *Bắc di cư* would improve the lives of local inhabitants, as well as the newcomers, and build a new regional economy

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<sup>77</sup> Đoàn Văn Sáo to Bùi Văn Lương, Document 3353/TU/DC/ HC3, “V/v công cuộc –định cư tại Cái Sắn”, May 16, 1956, 4, File N21-14, TĐBCPNP, NACIL.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> 297-TU/HC5/M, “Đồng bào di cư phải theo kỷ luật,” January 9, 1956, 1, File N21-12, TĐBCPNP, NACIL.

<sup>80</sup> 884/BNV/VP, “v/v thi hành dự án kiện toàn định cư,” June 14, 1956, 21, File N21-14, TĐBCPNP, NACIL.

<sup>81</sup> “Trên thực tế sẽ không còn danh từ di cư: Công cuộc định cư đã giúp đồng bào tự túc và sống hòa hợp với đời sống cộng đồng tại Nam Việt,” *Ngôn Luận*, March 27, 1956.

that met the needs of both groups. The government anticipated the Cái Sắn project uniting *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants in a common goal of regional agricultural development.<sup>82</sup> Canal digs employed tens of thousands of laborers, both local and newcomers. Project officials argued that this collaboration would generate a “sense of solidarity” and that stable, integrated communities would emerge along the banks of the new canals.<sup>83</sup>

Plans for integration, however, unraveled almost from the beginning. Father Cao Văn Luận, senior adviser to Diệm, maintained that northern migrants refused to be separated from one another. Wherever they went, the newcomers “demanded that they be settled together.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, faced with considerable administrative shortcomings already discussed, the GVN relied heavily on northern Catholic clergy to carry out secular leadership in the new communities as well.<sup>85</sup> As a result, the government dispensed with the idea of forging integrated communities.

The new Cái Sắn communities, instead, seemingly emerged as homogenous groups of migrants organized around established northern leadership, particularly parish priests. On March 19, 1956, barely seven weeks after the first *Bắc di cư* arrived in Tân Hiệp, authorities announced Order 34-NV “reforming village regulations” and included the condition that *Bắc di cư* “will be permitted to establish separate villages” in places

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<sup>82</sup> Hoài Văn. “Cái Sắn trưởng thành,” *Dân Việt*, July 7, 1956 (31), 23.

<sup>83</sup> *Operation Exodus: The refugee movement to Free Vietnam*, 44.

<sup>84</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bến Giồng Lịch Sử: Hồi Ký 1940-1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1969), 252.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 921-922.

where they numbered at least 1000 inhabitants.<sup>86</sup> To ensure northern migrants were not separated from one another, authorities modified “old village boundaries.”<sup>87</sup>

Though the two groups living in discrete communities, daily contact was not infrequent. Early efforts to improve relations had little apparent success. For instance, authorities intended that *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants would dig canals together in an effort to foster cooperation and camaraderie.<sup>88</sup> In reality, local residents rarely, if ever, cooperated with *Bắc di cư* in canal excavation. Moreover, as a result of growing local resentment toward the government and newcomers, native residents alleged that the canals only benefited northern migrants and some refused to participate.<sup>89</sup> Another early initiative to promote mutual understanding was the “tea-gathering [buổi trà bình dân].” Authorities organized these get-togethers in the hopes of increasing understanding between *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants as well as to give the two communities an opportunity to share practical knowledge about agriculture. The strategy, however, was quickly abandoned when the gatherings seemed to have the opposite impact, with several ending in fistfights.

By the autumn of 1956, unable to achieve common understanding between the two communities, government officials attempted to mollify local residents with concessions. People with verifiable claims to land being exploited by *Bắc di cư*, would

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<sup>86</sup> “Hệ thống hành chính hỗn hợp Khu Cái Sắn và vấn đề tranh chấp địa cá tại khu,” Undated, 22, File 10867, PTTĐICH, NACII. While 34-NV targeted the South as a whole, it was specifically intended for Cái Sắn.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. With only a few thousand *Bắc di cư* in Cái Sắn at this point, the new order appears to have been an inducement to reassure those on the way.

<sup>88</sup> *Sóng*, October 1960, 38.

<sup>89</sup> Southern Delegate to Government, February 6, 1957, 18, File 10865, PTTĐICH, NACII.

share a portion of all production from the land (whether rice, fish or otherwise).<sup>90</sup> In cases where land lay within *Bắc di cư* resettlement areas but was not yet exploited, the claimant(s) had full rights to the land for the coming season “and could come and go freely.”<sup>91</sup>

Unfortunately, claimants faced several unresolved questions in taking advantage of this compromise. Who would determine the production yields of land and distribute the shares to the original inhabitants? And would newcomers actually allow local inhabitants access to the unused areas within *Bắc di cư* perimeters? There is no evidence that either problem was addressed. Recognizing that temporary measures had little success, authorities sought a more durable solution.

The Ministry of Land and Land Reform attempted a permanent compromise with native inhabitants by redefining the terms of Order 34-NV. Initially, officials had envisioned the order establishing discrete *Bắc di cư* communities running the length of each newly excavated canals. Lands at the head of each new canal (where it intersected with the Sỏi Canal) and at the rear (where a canal met the Rạch Giá – Long Xuyên Canal) were to remain public domain. Eighteen months after the announcement of Order 34-NV, however, the government modified the use of the public lands. These two zones, “from the edge of the Sỏi Canal 600 meters in and from the edge of Tân Hội Canal 600 meters in,” would be “reserved for sale to local inhabitants.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc, “V/v khu Cái Sắn Rạch Giá – Long Xuyên,” January 23, 1957, 12, File 10865, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Minister of Land and Land Reform, “Về vụ bán đất chon ông dân trong vùng Cái Sắn,” October 29, 1957, 19, File 11843, PTTĐICH, NACII.

Essentially, local inhabitants were being presented with a chance to buy back lands that had been taken from them. Even if they wanted to buy land, most of the local people in question survived as tenants and did not have the resources. Instead, wealthy regional landowners stepped in and bought the properties, subsequently renting them to local tenants.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to amending land-use plans, the government also revised the format of representation for the village-level councils of Thạnh Đông, Tân Hiệp and Thạnh Quới. Originally representation was to be based on the size and make-up of the population, with one representative equivalent to about 1500 people. Such an arrangement would have allowed northern migrants to dominate the councils with five to six *Bắc di cư* members for each local representative. Only in Thạnh Đông would representation have been equally divided between *Bắc di cư* and local residents.<sup>94</sup> Instead, the government appears to have arbitrarily selected the number of representatives for northern migrants and local inhabitants. Of the thirty-one available seats, seventeen went to the *Bắc di cư* and the remaining fourteen to locals. Only in Thạnh Quới did newcomers have a significant advantage of eight to four while local representatives of Thạnh Đông actually outnumbered their *Bắc di cư* counterparts five to two.<sup>95</sup> Although this concession allowed locals inflated representation, nonetheless, northern migrants retained a numeric advantage. From the local perspective, the new arrangement had little substance. It is not

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<sup>93</sup> For discussion about land prices in Cái Sắn see Minister of Land and Land Reform, “Về vụ bán đất cho nông dân trong vùng Cái Sắn,” October 29, 1957, 19, File 11843, PTTDICH, NACII.

<sup>94</sup> Hồ Bảo Lộc (Government Delegate) to President Diệm, 118-VPDB/M (Secret), Hệ Thống hành chánh hỗn hợp địa cá tranh chấp, March 8, 1957, 1, File D32-17, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

surprising that *Bắc di cư* – local inhabitant relations became marked by distrust and violence.

### *Land, Distrust and Violence*

The record of Cái Sắn contains numerous accounts of conflict between northern migrants and local inhabitants of the region. When viewed collectively, they suggest that the persistent discord in Cái Sắn was driven by the confluence of the abrupt arrival of the *Bắc di cư*, the problem of land dispossession, the disjointed nature of government policy and cultural conflict. In addition, they also confirm that the reality of Cái Sắn – marked by animosity, distrust and communalism – was incongruent with the image of the region promoted in government propaganda. Finally, the land conflict exposes troubled relations between government and Church and the central role played by the parish priest in Cái Sắn community life, both of which I will return to in *chapter five*.

The first indication of regional trouble dates from mid-1956. On June 16, long-time residents confronted a *Bắc di cư* funeral procession in the vicinity of Canal 4. The encounter escalated into a fistfight when the mourners refused to leave after local residents accused them of trespassing on their lands.<sup>96</sup> The following day, a meeting was held that included the Tân Hiệp District Chief, Father Vũ Ngọc Bân (a spiritual leader of the northern migrant community), and a Mr. Kiệt, one of the aggrieved local parties. Mr. Kiệt explained, “I do not want to interfere with funerals of northern migrants. But I expect that those wanting to traverse lands that I have tirelessly (khó nhọc) worked will

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<sup>96</sup> District Chief of Tân Hiệp, 39-VP/M, June 17, 1956, 2, File 14411, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

seek my permission.”<sup>97</sup> In defense, Father Bân adamantly defended the right of the newcomers to organize funerals [đám ma] on the land. “If locals interfere again” observed Bân, “Confrontations will be unavoidable.” He was especially concerned about the prospect of violence breaking out when he planned to be away during an upcoming visit to Saigon: “I am very worried that during my absence there will be no one able to prevent blood from being spilled [đổ máu].”<sup>98</sup> Officials interpreted this comment as a threat. Minister of Land Reform, Nguyễn Văn Thời criticized the priest for trying to sow “North-South division and condoning violence to achieve *Bắc di cư* demands.”<sup>99</sup>

Bân may have angered authorities with his warning, but his statement had the desired effect: the GVN prevailed upon the local residents to move elsewhere in Cái Sắn with the promise of land and cash.<sup>100</sup> The deal, however, could not be a model for future cases. The government’s offer reinforced the impression of *Bắc di cư* privilege and indicated that the GVN could be pressured by the threat of violence.

Following the outcome to the conflict at Canal 4, other northern migrant communities requested the expulsion of native residents in response to similar clashes. In May 1957, Father Triết of Canal 3 demanded that all canal lands be turned over to the *Bắc di cư*. The request was made following a confrontation between a local family using

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Minister of Land Reform, 1800/M/ĐTCC/VP, “V/v tranh chấp giữa đồng bào di cư và địa phương,” June 21, 1956, 6, File 14411, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

land along the canal and several newcomers working nearby.<sup>101</sup> The newcomers hurled stones, insults and threats at the local family.<sup>102</sup> The priest maintained that moving the local residents would prevent future violence. This time, however, authorities did not move them. Instead, officials argued that the local inhabitants had been exploiting the land well before the *Bắc di cư* arrived and, therefore, had the right to continue to use it. Such a decision, however, did nothing to resolve the underlying issues.

A year after the establishment of Cái Sắn, conflicts over land and fishing holes remained “an everyday feature” of regional relations.<sup>103</sup> According to a Rạch Giá police report, in late 1956, a local southern family entered Canal 2 by boat to gather fish at a pond they had claimed prior to the arrival of northern settlers. As they emptied their fishing traps, a group of *Bắc di cư* appeared and demanded that they leave the area. Other native residents entered the fray. In the scuffle that ensued, *Bắc di cư* participants attempted to seize control of the family’s boat and the fish on it. Amidst the fighting, a migrant detonated a grenade in the boat, destroying it and over 100 kilograms of fish. The police report detailed another altercation involving dozens of northern migrants who resisted young locals that they found “intruding” in “their” canal. The settlers surrounded the “trespassers” and beat them “nearly to death [gần chết]” for the transgression.<sup>104</sup> This

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<sup>101</sup> An Giang Province Chief to Father Mai Xuân Triết, 1838-VP, May 3, 1957, 122-123, File N21-9, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>102</sup> 567-M/BT.2, “V/v Hội đồng hỗn hợp 2 xã, Tân Hiệp and Thạnh Đông,” June 24, 1957, 116-117, File N21-9, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>103</sup> 61-VPĐB/M, February 7, 1957, 84, N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>104</sup> Government Representative to President Diệm, 61-VPĐB/M (secret), February 7, 1957, 84-85, N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

was followed the same week by the discovery of a *Bắc di cư* murder victim lying in a “pool of blood [ao máu],” on land claimed by native inhabitants in Canal E.<sup>105</sup>

With conditions deteriorating, the GVN feared that its opponents would seize on the failure of its resettlement policy and attempted to blame subversive forces for the conflict. “Communist plots to divide southerners and northerners,” warned a GVN official, “must be monitored.”<sup>106</sup> The Kiên Giang province chief expressed fear that opposition forces might exploit current conditions to further stoke discord between the native and *Bắc di cư* communities.<sup>107</sup> Captured fliers certainly support these allegations. Two, in particular, expose Communist efforts to manipulate the bitterness of local inhabitants. On the eve of the 1957 Lunar New Year, GVN authorities discovered a cache of pamphlets with slogans like “Mỹ-Diệm activities serve only the interests of northern migrants” and “the American puppets have stolen your land.”<sup>108</sup>

Communists may have manipulated the rising enmity between locals and newcomers, however, GVN suspicions also reflected how the ongoing Communist Denunciation or *Tố Cộng* campaign fueled a Red Scare-like atmosphere in South Vietnam.<sup>109</sup> In 1955, President Diệm initiated the campaign to neutralize Communists

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<sup>105</sup> Hiến Binh Quốc Gia, February 6, 1957, 128, N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>106</sup> ĐBCPNP to president, 149/M/VPĐB, “Vấn đề Cái Sắn,” April 1, 1957, 31, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII; 567-M/BT.2, “V/v Hội đồng hỗn hợp 2 xã, Tân Hiệp and Thạnh Đông,” June 24, 1957, 116-117, File N21-9, PTTCPVNCH, NACII.

<sup>107</sup> Nhân Minh Trọng (Kiên Giang Province Chief) to Ministry of Internal Affairs, June 13, 1957, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>108</sup> File 10865, PTTĐICH, 61-VPĐB/M, February 7, 1957, p 18, TTLTQGII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>109</sup> For an example of this see: 12527 PC1/M (Công Văn, Mật), “V/v xô xát giữa đồng bào định cư Kinh D Cái Sắn và Bảo an Sở máy cày,” May 18, 1957, File 10869, PTTĐICH, NACII.

and their sympathizers.<sup>110</sup> While the campaign succeeded in its stated aim to some degree, *Tố Cộng* also generated a climate of fear that individuals and groups clearly abused in order to settle scores and pursue personal interests.<sup>111</sup>

The archival evidence indicates that *Bắc di cư* leaders, particularly clergy, in Cái Sắn exploited these fears and the climate to gain advantages for their own constituents. The most blatant example of this tactic occurred in Canal D in 1957. On the evening of April 5, the canal's elementary school was the target of a mysterious arson. Seventeen days later, vandals struck the parish again. They damaged the parish church and attempted to kill several residents of the resettlement site.<sup>112</sup> Father Nguyễn Đức Do, the canal's spiritual leader, fingered Communists for the attack but the Resettlement Committee blamed Hòa Hảo supporters.<sup>113</sup> Panic swept the *Bắc di cư* communities. In the days that followed the second attack, migrant leadership organized rallies in Tân Hiệp and Rạch Giá. Thousands of Cái Sắn settlers traveled to the protests by boat. Assembling at the offices of the provincial and district authorities, they demanded that the government provide arms to *Bắc di cư* militias.<sup>114</sup>

But a provincial inquiry determined that the attacks were *not* the result of communist or Hòa Hảo infiltration. Instead, it concluded that Father Do had sought to

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<sup>110</sup> The Communist Denunciation campaign remains a sensitive topic in Vietnam. As a result, the government continues to limit foreign researchers' access to related documents.

<sup>111</sup> Joseph J Zasloff, *Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954-1960: The Role of the Southern Vietminh Cadres* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1968), 10.

<sup>112</sup> 12527 PC1/M (secret) "V/v xô xát giữa đồng bào định cư Kinh D Cái Sắn và Bảo an Sở máy cày," May 18, 1957, 1, File 10869, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>113</sup> Minister of Internal Affairs, 3076 BNV/NA/MP2, May 27, 1957, 3, File 10869, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

militarize the new communities by preying on the anxieties of GVN officials about Hòa Hảo and Communist threats. The probe revealed that in the three months prior to the attacks, Father Do had requested weapons “no less than half a dozen times.”<sup>115</sup> The investigation concluded that Father Do and his supporters sought weapons to defend their lands against illegal entry by local southerners, *not* against attacks by Communist or Hòa Hảo forces. In his report to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Nhân Minh Trạng, the Kiên Giang Province chief, ominously concluded: “Bear in mind what the northern migrants have done without weapons? Once they have weapons in their hands, consider how these [regional] confrontations might become bloodbaths [án mạng đẫm máu].”<sup>116</sup>

Disputes were certainly notable for their frequency and intensity, but the case of Canals G and H provides insights into how such disputes unfolded over time. Initially, GVN officials proposed a unique plan for Canals G and H. The canals would be territory reserved for southerners. The recommendation was based on recent history.

In 1952, Nguyễn Ngọc Thơ, the then-province chief of Long Xuyên, relocated 54 families from Chợ Mới District to the future-canals.<sup>117</sup> Following the conclusion of the First Indochina War, southern wartime evacuees also settled there with government permission.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, by September of 1955, several hundred lower Mekong families

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<sup>115</sup> Minister of Internal Affairs, 3076 BNV/NA/MP2 (secret), May 27, 1957, 3, File 10869, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>116</sup> Nhân Minh Trạng (Kiên Giang Province Chief) to Ministry of Internal Affairs, June 13, 1957, 5, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>117</sup> An Giang Chief to Minister of Land and Land Reform, 3261/ĐT.2, July 9, 1959, 133, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

engaging in rice cultivation were living on those lands. As migrants flooded the region in 1956, however, the government abandoned the idea of special status for the two canals.<sup>119</sup>

Reversing themselves, officials opened the two canals to *Bắc di cư* resettlement in mid-1956. The rationale behind the about face is not entirely clear. Perhaps authorities felt it more important to concentrate on resettlement of northern migrants. Or maybe efforts to attract local inhabitants had not achieved sufficient numbers. Whatever the reason, southern families would soon become a minority population, as thousands of settlers joined them.

By the end of 1956, overpopulation along the canals left hundreds of *Bắc di cư* families sharing plots. Jealousy ran high among the newcomers, who claimed that authorities had fulfilled neither the promise of three hectares of land per family nor the right to establish independent, *newcomer* villages. As a result, northern migrants demanded that local inhabitants return hundreds of lots. Local southerners, conversely, insisted that the government uphold their individual claims.<sup>120</sup> Due to the seriousness of the issue, the Minister of Land Reform intervened directly and a compromise was reached.<sup>121</sup> The original 54 families would be allowed to remain, while all those later-arriving southern settlers would be given two years—through 1958—to work the land and then be moved elsewhere.

The compromise did nothing to improve conditions in the canals or relations between the parties. The *Bắc di cư* wanted all of Canals G and H for themselves and

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<sup>119</sup> 252-ĐĐCS2/VP-M (Secret), April 30, 1958, 84, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACH.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

some in the community began a campaign to achieve this aim through coercion against the original 54 families. In late May 1957, at a Thốt Nốt District meeting, Father Duy presented a list of signatures of the heads of those 54 households, in which they “promised to give up (nhường) all land in Canal H and G” to the northern migrants.<sup>122</sup> In reality, the “agreement” was reached as a result of “pressure” applied by Fathers Duy and Luyên as well as *northern* elders. In some cases, minions of Father Duy used tractors to destroy the fields of the 54 families.<sup>123</sup>

In another case, in mid-April 1958, ten *Bắc di cư* tried to evict two local teenagers tending a plot at the head of Canal G.<sup>124</sup> The commotion drew a group of native residents to the scene and a fistfight broke out between the two groups. Twenty more local residents arrived on the scene with sticks, knives and shovels. When the fight ended, four *Bắc di cư* and three native inhabitants were seriously injured.<sup>125</sup>

As a result of the animosity and violence, on April 30, 1958, authorities hastily organized a conference in an effort to “mediate [hòa giải]” the dispute. The 54 original families would be allowed to stay while all remaining lands in Canal G and H, including public lands, were “turned over” to the *Bắc di cư*.<sup>126</sup> For the northern settlers this was still

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> An Giang Province Chief, 1513/VP (Secret), December 11, 1957, 4, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>124</sup> An Giang Province Chief to Minister of Interior, 2787/ĐT2, “Âu đả giữa đồng bào địa phương và định cư tại kinh G Cái Sắn,” April 11, 1958, 53, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Minister of Land and Land Reform to the Province Chiefs of An Giang and Kiên Giang, “Tranh chấp tại Kinh H (Cái Sắn I),” July 15, 1959, 134, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

inadequate. The canals remained overcrowded, Father Duy argued in 1959, and many newcomers still had not been provided the three hectares/family.<sup>127</sup>

As the events of Canals G and H indicate, the government had little success in resolving the conflicts. By December 1960, an exasperated cabinet minister wrote, “These disputes have dragged on (kéo dài) for over four years without resolution.”<sup>128</sup> In fact, as of 1961, when the archival trail detailing Canal G and H ceases, relations between *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants remained marked by “regular violence and sabotage (phá hoại) of crops.”<sup>129</sup>

### *Government Inadequacy and the Northern Migrant*

Government appropriation of land in Cái Sắn underscores how northern migrants dominated GVN attention. Moreover, this dynamic clearly solidified the subsequent conflict between the native population and newcomers. Yet, as this dissertation has emphasized repeatedly, government attention to resettlement should not be conflated with ‘favoring’ or ‘privileging’ newcomers.

As already detailed in this dissertation, in early 1956—at the time of Cái Sắn’s inauguration—an array of issues already strained newcomer relations with the government, exposing the GVN as an unreliable champion of migrant needs. In 1954, many migrants found themselves settled in places unsuited to their skills, like the

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<sup>127</sup> Father Nguyễn Quang Duy to An Giang Province Chief, May 29, 1959, 131, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>128</sup> Huỳnh Hữu Nghĩa (Minister of Land Reform) to Vice President, 10776-BĐT/HC, December 19, 1960, 15, File 14411, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>129</sup> An Giang Province Chief, 2826/ĐT2, “V/v do đất phân lô tại kinh H Cái Sắn,” April 12, 1960, 54, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

thousands of fisher-folk sent to La Ngà in Đồng Nai Thượng—an area with no fishing. On the outskirts of Saigon, northern migrants lived in squalor amidst pools of sewage in the Khánh Hội neighborhood. When *Bắc di cư* students living in the area protested conditions, the government responded by arresting the leaders and labeling them Communist spies.<sup>130</sup> In Tây Ninh and Biên Hòa, newcomers found themselves dumped on land so poor farming was nearly impossible. In the Biên Hòa case, a parish priest had his flock collecting wood for survival. And camps in the Central Highlands suffered from “severe shortages” of rice, as the government “never” fulfilled even basic needs.<sup>131</sup>

In addition to the ineptitude, government corruption eroded migrant confidence and hindered promised funds. The suspects in these cases were GVN officials. With vital funds missing, the government failed to distribute living allowances to newcomers on numerous occasions. By late 1955, with anger swelling, *Bắc di cư* called for the “execution” of the perpetrators.<sup>132</sup>

Unfortunately, administrative understaffing only amplified the deceit and incompetence. In 1954, at the time of the regime’s establishment, the new administration faced grave shortages of trained personnel in all areas, including those most closely tied to *Cái Sắn*’s future: land reform and resettlement.<sup>133</sup> Meager salaries made it difficult for

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<sup>130</sup> Đô trưởng Saigon-Cholon, Nguyễn Hữu Tâm, 3534 M/VP/D (not dated), File R02-36 TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>131</sup> Văn Kiện 9, January 23, 1956, 160, File 4483, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>132</sup> “Lập trường: Phải thanh trừng sâu rộng hơn nữa,” *Tự Do*, December 10, 1955.

<sup>133</sup> Dennis Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford, 1968), 226; Nghiem Dang, *Politics and Public Administration in Vietnam* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1966), 120.

the government to recruit personnel.<sup>134</sup> Not 400 people, an expert agonized, were engaged in “land redistribution.”<sup>135</sup> Contrast this figure to Japan, where a well-functioning government, backed by capable technicians, directed nearly 400,000 workers in the project.<sup>136</sup> Adding to the woes of land reform, the Ministry of Agrarian Reform had no personnel outside urban centers.<sup>137</sup> Supposedly the ministry assigned six cadre to district-level offices in each province, but due to their “proclivities” for city life they congregated in Saigon and provincial capitals. As for the PTUDCTN, it based less than half of its force of 1300 officials outside of Saigon.<sup>138</sup> A 1957 evaluation of Cái Sắn itself alleged that just 20 GVN officers were on hand, or one for every two thousand settlers. Consequently, a pessimistic government investigator noted, bureaucrats suffered from “low morale.”<sup>139</sup>

Confronted with its inadequacies, the PTUDCTN encouraged newcomers *not* to depend on GVN assistance. In June 1955, months before the establishment of Cái Sắn, the commission initiated the *Self-Reliance* [*Tự Lực Mưu Sinh* or *TLMS*] campaign

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<sup>134</sup> Roy Jumper, “Problems of Public Administration in South Vietnam,” *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol 26, No 12 (December 1957), 188.

<sup>135</sup> Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 56; Louis L Walisky (ed). *The Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky: Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 1977), 265.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> David Wurfel, “Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam,” *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol 26, No 6 (June 1957), 84.

<sup>138</sup> Bùi Văn Lương to President, Document 922/VP/M (Secret), “việc do PTUDCTN phụ trách tại Cái Sắn,” October 5, 1956, 219, N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>139</sup> 2317/BTC/TU/M (Secret) “V/v điều tra về Công trường Cái Sắn,” November 11, 1957, 99-100; File 10867, PTTĐICH, NACII.

directed at the *Bắc di cư* community.<sup>140</sup> Simply put, *Tự Lực Mưu Sinh* challenged newcomers to fulfill their needs independently through community-based initiatives rather than relying on government aid. Newcomers, the campaign exhorted, must believe in their own “capacity.”<sup>141</sup> President Diệm himself repeatedly reminded *Bắc di cư* of their obligation to the nation and of the need to rely on their own communities for assistance.<sup>142</sup>

In the face of the government’s inability to manage newcomers’ needs, the GVN launched Cái Sắn. In just three days, the President’s office examined and approved the plan for transmission to the US Operations Mission (USOM) in late December 1955.<sup>143</sup> With only six months to relocate 50,000 northern migrants before the rainy season inundated the region and made resettlement “impossible,” authorities shelved the particulars of the project—such as a plan for digging 200 kilometers of canal and concerns about the region’s soil content—until a later, unspecified date. The newcomers, Resettlement chief Bùi Văn Lương confidently maintained, would “overcome the challenges” ahead.<sup>144</sup>

For northern migrants, however, GVN ineptitude, corruption and demands for self-sufficiency, not surprisingly, made them wary of Cái Sắn. Despite the poor conditions endured in Saigon and surrounding areas, *Bắc di cư* much preferred to stay put

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<sup>140</sup> *Dân Việt*, July 21, 1955, (1) 1.

<sup>141</sup> *Dân Việt*, July 28, 1955 (2), 2.

<sup>142</sup> See Vũng Tàu speech (September 4, 1954) and Biên Hòa speech (October 11, 1956).

<sup>143</sup> John D Montgomery, *Cases in Vietnamese Administration* (Saigon: Michigan State University – Vietnam Advisory Group, [Undated]), 51.

<sup>144</sup> 50.000 người tình nguyện đi định cư ở vùng Cái Sắn,” *Thời Luận*, January 17, 1956.

rather than place their faith in a GVN plan for the lower Mekong Delta. Staying in the capital region gave newcomers better security, whereas moving some 200 kilometers to Cái Sắn situated them among a population purported to be unfriendly. In addition, having already spent an entire year in these early resettlement locations, many families developed a modicum of stability and community.

Still, GVN figures show large numbers of newcomers did register for resettlement at Cái Sắn.<sup>145</sup> On June 30, 1956, just five months after the first arrivals, its *Bắc di cư* population numbered 42,427.<sup>146</sup> Moreover, by the summer of 1956, tens of thousands more volunteers had registered and awaited resettlement in Cái Sắn.<sup>147</sup> Three factors may account for the apparent ‘interest.’ First, the promise of three hectares of land per family—far more than newcomers could hope for in the Saigon region—certainly played an important role. Thus, government promotion of Cái Sắn highlighted land opportunities above all else. During his April 24, 1956 visit to Cái Sắn, Diệm reaffirmed the pledge in his public address.<sup>148</sup> Saigon press coverage of the trip subsequently appeared under the Diệm quote: “Each family to be granted three hectares of land.”<sup>149</sup> Second, unlike the Central Highlands, Cái Sắn also received the public backing of the *Bắc di cư* Catholic Church and clergy. While the clergy’s original assurances to newcomers about hospitable

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> “Hồ sơ về hoạt động tại khu định cư Cái Sắn năm 1956-1958,” 11, File 11787, PTTDICH, NACII.

<sup>147</sup> “50.000 người tình nguyện đi định cư ở vùng Cái Sắn,” *Thời Luận*, January 17, 1956.

<sup>148</sup> “Mỗi gia đình được cấp 3 mẫu tây đất để khai khẩn,” *Ngôn Luận*, April 26, 1956, 1. However, Diệm also promised, according to the paper, that half of Cái Sắn was to be reserved for local southerners.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

lands awaiting them in the South had not materialized yet, *Bắc di cư* still placed faith in clerical promises about Cái Sắn. By backing Cái Sắn, however, Church officials and priests put their reputations on the line for a government project. Failure might have ramifications for the clergy's relationship with parishioners of the region. Third, however, archival evidence suggests more than the promise of land and religious leaders drew large numbers of "volunteers" to Cái Sắn. It indicates that *coercion* figured prominently

In 1956, a wave of fires struck key resettlement sites in Biên Hòa and Gò Vấp. In the span of five weeks during February and March, fires left over 15,000 northern migrants homeless.<sup>150</sup> For the Tết Lunar New Year alone, authorities reported no less than 15 blazes.<sup>151</sup> The largest of these occurred on February 16, 1956 at Tân Mai Resettlement camp, leaving almost half of the roughly 13,000 *Bắc di cư* residents without any shelter.<sup>152</sup> The resulting investigation determined the cause of the tragedy to be an oil lamp knocked over during a domestic dispute. Concluding *all* the fires to be *accidental*, the GVN demanded victims move to Cái Sắn.<sup>153</sup>

Though scant proof exists implicating the government of arson, nonetheless, the timing, location and scope of the fires, as well as the GVN's response raise considerable suspicion about its role. Regardless of its culpability, based on government statistics, we can deduce that at least 35% of those who moved to Cái Sắn in 1956 did *not* volunteer.

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<sup>150</sup> The number is an estimate based on the official numbers the government gave for each fire.

<sup>151</sup> "Vụ cháy lớn, Bến cỏ và Chí Hoà," *Ngôn Luận*, February 17, 1956, 1.

<sup>152</sup> PTUDCTN, 880TU/VP, "Trại định cư Tân Mai bị hỏa hoạn," February 17, 1956, 1, File 4273, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

For newcomers, Cái Sắn did not necessarily represent a wanted opportunity. In the next chapter, I continue this examination of Cái Sắn and consider how migrants dealt with the numerous challenges of resettlement in the lower Mekong Delta.

**Chapter 5—Unfulfilled Fantasies:  
Life in the Lower Mekong Delta, 1956-1963**

*Introduction*

Despite the problems dogging resettlement, authorities still fantasized about the possibilities for Cái Sắn. It was the “miracle” of the Mekong.<sup>1</sup> Imbibing the received wisdom of the Mekong Delta’s fertility, GVN officials believed nature imbued the region with certain privileges, and as a result, its people did not have to toil.<sup>2</sup> The alluvium of the Mekong River, wrote the Kiên Giang province chief, made the fields of Cái Sắn “particularly bountiful,” a feature “augmented” by over a decade of disuse.<sup>3</sup> So confident, the GVN promoted Cái Sắn as “the breast milk of the nation [*vú sữa của dân tộc*].”<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the region’s agriculture, GVN officials, like their French and Vietnamese forebears, stressed northern “initiative” and facility for work.<sup>5</sup> If, as Vietnamese legend portrayed, northerners could produce chickens from “rotten eggs,” a newspaper reasoned that they should be able to grow rice anywhere.<sup>6</sup> “As everyone knows,” 1950s propaganda insisted, “northern migrants are a highly valuable and

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<sup>1</sup> *One Million Refugees: Victims of Communism from North Vietnam - The Story of the Most Extraordinary Mass Movement of Modern Times* (Saigon: Review Horizons, 1956), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California, 2010), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Địa Phương Chí Tỉnh Kiên Giang năm 1958* (Saigon: Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1958), 126.

<sup>4</sup> “Điều kiện thuận lợi trong việc canh tác Nam Tự Do,” *Dân Việt*, June 14, 1956 (30), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “Tháng giêng, tháng hai, tháng ba, tháng bốn, tháng khốn, tháng nạn...,” *Tự Do*, December 12, 1955.

dynamic labor source.”<sup>7</sup> And no place, authorities proclaimed, offered greater evidence than Cái Sắn.

Just six months after the arrival of the first settlers, authorities boasted, newcomers had completed ten of the 17 planned canals with their “bare hands” and restored production to “over 300,000 hectares” of the Long Xuyên quadrangle. The “initiative” and “skill” of the northern settler, the government declared, had “overcome the economic wounds of war.” And despite any setbacks or discord, the Refugee Commission reassured, Cái Sắn still offered *Bắc di cư* the ideal situation to realize immediate success. Resettlement in Cái Sắn, however, proved far more complicated.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter, continues the survey of Cái Sắn resettlement. In it I ask the question: how did migrants deal with the resettlement challenge? Faced with the interrelated problems of a government unable to fulfill the promises of Cái Sắn, rising northern migrant – local inhabitant tensions and living in discrete, unassimilated communities, new arrivals looked inward to institutions and customs they brought with them from northern Vietnam in order to resolve these problems. This chapter also gives further insights into the conflict between northern Church authorities and Diệm. I confirm my previous assertion that the failures of GVN resettlement in Cái Sắn directly prompted *Bắc di cư* Church officials to withhold support for future land development schemes, including the Central Highlands, as we saw in *chapter three*. In spite of this, Diệm looked upon Cái Sắn as a model for future RVN land development projects.

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<sup>7</sup> *Dân Việt*, July, 21, 1955.

<sup>8</sup> “Sức mạnh của đồng bào di cư trong công cuộc khai thác vùng Cái Sắn,” *Dân Việt*, June 14, 1956 (30), 12.

### *Realities of Cái Sắn Resettlement*

Newcomers who settled Cái Sắn in 1956 describe grim conditions. Looking in any direction, Trần Văn Tôn explained, one saw nothing but endless scrubland, “No trees, no fields.”<sup>9</sup> Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc, the Catholic priest of Canal 1 and the de facto leader of Cái Sắn, immediately doubted his decision to lead settlers to the region. “I was despondent,” admitted Lộc, “I had imagined verdant fields, but all we found was grass as tall as my head.”<sup>10</sup> Even on-sight GVN officials described Cái Sắn as an “immense wasteland.”<sup>11</sup>

Arriving in Cái Sắn, *Bắc di cư* faced a multitude of urgent problems. The newcomers lacked access to appropriate housing, food and medicine. Shocked witnesses observed thousands of newcomers sleeping haphazardly along route 8A for “months.”<sup>12</sup> Poor storage left arriving rice supplies ruined. In other cases, these supplies did not arrive at all as “bandits” raided the lorries or boats carrying it.<sup>13</sup> Living allowances promised to settlers were typically late or only a partial amount.<sup>14</sup> On other occasions, resettlement funds vanished entirely.<sup>15</sup> Every morning, stunned authorities reported, “hundreds of

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<sup>9</sup> Trần Văn Tôn, Interviewed by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang (Vietnam), November 16, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Việt Hương, “Chúng tôi thăm viếng vùng Cái Sắn (Phần III),” *Ngôn Luận*, August 23, 1956.

<sup>11</sup> ĐBCPNP to president, 149/M/VPĐB, Vấn đề Cái Sắn, April 1, 1957, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>12</sup> John D Montgomery, *Cases in Vietnamese Administration* (Saigon: Michigan State University – Vietnam Advisory Group, 1963), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Đây! Cái Sắn: V – Một vấn đề đồng bào Cái Sắn đang mong mỏi: ‘Giản dị hóa việc phát tiền trợ cấp,’” *CMQG*, March 31, 1956.

<sup>15</sup> PTU Dinh Điền to President Ngô Đình Diệm; Doc 132-DĐ/T/M, Phát ngân viên Cái Sắn mất tích, March 27, 1958, 131-133, File 11787, PTTĐICH; 172/DĐCS2/VP (Mật), March 28, 1958,

refugees gathered in front of our offices [asking for promised assistance].”<sup>16</sup> And by late-April, with well over 500 new arrivals every other day, the understaffed government field office faced a crisis. *Bắc di cư* were “worse off,” newspapers claimed, than in their original resettlement locations. Taking stock of their new situation, one newspaper wrote, “many wept [khóc lóc] and lost heart [ngã lòng].”<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the conditions, regulations demanded newcomers complete canal excavation before beginning construction of permanent housing. Two reasons existed for this. Officials believed this would motivate newcomers to work harder. Conversely, they feared, if settlers built homes first, they would collect the relatively substantial subsidy for completion and then leave the region. Instead, officials established temporary camps at the head of each planned canal to pursue canal excavation,.

Consequently, newcomers found themselves living under tarpaulins or in Quonset huts for over a year in many cases.<sup>18</sup> Overcrowded and offering limited shelter from the elements, the interim housing became a breeding ground for health-related problems. The stench from urine, feces and sweat was, as one Vietnamese journalist wrote, “unbearable.” The government promised each family “one large mosquito net and rice

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141-143, File 11787, PTTĐICH, NACII. Such was the case of the government accountant Trương Thanh Nhung. Tasked with delivering several million đồng to Cái Sắn in the spring of 1956, instead Nhung vanished. He, together with the remaining money, was discovered months later in Phnom Penh.

<sup>16</sup> John D Montgomery, op. cit., 54.

<sup>17</sup> “Trong Công cuộc Định cư ngót một triệu đồng bào miền Bắc, UB Hộ Trợ Định cư đã làm gì?” *Đường Sống*, March 2-3, 1957, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Trần Văn Tôn, Interviewed by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang (Vietnam), November 16, 2011.

mat” for sleeping, yet many never received either and those who did discovered they were damaged by rain and mold, left almost “worthless.”<sup>19</sup>

Setbacks aside, the government pressed ahead with the canals. Flawed government calculations as well as late-arriving and unsuitable assistance, however, caused immediate trouble for the excavation. To complete the canals, the government determined that it needed 20,000 newcomers to participate beginning in January. The US promised to deliver 100 tractors by early March. The GVN envisioned the tractors operating around the clock for nine months.<sup>20</sup> Both calculations, however, assumed availability far earlier than reality allowed. In fact, the above manpower could not be achieved until April at the earliest. By this time, barely two months remained before the rainy season commenced. As for the tractors, the machinery arrived three months late and proved inappropriate to the lower Mekong Delta. Within weeks, 33 of the tractors fell into disrepair, with neither parts nor mechanics to fix them.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the rainy season rendered the remaining vehicles useless. As a result, *Bắc di cư* dug by hand with little success.<sup>22</sup>

Compounding the disarray, authorities lacked even consensus over the canals’ design. In an almost-comedic display of pride, relevant agencies bickered over the design

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<sup>19</sup> “Công Nhân đi viếng Cái Sắn (Long Xuyên): Kế Hoạch Cái Sắn,” *Công Nhân*, August 20-21, 1956 (2 parts).

<sup>20</sup> 462/TU/HC/M. Báo Cáo thường nguyệt về tháng 1 năm 1956 (Mật), February 22, 1956, 15, File 4401, PTTĐICH, NACII. In 1988, Sơn Nam claimed the US presented 132 tractors to Cái Sắn. Sơn Nam, *Tìm Hiểu Đất Hậu Giang & Lịch Sử Đất An Giang* (Ho Chi Minh City: Trẻ, 2003), 357.

<sup>21</sup> Bùi Văn Lương, “Phiếu trình,” June 20, 1957, 46, File 10871, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>22</sup> “Công Nhân đi viếng Cái Sắn (Long Xuyên): Kế Hoạch Cái Sắn,” *Công Nhân*, August 20-21, 1956.

of the new network. Wasting precious time before the monsoons, Diệm's Director of Planning wanted a zig-zag pattern while the Ministry of Agrarian Reform called for a grid design, with neither side yielding.

The disagreement seemed to resolve itself when the Director of Planning left for France. At once, the Agrarian Reform Ministry implemented the grid model. But a month later the Planning Director returned. Furious, he suspended the project and began having *Bác di cư* erect homes in a zig-zag fashion to promote "his" model. He behaved, as one migrant noted, like a "dog marking his territory."<sup>23</sup> The Cái Sắn commission only managed "to settle" the impasse in late April 1956. The grid network prevailed but at a cost.<sup>24</sup>

When the dig finally resumed in earnest, rains had already transformed the region into "a vast lake and breeding ground for mosquitoes."<sup>25</sup> Excavation (and all other undertakings) became nearly impossible.<sup>26</sup> Father Nguyễn Đức Do reported Sisyphean-like conditions. Every time newcomers seemed to complete a task, "the rains quickly washed their work away, and they had to start all over again."<sup>27</sup> By mid-1956, only seven of the projected seventeen canals had even broken ground, a far different picture than the official depiction of ten canals magically near completion.<sup>28</sup> Further dispiriting to

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Trần Văn Tôn, Anton Parish, Canal 1, Cái Sắn (November 15, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> John D Montgomery, *op. cit.*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> ĐBCPNP to president, 149/M/VPĐB, Vấn đề Cái Sắn, April 1, 1957, File N21-18, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> John D Montgomery, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Canal 1 appears to have been the first canal completed, likely due to its residents being the earliest arrivals. Completion dates, however, vary.

newcomers, the GVN terminated the assembly of permanent housing commenced by the Planning agency. During those initial months, settlers had little to show for their “unsanctioned” efforts. Still, the GVN promise of land appears to have given newcomers a glimmer of hope. When the government, however, ‘clarified’ the pledge in mid-August of 1956, it ignited a dispute pitting newcomers and key figures of the Vietnamese Catholic Church against authorities.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Uncertain Policy and Newcomer Protest*

On August 19, at the conclusion of mass, Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc of Canal 1 turned to Cái Sắn secular affairs. Unfolding a letter from the Minister of Agrarian Reform, Nguyễn Văn Thời, Lộc began reading to the gathered congregation,

“*Bắc di cư* of Cái Sắn are entitled to three hectares of land, as per the spirit of Ordinance 7. During the first year they do not have to pay any land rent. In the subsequent two years rent will be just a fraction of the full amount. Only beginning in year four will newcomers have to pay the full 15-25% of yield.”<sup>30</sup>

Stunned, congregants of the makeshift church tried to comprehend the implication of the announcement. The shock soon gave way to anger and fear. “Women,” witnesses claimed, “began to weep.”<sup>31</sup> Outside, torrential rains of the monsoon season were transforming the dirt paths into mud-covered messes. How much more, the settlers wondered, did they have to endure? “I lost two children in the North during the First

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<sup>29</sup> “Công Nhân đi viếng Cái Sắn (Long Xuyên): Kế Hoạch Cái Sắn,” *Công Nhân*, August 20-21, 1956.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Tô Thị Thê, interview by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang (Vietnam), November 15, 2011.

Indochina War,” a tearful Tô Thị Thê admitted years later, “and had already lost another to poor health in Cái Sắn. I had nothing else...”<sup>32</sup>

Parish priests immediately demanded a meeting with GVN officials in Tân Hiệp for the end of August. Father Lộc led a delegation of twenty. The government, he protested, had given the land to the newcomers, a fact that President Diệm had affirmed during his April visit to Cái Sắn. How, Father Lộc demanded, could the government change course this way? The GVN had provided *Bắc di cư* with full land ownership in the Central Highlands at no cost. Why should the government treat Cái Sắn differently? The apparent change in policy, the delegation warned, might have repercussions for clergy leadership if northern migrants lost their faith in them.<sup>33</sup>

The ‘misunderstanding,’ GVN officials countered, was the fault of the parish priests, who had ‘misinformed’ *Bắc di cư*. Unlike Cái Sắn, no one “claimed” the uplands.<sup>34</sup> The government had an obligation to defend the law, including the legal rights of owners.<sup>35</sup> Newcomers would have the opportunity to buy land, authorities vowed, like any other citizen.<sup>36</sup> The meeting ended without compromise and without resolution. The priests returned to their congregants with the news.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> 129 CCĐĐ/M (Secret), September 7, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Of course, non-ethnic Vietnamese groups in the Central Highlands disputed such arguments. The government, however, did not recognize their claims.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> 3249-DTCC/VP, “việc một số đồng bào di cư không chịu làm khế ước và không đóng địa tô,” September 21, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP. In fact, authorities came up with a pricing scale for property in the region based on location and soil quality.

The month of September unfolded with the government making a move and newcomers countering. Teams of GVN officials fanned out across the region at the beginning of the month, demanding northern migrants sign tenancy contracts. The newcomers collectively refused. In some cases settlers urinated and/or defecated on the documents.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the government announced the cessation of all assistance until newcomers “fulfilled their responsibilities.”

Cái Sấn erupted in protest and violence on October 2. Over 500 *Bắc di cư* descended on Tân Hiệp, the seat of local government in Cái Sấn. Screaming slogans such as “Down with the corrupt scoundrels [đả đảo bọn lưu manh thú nát]” and “Down with the feudalists [Đả đảo bọn phong kiến],” the demonstrators broke into and ransacked government offices, attacked onlookers and demanded their daily stipend from the previous two months.<sup>38</sup> This kicked off violent protests throughout Cái Sấn. Beleaguered authorities sought military support to “restore order.” Protests continued unchecked while local officials awaited support.<sup>39</sup>

On October 9, conflict in Cái Sấn reached a climax. With several ARVN detachments on the way, according to government accounts, three local officials traveled from Tân Hiệp’s ferry landing across the Cái Sấn River to Canal 1. The three planned to

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<sup>37</sup> 129 CCĐĐ/M, September 7, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>38</sup> 25/4-HB, “Về vụ đồng bào di cư Công trường Cái Sấn biểu tình tại văn phòng Đại diện Tổng ủy di cư Cái Sấn và phòng việc Quận trưởng Tân Hiệp,” October 2, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII; 28/4-HBQG (Phúc Trình), “Về vụ ô Quận trưởng Tân hiệp bị đồng bào di cư kinh I hành hung bằng cách dã thương trong lúc hành sự và phái đoàn hỗn hợp UB Hành chánh đi giải thích cùng phát 4 đồng, lập tờ khế ước, bị đồng bào di cư đe dọa và chửi mắng,” October 9, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

visit Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc and ask his help in resolving “the misunderstanding.”<sup>40</sup>

Though only a parish priest, Father Lộc was regarded as Cái Sắn’s most powerful Catholic figure. Any resolution to the crisis would require his intervention. With thousands of eyes watching, the men, clearly in hostile territory, slogged through the rainy season mud toward Father Lộc’s residence.

Arriving at Lộc’s residence, the three found he had no interest in discussing the matter; instead, Lộc launched into a tirade. Reminding them that he and the other clergy had a “responsibility” to their parishioners, the clergy now found themselves in a position of appearing “misinformed” and inept. This would have, Lộc admonished, “serious consequences” for priest – congregant relations. In addition, the priest argued, government refusal to pay living allowances until newcomers signed contracts was inhumane. Under the present circumstances, he refused to mediate this problem on behalf of officials.<sup>41</sup>

When the three men stepped out of Lộc’s residence, they found themselves “surrounded by over 2000 *Bắc di cư*.” Shouting “Get’em,” the mob “jumped on” the three officials, “raining down punches.” Bloodied, the three were detained in Father Lộc’s residence.<sup>42</sup> Residents cautioned a detachment of soldiers seeking the release of the

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<sup>40</sup> 26/4-HB, “Về vụ một đoàn người di cư ngồi trên đò 50 chiếc xuống đến Quận Tân Hiệp đòi hỏi về tiền trợ cấp định cư 4 đồng,” October 11, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> 28/4-HBQG (Phúc Trình), “Về vụ ô Quận trưởng Tân hiệp bị đồng bào di cư kinh I hành hung bằng cách dã thương trong lúc hành sự và phái đoàn hỗn hợp UB Hành chánh đi giải thích cùng phát 4 đồng, lập tờ khế ước, bị đồng bào di cư đe dọa và chửi mắng,” October 9, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

three men that any show of force and the hostages would “pay.”<sup>43</sup> Finally, hours later, Father Lộc and canal residents released the three with a warning, if the government did not resume living allowances, “We will destroy our housing and return to the North.”<sup>44</sup> But this and other confrontations could only partially be explained by misunderstandings regarding land and failures to allocate aid. It also reflected Church officials efforts to defend their reputations.

### *Finding Fault: Growing GVN – Church Animosity*

Allegations of malfeasance and corruption had also plagued Cái Sắn from its inception. In January 1956, for instance, the government paid one hundred times the going rate to transport northern migrants to the region. By the summer of 1956, accusations had expanded into systematic fraud of resettlement funds by both local resettlement officials and Catholic clergy. In fact, on October 8, 1956—amidst Cái Sắn violence—the RVN national police completed two investigations uncovering an alleged web of corruption by local Cái Sắn officials and parish priests. A long way from Saigon and the central government’s authority, the account stresses, “local PTUDCTN officials and their Catholic counterparts have free reign [tự do thao túng] over resettlement finances.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> 28/4-HBQG (Phúc Trình), “Về vụ ô Quận trưởng Tân hiệp bị đồng bào di cư kinh I hành hung bằng cách dã thương trong lúc hành sự và phái đoàn hỗn hợp UB Hành chánh đi giải thích cùng phát 4 đồng, lập tờ khế ước, bị đồng bào di cư đe dọa và chửi mắng,” October 9, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII; 725/VP, Rạch Giá Province Chief to Minister of the Interior, October 9, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>45</sup> 725/VP, Rạch Giá Province Chief to Minister of the Interior, October 9, 1956, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII. The investigation should be regarded cautiously. Witnesses and ‘victims’ were also abusers of resettlement funds. Even this report admitted that clergy may have refused to pay contractors due to the poor quality of equipment and items delivered.

Since the establishment of Cái Sắn eight months earlier, the findings outlined, as much as 25% of all money earmarked for northern migrants had ‘disappeared.’<sup>46</sup> The priests, the government claimed, doctored books and numbers to increase the population and, therefore, the amount of aid to the community.<sup>47</sup> Parish priests throughout the region, officials found, regularly concocted ghost receipts [đơn ma] for fictitious or dead individuals.<sup>48</sup> Clergy levied a range of taxes on *Bắc di cư*: on direct assistance received from the GVN (for instance, withholding up to 25 percent of both the monthly rice subsidies and the 3000 đồng housing allowance provided each *Bắc di cư* family) and 20% on labor earnings, such as participation in canal excavation. Equipment intended for newcomers became the property of the parish priest, which he then rented out to residents. Apprised of these findings by October 9, 1956, the same day as the confrontation on Canal 1, Diệm threatened punishment for those “abusing religion [lợi dụng danh nghĩa đạo]” for individual profit.<sup>49</sup>

The investigations led to the arrests of dozens of officials.<sup>50</sup> The provincial courts of Rạch Giá began proceedings in mid-October. Though GVN officials did not detain any

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Minh Sơn, “Bên lề Lễ kỷ niệm hai năm di cư các vị lãnh đạo tinh thần,” *Đường Sống*, October 13-14, 1956.

<sup>48</sup> Đào Văn Tình, a resettled migrant of Canal 1, claims that his family had nine members. But just days after arriving in Sắn one his children died. According to resettlement stipulations, the child’s name should have been stricken from the Canal roll of aid recipients, but Father Lộc ignored the provision. Nor did Father Lộc, the same report indicates, remove another family from the canal list although they had fled to Saigon to live. See Phiếu Khan Trinh, “về việc gian lận nơi các kinh ở khu Định cư Cái Sắn”, 61-70 (Undated), 61-70, File 10454, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>49</sup> Minh Sơn, “Bên lề Lễ kỷ niệm hai năm di cư các vị lãnh đạo tinh thần,” *Đường Sống*, October 13-14, 1956.

<sup>50</sup> Tòa Án Rạch Giá, “Về các vụ hối lộ và hà lạm do Nha Đại diện tại Cái Sắn của PTUDCTN gây ra,” undated, 59, File 10454, PTTĐICH, NACII.

parish priests, clergy were implicated in the “cheating [gian lận] and misappropriation [hà lạm]” of funds. The worst offender, according to authorities, was Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc of Canal 1.<sup>51</sup> I will turn return to the story of Father Bá Lộc and Canal 1 below. First, however, let us consider an apparent irony in the story of Cái Sắn. As GVN officials conducted these investigations that eventually implicated Catholic clergy of Cái Sắn in embezzlement and other criminal activity, President Diệm made an announcement that ensured the role of the parish priest would become even more crucial to life in the region.

On October 11, 1956, the occasion of the second anniversary commemorating the exodus, Diệm officially announced the launching of Localization or *Địa Phương Hóa*. The significance, of course, was that the national government would no longer be responsible for resettlement sites. This required that *Bắc di cư* make sacrifices as the so-called “vanguard” of the nation.<sup>52</sup> As far as Diệm was concerned, present circumstances necessitated the “absolute cooperation” of newcomers and the Church. Recall from chapter three, the demand that clergy play a fundamental role in the affairs of state-directed resettlement while at the same time being portrayed as corrupt, cast a dark shadow over relations between *Bắc di cư* Church officials and Diệm. Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, the head of northern migrant Catholic Church assistance, was particularly frustrated by the situation.

On October 13, just two days after Diệm declared the launching of *Localization*, the *Đường Sống* newspaper—the Bishop’s de facto voice—challenged GVN depictions

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<sup>51</sup> Phiếu khan trình: “về việc gian lận nơi các kinh ở khu Định cư Cái Sắn,” August 1957, 61-70, File 10454, PTTĐỊCH, NACIL.

<sup>52</sup> “Second Anniversary of the Refugee Movement,” *Major Policy Speeches of Ngô Đình Diệm*. (Saigon: Press Office, 1956), 33-34.

of Cái Sắn resettlement and took issue with the government's reliance on the *Bắc di cư* Catholic Church to administer state-directed resettlement there. The *Đường Sống* emphasized that in April of that year, the GVN had announced that each family would be given "ownership" [sở hữu] of the land on which it was now settled. Suddenly, however, in August the government reversed its decision, without warning, and now was demanding that northern migrants sign tenant contracts with "mysterious" landowners.<sup>53</sup>

Cái Sắn clergy had not misrepresented GVN policy. Instead, the paper condemned certain unnamed figures for their "deceitful" handling of the land issue in Cái Sắn.<sup>54</sup> Without identifying him, the *Đường Sống* was clearly referring to Nguyễn Văn Thời and his family's holdings, as many suspected him of abusing his position for personal gain.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to disputing the government's portrayal of events, the paper castigated the government for its reliance on Catholic clergy in overseeing local-level resettlement affairs. Bishop Chi and his Catholic Auxiliary Resettlement Committee [Ủy Ban Hỗ Trợ Định Cư] had formally warned the PTUDCTN on no less than three occasions that clergy were unprepared to perform these duties and when they failed to live up to GVN standards, authorities labeled it "misconduct" and "wrongdoing."<sup>56</sup> By doing this, Chi

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<sup>53</sup> Tiếng vọng từ Cái Sắn," *Đường Sống*, October 13, 1956.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *Bắc di cư* of Cái Sắn to the President, Document 3891-BNV/HC, October 3, 1956, 152-153, File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII; David Wurfel, "Agrarian Reform in the Republic of Vietnam," *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (June 1957), 88. In addition, elders of Cái Sắn claim that Thời was also acting on behalf of a "French company" with significant interests in the region. Those making allegations could not recall the company's name.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

had warned, the PTUDCTN might one day find that it could not rely on parish priests to act as intermediaries with northern migrants on its behalf.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps in an effort to placate both Catholic clergy and *Bắc di cư* of Cái Sắn, Diệm sacked the Land Reform Minister, Nguyễn Văn Thời, and his nephew, Trịnh Văn Hi, who was on the Cái Sắn oversight committee. This did nothing, however, to address the core issue: the government's reliance on the clergy. Bishop Chi recognized as well as anyone, *Localization* guaranteed that clergy would become more involved in the secular affairs of the region, not less.

For Cái Sắn, *Localization* officially occurred on September 24, 1957. An underlying theme addressed in the speeches given was the hope that *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants would “cooperate (hợp thức với nhau)” for the sake of Vietnam's future.<sup>58</sup> With the end to state-directed resettlement, migrants could become more invested in their new homes. Emphasizing this point, the new Minister of Agrarian Reform proclaimed, “We no longer distinguish between *Bắc di cư* and local farmer, we no longer recognize one's homeland as a distinguishing feature, we see only Vietnamese.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Minh Sơn, “Bên lề kỷ niệm hai năm di cư: các vị lãnh đạo tỉnh thần,” *Đường Sống*, October 13, 1956 (#134).

<sup>58</sup> 6235/VP, September 25, 1957, An Giang (Long Xuyên) province chief, Đỗ Kiến Nhiệm to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 103, File 10850, PTTĐICH, NACII. According to some documents the date of ĐPH appears to have been pushed back multiple times, for perhaps as much as a year. In fact, in August 1957, the Kiên Giang province chief announced that 25,000 migrants in Kinh 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, Tân Hiệp 2, A and B “đã hòa mình vào nhịp sống địa phương của làng Tân Hiệp.” 3801/KT/3: V/v địa phương hóa các trại định cư, August 26, 1957, 111, See File N21-9, TĐBCPNP, NACII.

<sup>59</sup> Minister of Land and Land Reform to An Giang Province Chief, Document 3334 BĐT/VP, “Tranh chấp tại Kinh H (Cái Sắn I),” July 15, 1959, 136, File 12731, PTTĐICH, NACII.

Reflecting the inherent contradictions in the GVN's attempts to promote integration of northern migrants, regional cooperation and the unity of Vietnamese, the audience consisted *entirely* of *Bắc di cư*. There was not one local inhabitant present at the ceremony. Even in Cái Sắn, the RVN's model resettlement center, state-directed resettlement had established communities comprised solely of northern migrants and led by Catholic priests.<sup>60</sup>

As a result, like in other resettlement sites across the South, *Localization* terminated any possibility for *Bắc di cư* assimilation into the society of the lower Mekong Delta. Confronted with the government's retreat and a population dominated by Catholic *Bắc di cư*, the new communities emerged around institutions and structures with which northern migrants were familiar. Under these circumstances, parish priests wielded enormous power over the daily life of Cái Sắn. And none exerted more influence than Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc of Canal 1.<sup>61</sup> The story of Father Lộc provides insights both into resettlement life for northern refugees as well as demonstrates the various perceptions held about Church oversight of resettlement.

*"The Tyrant of Cái Sắn": Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc*

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<sup>60</sup> The lone exception was Đông Bình Canal, popularly referred to as the "Buddhist Canal [Kinh Phật Giáo]." The majority of its residents hailed from Đồng Cừ village in Thái Bình province. Instead of organizing around the parish church, the central institution imposing order reflected the non-Catholic character of the residents: the communal house (or Đình). Nguyễn Văn Nho, Interview by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang Province (Vietnam), November 17, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Following the fall of the South in 1975, Communist authorities arrested Father Lộc, who then spent fourteen years in Reeducation. Inhabitants of Anton Parish recall that Lộc returned to Canal 1 in late 1989 and died soon after in early 1990.

Who was Lộc and what accounted for his power? The circumstances surrounding Cái Sắn's early years offer a partial answer. At its founding, Cái Sắn became a part of the recently-organized Cần Thơ Diocese. Launched in September 1955, the Diocese first bishop was Nguyễn Văn Bình, a southerner from Long An province.<sup>62</sup> Bình confronted an enormous task: organizing a new diocese in the post-colonial, post-war lower Mekong Delta. In addition to setting up the usual diocesan institutions (a seminary, high schools, and a monthly journal, *Thực Hành* (Practice), Bình took several exceptional steps. Facing serious government deficiencies, he established various committees to assist him and the government in areas such as finance, land development and *Bắc di cư* resettlement. Apparently a man willing both to delegate responsibility and accept his own limitations as a southerner in a Diocese dominated by Cái Sắn northern migrants, Bishop Bình sought assistance.<sup>63</sup> One of the first people to whom Bình turned was Father Lộc of the Hanoi Diocese.

Lộc had led the very first group of 602 volunteers to the region. Contemporary witnesses also claim he participated in all aspects of the early resettlement hardships, including canal excavation. Likewise, Lộc had served as commander of a Catholic militia during the First Indochina War.<sup>64</sup> In early 1956, he was both revered as a “great man” by those who followed him to Cái Sắn and trusted by Church elites in Saigon (in particular, Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi), who selected him to lead the first wave of migrants to Cái Sắn.

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<sup>62</sup> Pope Paul XII established the Cần Thơ Diocese on September 20, 1955. While I have found no evidence of this, we may want to consider the role that the new diocese's formation had in Cái Sắn's creation. Catholic archives may hold the answer.

<sup>63</sup> Bishop Bình was born in Long An Province in 1922.

<sup>64</sup> Rising to the equivalent of Major (Thiếu Tá), a rank he continued to hold in the South.

With such credentials, the new Bishop seemed to have found his man. Father Anton Nguyễn Bá Lộc embraced his advisory role with great energy, even having business cards made proclaiming “Priest – Advisor Anton Nguyễn Bá Lộc.”<sup>65</sup>

Advisor to a Bishop and de-facto spiritual and administrative leader of Cái Sắn, Father Lộc was a figure with whom to be reckoned.<sup>66</sup> When President Ngô Đình Diệm made his much-publicized visit to Cái Sắn, he gave his address at Canal 1 and next to him stood Lộc. Moreover, in an effort to cope with the Cái Sắn crisis related above, GVN officials twice sought him out, not Bishop Binh. In addition to the failed meeting by three officials detailed above, General Dương Văn Minh was dispatched to meet with Lộc a few days later. GVN authorities, including Diệm, recognized the power he exerted. But the archival record suggests that Lộc’s authority did not merely spring from his network of relationships.

Sources also indicate that Father Lộc’s power was the product of ruthlessness and violence. For instance, a deposition given by a man who fled Cái Sắn described Father Lộc as “the tyrant [bao chúa]” of Cái Sắn:

Everyone is afraid, not merely the people, but even the officials. Upon hearing his name, one imagines an evil genius with the power to give life or take it away. The fear is not born of his Church authority, he is just a parish priest... People are terrified because Lộc has been able to consolidate power in Cái Sắn by breaking Church and State law, while simultaneously developing a reputation among senior Church and government officials for honesty... Father Lộc has been able to rise to

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<sup>65</sup> Office of the President, “Phiếu Trình: Về vấn đề LM Nguyễn Bá Lộc, Chính Xứ An-Tôn Cái Sắn,” December 29, 1973, 17, File 746, PTTĐIIICH, NACII. GVN officials depict his business cards as an example of the priest’s hunger for power.

<sup>66</sup> No one seems to have opposed the naming of the new parish on Canal 1 after Father Lộc himself, *Anton*.

the position of Cái Sắn's overlord [lãnh chúa]. Accept the wishes of Father Lộc and live, oppose and you die.<sup>67</sup>

Those who resisted Father Lộc's authority could expect trouble. The experience of the members of the Xuân Bàng sub-parish settled in Canal 1 under the leadership of Lộc captures this dynamic.

During the summer of 1956, members of the sub-parish refused to meet the demands of Father Lộc, to contribute to certain construction projects along the canal. The elders of the sub-parish argued that the work amounted to "corvee labor" and they would not submit. Furious, Lộc used the pretext of a threat made by Trần Văn Lưỡng—one of the Xuân Bàng elders—against local officials to order the expulsion of Lưỡng and his family from the canal.<sup>68</sup>

Still, the Xuân Bàng sub-parish stood resolute. They protested Lưỡng's eviction and refused to perform parish labor. Lộc issued a decree depicting the "rebels" as a threat to parish security.<sup>69</sup> Revealing the extent of his authority, Father Lộc revoked their Church privileges and access to resettlement assistance, denying the families food, money, equipment, seeds and even drinking water.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> [Title Unclear], October 7, 1973, File 746, PTTĐIICH, NACII. On the evening of October 25, 1971, almost eight years after President Diệm's death, a gunman dressed as a "VC" shot and wounded Trần Văn Huân (the man who gave the deposition), his wife and daughter as well as killed a neighbor. When authorities captured the gunman and his accomplices, however, they discovered the men were not Communist guerrillas. Instead, they were district police officers and "disciples [con cháu đệ tử]" of Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc. After being discharged from the provincial hospital, Huân and his family fled Cái Sắn to Saigon, where he gave the deposition to authorities.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Father Nguyễn Bá Lộc, "Thông Súc", February 15, 1957, File 746, PTTĐIICH, NACII; PTU Dinh Điền, 17/TU/BTTDC, January 7, 1958, 10, File 10845, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

The sub-parish appears to have sought GVN intervention in the matter. Subsequently, government officials cleared the Xuân Bằng parishioners of wrongdoing. In Cái Sắn, however, Father Lộc's authority outweighed the government. Three of the sub-parish's leaders—Trần Ích Phương, Trần Ngọc Kim and Trần Văn Kiệu—were taken into custody by Cái Sắn police in November 1957 and subjected to “ruthless torture.”<sup>71</sup> And when Trần Văn Kiệu died as a result, the presiding doctor declared the cause of death to be “complications related to tuberculosis.” Attempts to conduct an independent autopsy into Kiệu's death were thwarted when the body mysteriously disappeared.<sup>72</sup> Merciless to the end, authorities claim Father Lộc confiscated government assistance provided to Kiệu's family following his death and even stripped the relatives of the three ‘agitators’ of their share of the harvest revenue.<sup>73</sup> “All-powerful [toàn quyền] and absolute kings [những ông vua tuyệt đối],” one did not cross the clergy, particularly, Father Lộc.<sup>74</sup>

In November 1960, possibly out of concern for clerical power, the Vatican reorganized the Church in Vietnam. Among the decrees directly impacting Cái Sắn, the Vatican issued two measures. The Church reformed the Parish council (*Hội Đồng Giáo Xứ*) in order to “democratize and raise the level of parishioner participation in activities.”<sup>75</sup> As a result, members of the council would no longer be hand picked by the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> *Công Luận*, April 25, 1960, File 746, PTTĐIIICH, NACII.

<sup>74</sup> Trần Tam Tĩnh, *Thập Giá và Lưỡi Gươm* (Hà Nội: Trẻ 1988), 124.

<sup>75</sup> *Địa Phận Long Xuyên*, 1971, 41.

parish priest but instead elected by parishioners. Second, Rome also established the Long Xuyên Diocese, which included the Cái Sắn region.<sup>76</sup>

Well intentioned, perhaps, but as the Church in Vietnam had already found, as long as places like Cái Sắn remained isolated, the parish priests would continue to have ‘free reign.’ Without external intervention, *Bắc di cư* themselves were unlikely to bring real reform or ‘democratization’ to the region. The clergy remained the center of power along the canal and parishioners faced severe consequences if they challenged the clergy as the case of the Xuân Bàng sub-parish in Canal 1 illuminates.

As in their pre-1954 northern parishes, the anthropologist Nguyễn Đức Lộc emphasizes that the parish church in Cái Sắn stood at the center of the inhabitants’ lives. It conducted all significant activities and rites of passage of *Bắc di cư* residents.

Each newborn was brought to the church by his parents for baptism [rửa tội], without fail... Not merely performed by the Church, marriages only occurred if

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<sup>76</sup> The Vatican announced the decrees just thirteen days after the November 11, 1960 coup attempt against the Diệm house. In addition, the measures had a dramatic effect on Church hierarchy in South Vietnam. There may be an argument to be made that this was, in part, orchestrated by powers critical of the Diệm family. First, Bishop Nguyễn Văn Bình of Cần Thơ was elevated to Archbishop of Saigon, the position coveted by Bishop Ngô Đình Thục. Second, Thục was promoted to Archbishop of Huế, a move that appears intended to remove Thục from Mekong politics.

Moreover, by 1959, the Cần Thơ Diocese had reached over 140,000 adherents. As a result, in the November 24, 1960 reshuffle, the Vatican divided the Cần Thơ Diocese to form the new Long Xuyên Diocese (made up of An Giang and Kiên Giang provinces, the heartland of Cái Sắn). In January 1961, Bishop Michael Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, a *Bắc di cư* from Thái Bình, was consecrated as the new Bishop of Long Xuyên. (The ceremony occurred in Saigon and was presided over Archbishop Ngô Đình Thục, not Bình. As it happens, Bishop Ngữ was a disciple of Thục from the former’s days in Huế during the 1930s). It appears tensions arose between the Long Xuyên Diocese and Cái Sắn when, shortly after his arrival in Long Xuyên, Bishop Ngữ informed Father Lộc that he was no longer an “advisor (Cố Vấn).” (However, the *1964 Vietnam Catholic Church* officially records Lộc as a member of Ngữ’s board of advisors). (See Phan Phát Huôn, *Việt Nam Giáo-Sử: Quyển II (1933-1960)*. Saigon: Cứu Thế Tùng Thư, 1962; Bùi Đức Sinh, *Giáo Hội Công Giáo ở Việt Nam (Vol III)*. Calgary: Veritas, 2002; Lê Ngọc Bích, *Các Đức Giám Mục Việt Nam đã qua đời 1944-2009*. Saigon, 2010; *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám 1964*. Saigon: Sacerdos, 1964).

the parish priest gave his blessing. And when a person passed on, his or her body was interred in the parish's holy plot, the cemetery.<sup>77</sup>

The parish priest dictated the rhythms and patterns of each parishioner's life. To resist the priest, a Catholic threatened not only his/her relationship with the Church also but his/her family's as well as. He might be expelled from the parish and removed from the rolls of the Church and the village [số làng]. Expulsion from the parish meant not only the loss of land and livelihood, but also one's connection to the Church. There was little Diệm or GVN authorities could do as in the cases of both Trần Văn Kiệu and Trần Văn Lương. Father Lộc issued an order removing them from the parish roll and confiscating all possessions and property.<sup>78</sup>

#### *Self-Reliant: Life Along the Canal*

Still, evidence of abuse and corruption by Father Lộc and other priests must be contextualized. The previous chapter sketched out the litany of problems directed resettlement faced. In addition to those struggles and failures already outlined, the northern migrants of Cái Sắn wrestled with a new environment and new community. During the Diệm years, harvests of the region varied between unsuccessful and disastrous. A look at harvest results of Cái Sắn between 1956 and 1962 exposes immense hardship.

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<sup>77</sup> Nguyễn Đức Lộc, *Cầu Hình Xã Hội*, 132.

<sup>78</sup> LM Nguyễn Bá Lộc, *Thông Súc*, February 15, 1957, 30, File 746, PTTĐIICH, NACII.

In 1956, as one report described, if a family of five could find a *gia*, or about 20 pounds of rice, they were in good shape.<sup>79</sup> 1957 saw “improvement,” leading some officials to allege that Cai San “had passed its crisis.” Yet such “progress” did not buoy *Bắc di cư* confidence. “With such a poor return,” one elder remarked, “the energy spent felt wasted?”<sup>80</sup> Two years after the establishment of Cái Sắn, the *Tự Do* newspaper discovered, newcomers had managed to “cultivate as little as 10% of the land.”<sup>81</sup> By 1960—four years after arriving in Cái Sắn—conditions seemed little better. Refugees had “seeded” just a small portion region, while mice “devastated” almost 70% of the fields.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, the GVN promise of tractors to plow the lands had, four years later, “still gone unrealized,” as newcomers ate “watery rice gruel” awaiting the upcoming harvest.<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately, catastrophic flooding in 1961 and 1962 brought no relief, as salt water crippled not just the harvest, but also the soil. American sources estimate that 100,000

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<sup>79</sup> Đoàn Đức Xuân, “Nghiên Cứu Một Cộng Đồng Liên Xã Khu Cái Sắn” (Graduation Thesis, National Institute of Administration, 1973), 46.

<sup>80</sup> Nguyễn Đức Nho, Interview by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang Province, November 17, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> “Đời Sống của đồng bào Bắc Việt di cư...,” *Tự Do*, September 10, 1957.

<sup>82</sup> Đồng bào định cư tại Cái Sắn to President, July 12, 1960, 164-165, File 11787, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

families endured the 1961 “disaster,” which included Cái Sắn.<sup>84</sup> Not until 1963, elders recall, “were we able to fully cultivate the land.”<sup>85</sup>

Amplifying the agricultural struggles of the new environment was the synthetic nature of the newly organized communities. Distinct from resettlement in places like Biên Hòa, Gò Vấp and Tây Ninh, the new parishes of Cái Sắn did not reunite a single community and/or Catholic Order under the direction of its spiritual leader. Instead, each contained multiple groups, clans and orders originating from provinces throughout the Red River Delta under the direction of a parish priest. Generally, that priest had previously served as the spiritual leader of one of the represented northern communities of the new parish.

The northern Red River Delta, A. Terry Rambo noted, produced a vast number of “differing local environments,” each with its own cultural particularities and rules regulating its members.<sup>86</sup> Being Catholic and northern did not organically or spontaneously fuse these new communities into cohesive units. In light of the situation,

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<sup>84</sup> American Friends of Vietnam, *News from Viet-Nam*, December 15, 1961, 8, Douglas Pike Collection (American Friends of Vietnam), VVA – TTU, Lubbock, TX. Interestingly, in November 1961, General Maxwell Taylor recommended to President Kennedy that the US use the flood as a cover to send an 8,000 man American combat task force. Neil Sheehan (et al), *The Pentagon Papers: The Secret history of the Vietnam War* (New York: New York Times, 1971), xvii-xviii.

<sup>85</sup> Đinh Thị Nuôi, Interview by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang, November 17, 2011. Also see Trần Hữu Hợp. “Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công Giáo người Việt vùng Cái Sắn từ năm 1956-1975,” (MA Thesis, Institute of Social Sciences – Southern Region, 2000), 38.

<sup>86</sup> A. Terry Rambo, *A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Viet-Nam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution* (Monograph Series III) (Carbondale: Center for Vietnamese Studies, Southern Illinois University, 1973), 58. As Pierre Gourou shows corporatism permeated village life in northern Vietnam. In the case of Nghĩa Độ village in Hà Đông province, for instance, women marrying out of the village had to swear an oath never to share the village’s secrets behind its sugar manufacturing. Pierre Gourou, *Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois: Etude de Geographie Humaine*, (Mouton: Paris, 1965), 245.

parish priests, like Lộc, may have felt compelled to impose order. Without GVN assistance or its presence, management of these complex problems fell to Lộc and other parish priests in the region.

As a result, we should be careful in assuming that parish priests were corrupt, inimical individuals, as GVN records portray. The ‘corruption’ described, in many cases, was for purposes other than individual benefit. In many ways, the practices that clergy resorted to reflected both government calls for *Self-Reliance* or *Tự Lực Tự Sinh* and standard northern Vietnam village ‘safety nets’ for confronting crisis as well as rules directing “communal control of land and possessions.”<sup>87</sup>

An example of this ethos, several scholars have demonstrated, was the redistribution of capital in the village or commune [xã]. This often occurred through religious and administrative activities. Participation in these practices was obligatory and could be onerous. In the 1930s, Pierre Gourou found that normal villages rituals accounted for as much as 10 to 15 percent of a peasant family’s annual budget. However, special events, like weddings or funerals, however, could consume up to half a family’s income.<sup>88</sup> Still amidst crisis, this system could be the difference between life and death.

By recognizing the activities of Cái Sắn’s parishes in this way, it also may more deeply illuminate the dispute between the Xuân Bàng sub-parish and Father Lộc.

Northern villages worked to limit membership and maintain resources in the hands of village natives so as to protect its inhabitants. As a result, according to custom, those

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<sup>87</sup> A Terry Rambo, op. cit., 29; Gerald C Hickey, “Social Systems of Northern Vietnam” (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958), 53.

<sup>88</sup> Pierre Gourou, *Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois: Étude de Géographie Humaine* (La Haye: Mouton, 1965).

living on village lands *not* inscribed in its rolls [*sổ làng*], still had to pay community taxes but did not enjoy the full benefits afforded ‘registered’ members of the village. These persons/families were known as *dân ngoài* or outsiders.<sup>89</sup> Xuân Bàng members, in fact, had no relationship with Lộc prior to their arrival in Cái Sắn. They were from Nam Định and Father Lộc was a product of the Hanoi Diocese. The conflict displayed the marks of families being treated as outsiders of the newly established community.

Though scholars like Gourou, Hickey and A Terry Rambo examined non-Catholic communities, the practices in question were indeed present in northern Catholic parishes as well. However, instead of organizing around a communal house, or *đình*, these communities formed around the church, with the parish priest holding immense authority. In many ways, parish priests in Cái Sắn, like Father Lộc, were performing tasks they had informally executed in their Northern parishes, particularly during the First Indochina War.<sup>90</sup> Here I discuss three aspects relating to community life that demonstrate the influential role of parish priests in Cái Sắn: social safety nets, schooling and canal security. It is important to keep in mind that while these services proved crucial to the existence of many *Bắc di cư*, they once again prevented refugees integration into southern society.

To achieve a Canal-wide provident fund (Quỹ Kinh), Lộc taxed members of the parish heavily.<sup>91</sup> Father Lộc had complete discretion over the fund. Some of it may have

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<sup>89</sup> Gerald C Hickey, “Social Systems of Northern Vietnam” (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958), 83; A. Terry Rambo, *op. cit.*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> This gestures to the first chapter of the dissertation, which recounts pre-history of the Great Migration and life in these northern villages.

<sup>91</sup> The details for this provident fund (Quỹ Kinh) are based on interviews during May 2010 and November 2011 in Canal 1 and Canal Đông Bình.

gone to unneeded projects or benefited a favored group. For those having good relations with Father Lộc, such as Trần Thị Thê, they could expect his protection. “When my children were gravely ill,” Ms. Thê writes, “Father [Lộc] made sure they had the necessary care.”<sup>92</sup> For those who challenged Lộc’s authority, such as members of the Xuân Bảng sub-parish, they suffered. All residents endured the same taxes, regardless of whether or not they shared equally in the benefits.<sup>93</sup>

Plainly, Father Lộc and other parish priests responded to the lack of institutional support with uncompromising, even brutal strategies of their own. Nonetheless, in the case of the Canal Fund, the safety net covered an array of disasters and tragedies where nothing else existed: from the personal (such as a home fire, a severe illness or a death in the family) to the collective (such as drought or poor harvest). The provident fund even served as the northern migrants’ initial and chief source of relief following the flood of 1961.

Another area in which parish priests of Cái Sắn played an influential role was education. As stipulated by the Cái Sắn project plan, each canal was outfitted with at least one elementary school by the government. Authorities intended the schools to advance literacy and a “national curriculum.”<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, the Ministry of Education hoped education would play a significant role in the “adjustment and acclimation” of young *Bắc di cư* to “their new homes.”<sup>95</sup> The new communities, however, were left to run them with

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<sup>92</sup> Trần Thị Thê, Interview by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang Province, November 15, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Province Chief of Kiên Giang to President, 73, Undated, File 10854, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>94</sup> Other such institutions were the medical clinics.

<sup>95</sup> PTUDCTN, *Cuộc Di Cư Lịch Sử tại Việt Nam* (Saigon: PTUDCTN, 1957).

limited resources and little direction. While canals managed to run the schools, the results were not as the government outlined.

In the case of Canal 1, Father Lộc became the de facto school supervisor and all teachers were *Bắc di cư* selected by Lộc. The curriculum was a mix of secular and religious education.<sup>96</sup> In addition, with an entirely Catholic northern staff, students had no exposure to southerners. Certainly those students who went on for tertiary-level education could expect to interact with southerners in places like Saigon, but based on unofficial estimates just 10% of students completed the Baccalaureate and these students were trained at high schools run by the Church. Interestingly, though *Bắc di cư* education in Cái Sắn appears to have hindered northern migrant – local inhabitant relations and integration into the larger southern society, it actually helped improve relations within the new communities. Students of different Red River Delta provinces and parishes attended school and grew up together.

The third matter in which the Cái Sắn parish priests dominated was security. *Chapter two* outlined the rise of self-defense militias in resettlement villages and *chapter four* highlighted GVN concerns over arming the new parishes in the Cái Sắn, fearing it would provoke violence between *Bắc di cư* and local inhabitants.

Yet this hardly ended attempts to militarize the canals and by no later than 1957 the first parish militias were established. Father Lộc stood at the head of these efforts. Perhaps the result of his own experiences during the First Indochina War, Lộc became

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<sup>96</sup> Students recalled learning of the parallels between the Great Migration of 1954-1955 and the Jews exodus from Egypt and singing sang songs to celebrate the *Bắc di cư* arrival in the “promised land” of Cái Sắn, where “northern migrants landed in the empty land to built it up...” “Ai về Cái Sắn” was written by Nguyễn Việt in the early 1960s. Recited by Nguyễn Cao Trí. Nguyễn Cao Trí, Interview by Jason Picard, Kiên Giang Province, November 15, 2011.

the local militia commander.<sup>97</sup> Like their Red River Delta predecessors, the new militias were intended to protect the parishes. Thus the militia also advanced community solidarity. By bringing together men from different clans, parishes and from across the northern Red River Delta to serve in defense of a new, shared community, the militia facilitated the development of relations among them. Simultaneously, these militias became sources of violence between migrants and southerners.

As this section exposes, far from integrating *Bắc di cư* into lower Mekong Delta society, GVN-directed resettlement and associated campaigns such as *self-reliance* and *localization* served to carve out corporate northern migrant communities. Established around the Catholic Church, Father Lộc and the other parish priests of Cái Sắn became the region's power brokers. This ensured the entrenchment of regional and religious politics in the western Mekong Delta, further fracturing and fragmenting societal relations.

*Conclusion:*

Despite the array of problems, struggles and failures, the *Bắc di cư* remained in Cái Sắn. By 1975, at the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the northern migrant communities of Cái Sắn had achieved a significant degree of cohesion. The divisions among the region's newcomers a generation earlier were, if not gone, at least far less visible.

The same, however, cannot be said of regional tensions between northern migrants and southern residents. Remarkably, today, this relationship remains marked by distrust and a lack of cooperation on the part of both communities in Cái Sắn. Amongst

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<sup>97</sup> Father Lộc to President, November 25, 1973, 13, File 746, PTTĐIICH, NACII.

themselves, *Bắc di cư* still disparagingly refer to their southern counterparts as ‘beansprouts [đậu giá]’ and, conversely, local residents allude to northern migrants as ‘morning glory [rau muống].’ Marriage is unheard of between the regional groupings. In *Beautiful Floods*, Judith Ehlert shows that *half a century* later southern inhabitants and *Bắc di cư* remain unwilling to share technical skills relating to fishing and agriculture.<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, as this chapter and *chapter four* have demonstrated, even in the case of Cái Sắn—the Diệm-era model resettlement center—the assumption that the government privileged or favored the *Bắc di cư* is problematic. Such judgments presume much about the desires of the new arrivals and the quality of the land in the western Mekong Delta. It also confuses their ability to adjust and survive as a product of RVN privilege. Cái Sắn further elides the classic chestnut about Diệm’s relationship with the Catholic Church. Once again, like in *chapter three*, the president demanded that loyalty to the state take precedence over religious concerns.

Despite the inherent problems, corruption, mismanagement and the conflict surrounding the project, many continued to believe that Cái Sắn was the “miracle of the Mekong.” Diệm, in particular, regarded the region as *the* model for many of his regime’s future land development projects such as New Land Cultivation [Dinh Điền], Agrovilles [Khu Trù Mật] and even the infamous Strategic Hamlets [Áp Chiến Lược]. It is no accident that numerous key officials who later worked on projects such as Agrovilles and Strategic Hamlets, initially played important roles in Cái Sắn. Two examples were Bùi

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<sup>98</sup> Judith Ehlert, *Beautiful Floods: Environmental Knowledge and Agrarian Change in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2012), 181.

Văn Lương and Hoàng Văn Lạc.<sup>99</sup> I have already discussed Bùi Văn Lương at length. Lạc, on the other hand, deserves some explanation here.

Hoàng Lạc initially gained the attention of Diệm in 1954 as a division commander of the Inter-Arms Presidential Brigade. As a result, following the several Cái Sắn scandals detailed above, Lạc was promoted to the post of Kiên Giang province chief in 1957. The experience burnished his credentials as a land development and resettlement expert in the eyes of the Ngô Đình house. Thus, in 1961, Ngô Đình Nhu elevated Hoàng Lạc to serve as the operational director for the Inter-Ministerial Committee of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Both Lạc and Bùi Văn Lương became two of Nhu's closest advisors on the ill-fated project and their stories are but two examples of the genealogical connection between state-directed resettlement in Cái Sắn and the Strategic Hamlet Project.<sup>100</sup> Even after Diệm's fall, both men continued to hold key posts in the RVN.

In the next chapter I examine GVN efforts to reach out to the *Bắc di cư* population through a press dedicated to northern migrant-related issues. The most prominent among these was the *Tự Do* [Liberty] daily and its sister weekly, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* [Free Arts and Literature]. While Diệm and other officials imagined these papers would be an instrument through which to champion the regime, in fact, the *Tự Do* and the

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<sup>99</sup> Lạc was born in Nam Định in 1927. He graduated from the National Military Academy in Dalat in 1950 and served in the French army until the end of the of the First Indochina War when he joined the National Army in South Vietnam. For writings by Hoàng (Văn) Lạc see Hoang Lac and Ha Mai Viet. *Blind Design: Why America Lost the Vietnam War* (Sugarland, TX, 1996); Hoang Lac, "Blind Design," in *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam, 1960-1965*, ed. Harvey Neese and John O'Donnell (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 58-85.

<sup>100</sup> Harvey Neese and John O'Donnell, *Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam 1960-1965* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), xiii.

*Văn Nghệ Tự Do* became the first mainstream newspapers to challenge the government over the South's democratic future.

## ***Chapter 6—Ungrateful Loyalists: The Rise, Fall and Troubled Resurrection of the Tự Do Press Group, 1954-1957***

### *Introduction*

On April 29, 1956, South Vietnam's Minister of Information, Trần Chánh Thành, ordered the immediate seizure of the thirteenth issue of the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* [Free Arts and Literature] weekly, warning that the government would not tolerate “any further sabotage or slandering of national authority.”<sup>1</sup> An arm of the northern migrant or *Bắc di cư*-established *Tự Do* [Liberty] daily newspaper and *Tự Do* intellectual group, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* had openly confronted the government in a series of published letters, alleging that certain individuals were exploiting “Communist techniques” in a plot to curb freedoms of expression and the press and, ultimately, destroy South Vietnam's fledgling democracy. To this point, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* had avoided naming the individuals. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, however, that changed.

Implying that Thành was exploiting his relationship with President Diệm to stifle opposition, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* referred to Thành as an “anti-democratic opportunist... who enjoys using ‘the mother’s breast to silence the child’s cries [cả vú lấp miệng em].” Worse still, the paper argued, the Minister of Information was enamored with power:

He believes that because the people revere the deity [ông thần] of the banyan tree they also venerate the banyan tree [cây đa] itself. Therefore, he intentionally spread his branches, sprouted leaves and attempted to cover the deity.<sup>2</sup>

Thành, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* insinuated, had his eyes set on becoming the deity.

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<sup>1</sup> “Tại sao tuần báo *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* số 13 bị tịch thu,” *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*, May 2, 1956; “Tại sao tuần báo *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* số 13 bị tịch thu,” *Ngôn Luận*, May 4, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Cử Tri, “Lá thư gửi Ủy ban thảo hiến của Quốc hội,” *VNTD*, April 29, 1956 (#13).

Less than a week later, the Ministry of Information shut the paper down. The two figures allegedly behind the series of letters, Mạc Thu Lưu Đức Sinh and Hiếu Chân Nguyễn Hoạt, were arrested and incarcerated. Yet just six months later, Ngô Đình Diệm and Thành resurrected both the *Tự Do* and *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* newspapers. This story raises several important questions.

What led to this confrontation? More specifically, why was the *Tự Do* press group, whose stated mission it was to serve the *Bắc di cư*, the first to publicly challenge the government of South Vietnam? And what possessed the president to restore a pair of newspapers that had antagonized the regime? In this chapter, I explore the rise and fall of the original group as well as the subsequent resurrection of its two newspapers. This story reveals the government's efforts to reach out to the *Bắc di cư* population through a press dedicated to northern migrant-related issues. It also further lays bare the constraints impeding the development of a united northern migrant bloc loyal to Diệm and the GVN (Government of Vietnam).

Amidst the unfolding migration crisis, a collection of newspapers appeared in Saigon with two traits. They were staffed by *Bắc di cư* arrivals and focused their coverage on the plight of the northern migrant. The most prominent among these was the *Tự Do* [Liberty] daily and its weekly *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* [Free Arts and Literature]. Organized in late 1954, the *Tự Do* group continued publication of the two papers until the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*'s forced closure in May 1956. In examining the papers, I argue that two factors led to the group's transformation from one championing *Bắc di cư*-related issues to one challenging the government over the South's democratic future: political divisions within the *Tự Do* group and GVN pressure on it.

Since the days of David Halberstam, the role of the American press during the Vietnam War-era has garnered intense debate.<sup>3</sup> With a few recent exceptions, however, Western scholarship has by and large overlooked the press of South Vietnam (1954-1975).<sup>4</sup> In many cases, commentators have dismissed it as a tool of the South Vietnamese regime(s).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the GVN did not formally establish a state-run newspaper until July 1955 with the launch of the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*. Ironically, on the rare occasions scholars and observers have addressed the RVN-era press, they have detailed examples of conflict between it and the regime, particularly instances in which the government closed a newspaper and/or arrested a journalist for challenging its authority.

The eminent Vietnam War scholar Bernard Fall and the journalist David Hotham wrote about the discord that arose between the government and several South Vietnamese

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<sup>3</sup> Marguerite Higgins, "Our Country's Inglorious Role in the Final Days of the Diem Regime," *Human Events*, March 7, 1964, 8-9; David Halberstam, "Getting the Story in Vietnam," *Commentary*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 1965): 30-34; David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965); Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare: The Story of US Involvement in the Vietnamese Tragedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Peter Braestrup, *The Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977); Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988); Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Vintage 1994); William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media & Military at War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1998); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> These exceptions are Nu-Anh Tran, "South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention, and the Newspaper Chính Luận [Political Discussion], 1965-1969," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1-2 (Fall 2006):169-209; Olga Dror, "Raising Vietnamese: War and Youth in the South in the Early 1970s," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (February 2013), 74-99.

<sup>5</sup> George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1967), 100; Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 69; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and US Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University, 2004), 224.

newspapers over accounts that painted resettlement in a troublesome light.<sup>6</sup> In 1956, the *New York Times* called for the release of two Vietnamese journalists detained for publishing articles “slandering” the government.<sup>7</sup> But the most well known dispute between GVN and press was the *Thời Luận* affair of 1958, in which a newspaper by the same name was closed and its editors arrested for publishing a series of letters signed “XYZ.”<sup>8</sup> Without suggesting that South Vietnam enjoyed full freedom of the press, there does seem to exist an irony here. How could such conflicts arise, if the press of South Vietnam was simply “government-controlled?” The overwhelming evidence points to a far more nuanced account involving the role of censorship in the South and the function of newspapers established to deal with the flood of arriving northern refugees. To begin this story, I turn to the rise of these newspapers, which I refer to collectively as “the *Bắc di cư* press.”

*Background: A Crisis of Communication and the Bắc di cư Press*

In the wake of the so-called Great Migration, among the many challenges it generated was the problem of communication between government and northern migrants. The Vietnamese Catholic Church and Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi’s Auxiliary Resettlement Committee proved a useful conduit to reaching the *Bắc di cư* Catholic majority.

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<sup>6</sup> David Hotham, “US Aid to Vietnam—A Balance Sheet,” *The Reporter*, September 19, 1957, 31; David Hotham, “South Vietnam—Shaky Bastion,” *The New Republic*, November 25, 1957, 15; Bernard Fall, “Danger Signs,” *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966*. New York: Praeger, 1966, 160 (Originally published in *The Nation*, May 31, 1958, pp 160-161); Richard W. Lindholm (ed.), *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 92-95.

<sup>7</sup> “Writers detained in Saigon,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1956.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 80; Bernard F Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 183.

Recognizing the unique value of print to reaching a wide audience, Chi's committee founded the *Đường Sống* weekly.<sup>9</sup> Still, the paper's religious focus limited its readership. Moreover, as we saw in chapters 4 and 5, Diệm did not trust Bishop Chi, the *Đường Sống*'s founder.

Following the establishment of the *PTUDCTN*, the agency introduced a weekly magazine, the *Quê Hương* [Homeland]. But it gained little attention in the *Bắc di cư* community and quickly died.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, southern Vietnam had a relatively strong newspaper heritage, dating back to the French-sponsored Vietnamese language newspaper the *Gia Định Báo* (1869).<sup>11</sup> And in the autumn of 1954, in fact, mainstream southern newspapers such as the *Ánh Sáng*, *Buổi Sáng*, *Dân Ta*, *Sài Gòn Mới*, *Tin Điện* and *Tin Mai* all had occasional or regular coverage of the migration. The *Dân Ta* [Our People], for instance, had reported the plight of fleeing northerners prior to the conclusion of the Geneva Conference, warning as early as July 1, 1954 of an impending “flood” of refugees.<sup>12</sup> The southern periodicals, however, provided information *about* the migration, not information directed *at* migrants. Refugees needed access to news and advice on numerous issues. It was at this time that Joseph Buttinger arrived in Vietnam.

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to the *Đường Sống*, the Catholic Church in the South published numerous other periodicals including the *Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp* [Our Lady of Perpetual Help] and *Đạo Binh Đức Mẹ* [The Legion of Mary]

<sup>10</sup> The *Quê Hương* had two more incarnations: *Hồn Quê* [The Spirit of the Homeland] and *Dân Việt* [The Vietnamese People].

<sup>11</sup> For more on the press culture of southern Vietnam/Cochinchina refer to Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Philip M.F. Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Nguyễn Vỹ, “Hà Nội tản cư và hồi cư,” *Dân Ta*, July 1, 1954.

An Austrian émigré, Joseph Buttinger fled European fascism for the US in 1939. A year later, he became a founding officer of the new International Rescue Committee (IRC). For Buttinger, the plight of refugees was a personal issue. When the IRC began operation in Vietnam in August of 1954, Buttinger requested the post. He arrived in Saigon tasked with assisting intellectuals and students coming from the North.<sup>13</sup> Introduced to the new prime minister by Edward Lansdale, Buttinger quickly became an ardent champion of Diệm.<sup>14</sup> Surveying the critical situation, Buttinger suggested the establishment of a newspaper for *Bắc di cư*, one modeled after the *Aufbau*.

Founded in 1934, the *Aufbau*'s mission was to assist Jewish refugees, and their children, to shed their European pasts and rebuild their lives in the US. It began as a newsletter of the German-Jewish Club of New York through which immigrants could find apartments, jobs and even explanations for understanding baseball.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the *Aufbau* had also been crucial in providing intellectual émigrés an outlet. Contributors included Hanna Arendt, Thomas Mann and Albert Einstein. As a member of the IRC, Buttinger was very familiar with the *Aufbau* and its successes.

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1958), 4. He later confessed that he, like everyone else, assumed the South was lost when he first arrived in Vietnam. Buttinger explained in 1958, "I wanted to see Saigon before it became a Communist city." There may, however, be another reason. Buttinger's 1953 memoir, *In the Twilight of Socialism*, also gives the impression that Buttinger was bored in the United States and searching for new inspiration. Joseph Buttinger, *In the Twilight of Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1953).

<sup>14</sup> Will Brownell, "The Vietnam Lobby: The Americans Who Lobbied for a Free and Independent South Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s," (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1993), 122.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the *Aufbau* see Wendy Sue Wilson, "Heimat and the Memory in the City: Representations of New York City and Vienna in Autobiographical Works of Exiled Viennese Authors" (PhD. Diss., Georgetown University, 2009).

Diệm gave his blessing to the concept of a daily newspaper devoted to northern migrant issues and introduced Buttinger to his Minister of Information, Bùi Kiến Tín. The idea, in fact, became a popular one as arriving *Bắc di cư* launched several newspapers and journals. In addition to the *Tự Do* daily and *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* weekly, there were also the *Ngôn Luận*, *Đường Sống*, *Người Việt*, *Người Việt Tự Do*, *Thời Luận*, *Dân Chủ*, *Tân Dân*, *Tin Bắc*, *Dân Tộc*, *Đi và Sống* and *Lửa Sống* newspapers. Collectively, I refer to this phenomenon as the northern migrant or *Bắc di cư* press. The newspapers arose with the dual objectives of providing a resource to the northern migrants and a haven for northern intellectuals.

But where Diệm envisioned these papers as a tool of the government, the writers and journalists considered their primary responsibility to be to a readership. This difference in vision would lead to confrontation. The establishment of the *Tự Do* daily, the first and most prominent of the *Bắc di cư* papers, reveals the differing objectives.

### *The Tự Do Daily: The People and the Paper*

To lead the paper, Bùi Kiến Tín wanted someone with experience and stature but who could be relied upon not to make political waves. Tín sought counsel from two prominent members of his inner circle at the Ministry of Information, the playwright Vũ Khắc Khoan and writer Mặc Đỗ (aka Đỗ Quang Bình).<sup>16</sup> Both recent arrivals from the North, Khoan and Mặc Đỗ proposed an old acquaintance from Hanoi named Vũ Đình Chí, better known as Tam Lang.

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<sup>16</sup> Months after helping to establish the *Tự Do* daily, Vũ Khắc Khoan and Mặc Đỗ launched a weekly called *Quan Điểm* [Point of View].

A journalist and newspaper editor best known for his reportage *Tôi Kéo Xe* [I Pulled a Rickshaw], Tam Lang was born in Hanoi in 1900. In August 1954, he fled South. Tín and Buttinger approached Tam Lang about the job. He accepted. On September 16, 1954, the GVN officially approved the application for the *Tự Do* daily to begin publishing under the direction of Tam Lang Vũ Đình Chí.<sup>17</sup> It would, however, be another two months before the *Tự Do* went to press. The paper still had much to do before it launched. In particular, it needed financing and writers.

Some discrepancy exists over the source of *Tự Do* funding. The initial outlay for the new paper was over 1.5 million piasters or almost 43,000 US dollars, an incredible sum for the time and place.<sup>18</sup> Some have claimed that Dr. Tín financed the paper, while others have alleged that Buttinger provided the funds.<sup>19</sup> Based on the evidence it appears that neither of these is correct. The IRC was, by its own admission, not equipped to provide that kind of funding for a single project. Instead, circumstantial evidence suggests the real source of the money may have been Edward Lansdale. Head of the Saigon Military Mission, Lansdale already had established connections with the regime. Thus, we know, he had introduced Buttinger to Diệm.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in his capacity, Lansdale could fund such an endeavor. It is, therefore, probable that Lansdale funneled

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<sup>17</sup> “Đây sự thật về vụ nhật báo *Tự Do*: Thuyết trình về hoạt động của cơ sở báo chí *Tự Do*” in *VNTD*, April 1, 1956.

<sup>18</sup> “Thuyết trình về hoạt động của cơ sở báo chí *Tự Do*,” *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, April 1, 1956.

<sup>19</sup> “Văn học miền Nam, từ *Tự Do*, nhóm Quan Điểm và Văn học hải ngoại, Mặc Đỗ trả lời Nguyễn Tà Cúc,” *Khởi Hành*, December, 2004 (#98); Thụy Khuê, “Văn học miền Nam,” see <http://thuykhue.free.fr/stt/v/VanHocMienNam.html> (accessed March 10, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Will Brownell, “The Vietnam Lobby: The Americans Who Lobbied for a Free and Independent South Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1993), 122.

the money through Buttinger. As for why members of the *Tự Do* claimed Tín was the source of the newspaper's capital, in 2004, Mặc Đỗ explained that it was a mark of the time: in the mid-1950s, to admit to taking money from westerners to establish the paper would have cast a dark shadow of suspicion over the paper's true intentions.<sup>21</sup> In any event, with the paper's finances secured, the *Tự Do* daily could launch.

### *The Tự Do Goes to Press*

The *Tự Do* daily represented the first non-Catholic newspaper serving the northern migrant community, going to press on November 27, 1955.<sup>22</sup> Before 1956, it was the only daily newspaper regularly distributed by the government in reception centers and resettlement sites across the South. In May 1955, the GVN even acknowledged that it generally *only* published announcements aimed at *Bắc di cư* in the *Tự Do*.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the government privileged the *Tự Do* daily, in part, represents the role that Diệm and the Ministry of Information played in the paper's founding.

Its format matched what Diệm had in mind when Joseph Buttinger first proposed the idea. The *Tự Do*'s depictions of the exodus and refugees reflected conventional GVN accounts and propaganda being disseminated at the time. In his series *Northerners Come South* [Người Bắc Vào Nam], Nguyễn Văn An espoused an argument championed by the government that the migration was a part of Vietnam's historical "March South," known to Vietnamese as *Nam Tiến*. This so-called process consisted of two key elements. First,

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<sup>21</sup> "Văn học miền Nam, tờ *Tự Do*, nhóm Quan Điểm và Văn học hải ngoại, Mặc Đỗ trả lời Nguyễn Tà Cúc," *Khởi Hành*, December, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> The Catholic *Đường Sống* had launched nearly two months before.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance *Tự Do*, May 4, 1955.

over the course of many centuries, the Việt people had journeyed from the North, “the cradle of Vietnamese culture,” to the Mekong Delta, thus taking the land to which they were justly entitled.<sup>24</sup> *Nam Tiến*, wrote An, was just as much a part of Vietnamese heritage as “dying one’s teeth black, chewing betel nut and knotted hair (búi tóc).” Second, the age-old movement south was a direct response to foreign aggression from the North, namely the Chinese. In conclusion, An argued, the *Bắc di cư* were participants in an historical process to both preserve and expand the Vietnamese nation. This naturally lent itself to the *Tự Do*’s emphasis of the *Bắc di cư* as courageous pioneers, sacrificing for the sake of the Việt people.<sup>25</sup>

Emphasizing the so-called Great Migration’s significance and the GVN’s own role in assisting the refugees, the *Tự Do*’s Lục Y Lang tapped into the spirit of *Truyện Kiều* [*The Tale of Kiều*]. Regarded as Vietnam’s national epic poem, *The Tale of Kiều* was written by the poet and mandarin Nguyễn Du in 1813. The poem is based on a 17<sup>th</sup> century Chinese novel, *Kim Vân Kiều* or 金雲翹, which Du allegedly read while serving as the Nguyễn Court’s ambassador to China. It takes its name from the main character, Kiều, and chronicles her odyssey after she is sold to cover a debt owed by her father.

Lục Y Lang borrowed Nguyễn Du’s poem, recasting it in northern Vietnam amidst the unfolding exodus, as people confronted the life-altering decision: “to stay or go [đi hay ở].”<sup>26</sup> *Bắc di cư* of all backgrounds flee together, Lang began:

Cyclo drivers, phở soup sellers, farmers,

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<sup>24</sup> Nguyễn Vạn An, “Người Bắc Vào Nam (Part I),” *Tự Do*, December 8, 1954.

<sup>25</sup> Nguyễn Vạn An, “Người Bắc Vào Nam (Part IIV),” *Tự Do*, December 17, 1954.

<sup>26</sup> Lục Y Lang, “Thiên Phóng Sự Hải Hước Bằng Thơ Lục Bát: Thúy Kiều... Di Cư,” *Tự Do*, December 4, 1954.

Merchants, students and civil servants all comprise the one million.  
The one hundred planes gradually transport,  
The American ships, almost 60 in total, do the same.  
All the lowland provinces,  
Communal houses, pagodas, the government greets the migrant...  
Advising, 'better to leave this land behind.  
In the South, the government grants assistance,  
A house for shelter, food to eat and money on which to live.  
Each person to receive three hectares, draught animals and farming implements  
for free.'<sup>27</sup>

Lục Y Lang portrayed the migration as a movement embodying the Vietnamese national spirit with one government—the GVN—prepared to provide assistance to the refugees and defend the Vietnamese nation with the help of its allies against the specter of China and Communism. Lục Y Lang's account, however, ignored the crucial role Catholicism played in the exodus. One explanation for the absence may be the fact that, like the rest of the original *Tự Do* membership, Lang was not Catholic. This might also explain why, at times, the *Tự Do* seemed out of touch with the customs and practices of the majority of *Bắc di cư*.

In early 1955, the *Tự Do* presented a plan intended to bring stability to village resettlement.<sup>28</sup> As the government organized new villages, the writer suggested, authorities should seek to re-create “village convention [bản hương ước]” and make ancestral worship the chief religion. The article also counseled that a committee of elders [ban Bô Lão] would adjudicate all problems of the village. Ultimately, it was believed

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, December 5, 1954.

<sup>28</sup> Dương Chính, “Một kế hoạch để ổn định tình trạng của đồng bào di cư vào miền Nam,” *Tự Do*, February 22, 1955.

this approach would develop “community [đàn thề]” and the capacity for “self-sufficiency.”<sup>29</sup>

In some ways the article seems prophetic as it anticipates—by five months—the launching of the *Self-Reliance* campaign, discussed in chapter three, and the need for *Bắc di cư* self-sufficiency. At the same time, however, the article’s promotion of ancestral worship as the central feature of these new villages revealed an apparent lack of awareness by the *Tự Do* about the people for whom it claimed to advocate. For the most part, the Catholic Church still publicly forbade the practice of ancestor worship, a prohibition that obviously included most of the villages in question. However, as earlier chapters also reveal, the apparent de-emphasizing of Catholicism’s place in the migration did not merely reflect *Tự Do* values, it corresponded with official efforts to downplay difference.

It is, however, important to recognize that the *Tự Do* daily still succeeded in capturing the *Bắc di cư* community due to the paper’s overwhelming emphasis on their concerns, not merely because the GVN favored it. The *Tự Do*’s staff viewed the paper as “the voice of the *Bắc di cư*.”<sup>30</sup> It had more coverage of northern migrant-related issues than any newspaper in South Vietnam. Of its four pages—the length common to newspapers of the day—the *Tự Do* devoted its inner two pages [trang trong] to migrant-related issues in a section entitled *Refugee Life* [Sinh hoạt đồng bào tị nạn]. These pages provided a message board for migrants; occupational advice and health tips; and a vehicle for the GVN to reach *Bắc di cư* with vital information.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Văn học miền Nam, tờ *Tự Do*, nhóm Quan Điểm và Văn học hải ngoại, Mặc Đỗ trả lời Nguyễn Tà Cúc,” *Khởi Hành*, December, 2004 (#98).

With content directed at refugees to a degree unrivaled by any other southern newspaper at the time, the *Tự Do* established itself as the premier *Bắc di cư* newspaper. And its significance was not restricted to literate northerners living in Saigon. During the initial year following the Geneva Accords, the *Tự Do* was the only daily newspaper regularly distributed in reception centers and resettlement sites.<sup>31</sup> These centers and villages organized community-wide newspaper readings for residents, in which one inhabitant capable of reading would perform the service for an audience. The readings typically attracted very large audiences and quickly became both a key form of entertainment and source of information for the emerging communities, according to witnesses.<sup>32</sup>

The *Tự Do* established the first daily “message [nhắn tin]” column to connect tens of thousands of refugees separated from family and friends due to the chaos of war and the flight South. Virtually every issue of the *Tự Do* newspaper between November 27, 1954 and December 28, 1955, or 328 issues, ran some form of this column.<sup>33</sup> Initially the column had limited service as only those who could write or get to the *Tự Do*’s offices at 52 Võ Tánh Street had access. But the paper quickly expanded the service, sending staff to visit reception centers and transcribe requests for recent arrivals. Thus, Phạm Văn Gấm from Bùi Chu, Nam Định, who had fled South and settled in Xóm Mới (Gò Vấp), could

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<sup>31</sup> The other newspaper distributed in these sites was the Catholic *Đường Sống* weekly.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyễn Văn Công, interviewed by Jason Picard, Cao Xá Parish, Tây Ninh, October 3, 2010; Trần Văn Tôn, interviewed by Jason Picard, Canal 1 (Tân Hiệp), Kiên Giang, November 17, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> This column appeared under various names. In addition to “message,” it also published under titles such as “tìm bà con [finding relatives]” and “tìm người nhà [finding family].” See for instance *Tự Do*, June 15, 1955.

hunt for the whereabouts of his mother, Phạm Thị Vóc, and Nguyễn Văn Vàng was able to search for his older brother, Nguyễn Văn Huân, who lived in Bến Tre.<sup>34</sup> Over the course those 328 issues, the *Tự Do* printed thousands of postings in the column.

Moreover, the flood of refugees also brought with it a major health challenges. As already demonstrated, many migrants arrived in the South suffering from hunger, malnutrition and illness due to a decade of war and the chaos wrought by the exodus itself. The *Tự Do* published a regular medical advice column, Mách Thuốc [Advice on Medicine], in which the paper answered countless questions relating to migrant health problems.

One widespread problem facing *Bắc di cư* was Beriberi. Nguyễn Trường G, identified as a farmer from Nam Định, wrote the doctor about his wife, who had spent several years evacuated during the First Indochina War, in 1950 “she suffered numbness in both legs and could not move.” In 1951, they were able to get Western medicine, to which she responded. But now in the South, G worried because she still required attention. The doctor explained that G’s wife suffered from a common problem among people deprived of vitamins, particularly B1. He surmised that two issues were in G’s favor. First, the First Indochina War had limited people’s access to food. The post-1954 peace would immediately improve this situation. Second, rice processing differed in the North and South and, as a result, southern rice was richer in vitamins.<sup>35</sup>

A desperate parent sought advice regarding her 13 year-old, “who has been suffering epileptic seizures for six years...it is becoming increasingly serious. We are

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<sup>34</sup> “Nhấn Tin,” *Tự Do*, January 4, 1955.

<sup>35</sup> BS. H, “Mách Thuốc,” *Tự Do*, June 9, 1955.

migrants and have no money to treat him, there are days when it occurs 30 times.”<sup>36</sup> In cases such as this one, the *Tự Do* also became an intermediary, through which relevant officials could respond to individuals and communities. On this matter, a doctor suggested that the parents bring their child to Biên Hòa Hospital for examination. But the paper did not merely attend to migrants’ crises of the moment. It also aimed to help them tackle the problem of starting over in the South.

To this end, the *Tự Do* began a column known as *Mách Nghề* [Occupational Advice], focusing attention on the long-term problems of resettlement. The column, the *Tự Do* explained, represented the paper’s response to being inundated by *Bắc di cư* questions and concerns about earning a living in “the strange land.”<sup>37</sup> For instance, a migrant in Lạc An (Biên Hòa) described seeing people selling a root in the market called *khoai mì* and wonders if this is cassava (*củ sắn* in the North) and if so how does one grow it in the South. In another example, Nguyễn Văn Nguyên in Củ Chi (Gia Định) had tried his hand at selling duck eggs, but because of the heat those he did not sell went foul, he asked the *Tự Do* for suggestions on how to avoid this problem. (The paper offered a recipe for soaking them in limewater).<sup>38</sup>

By all appearances, the *Tự Do* daily had operated just as Diệm had hoped. It provided *Bắc di cư* vital information and gave the government a conduit through which to reach migrants, one that was not Catholic. In the process, the paper had gained a loyal *Bắc di cư* audience. By these measures, the daily was a great success. However, from the

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<sup>36</sup> BS. H, “Mách Thuốc,” *Tự Do*, July 24, 1955.

<sup>37</sup> Duy Việt, “Mách Nghề,” *Tự Do*, April 20, 1955.

<sup>38</sup> Duy Việt, “Mách Nghề,” *Tự Do*, April 21, 1955.

moment the paper launched, the *Tự Do* group—its editors and writers—faced trouble both internally and with the GVN.

*Internal Dissent: The Tự Do Daily and Its Closure*

As editor-in-chief of the *Tự Do*, Tam Lang proved willing to cooperate with the government and, as some claimed, was “sympathetic” to Diệm.<sup>39</sup> To fill out its ranks and fulfill its other mission as a haven to *Bắc di cư* intellectuals, however, Tín, Buttinger and Tam Lang recruited numerous established writers, journalists and artists from a wide spectrum of political backgrounds, many of whom were not so amenable to Diệm.<sup>40</sup> The roster came to include former Vietminh and Communist Party members, self-proclaimed Trotskyists, *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng* (VNQDDĐ) and Đại Việt members, individuals who served Bảo Đại and several writers and journalists who had remained in Hanoi during the First Indochina War.

Joining Tam Lang on the editorial board were Mặc Đỗ, Đinh Hùng, Mặc Thu and Như Phong.<sup>41</sup> Mặc Đỗ and Mặc Thu, both writers, had remained in Hanoi during the First Indochina War. A poet, Đinh Hùng had been the de-facto “field marshal” of an intellectual group called Dạ Đài [Princes of the Nether World] in the mid-1940s.<sup>42</sup> He

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<sup>39</sup> Tam Lang, “Chúng Ta Quyết Thắng...,” *Thời Luận*, May 3, 1956.

<sup>40</sup> File 14616, “Hồ sơ về chuyến thăm trại sinh viên và đồng bào di cư Bắc Việt của Joseph Buttinger năm 1954”, Official Telegram 7418, November 16, 1954, pp 1-2. PTTCPNV, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>41</sup> Vũ Khắc Khoan is often recalled as a member, but does not appear in the masthead among the paper’s editors.

<sup>42</sup> For more on the Dạ Đài group see Đinh Hùng, “Người lên đường và người ở lại,” *Nghệ Thuật*, November 11-14, 1965 (#6), 2; Tạ Tỵ, “Thương Nhớ Đinh Hùng,” *Văn*, October 1967 (91), 23; Trần Dần, *Thơ* (Đà Nẵng, 2008), 54-59; Trần Dần, *Ghi, 1954-1960* (Paris: td memoire, 2001).

and the group joined the Vietminh at the beginning of the war. However, Đinh Hùng and two other members of the Da Đài, Vũ Hoàng Chương and Tạ Tỵ, later broke from the Vietminh and subsequently fled South. Chương and Tỵ also joined the *Tự Do* as staff writers. Finally, there was Như Phong, a nephew of the beloved Vietnamese writer Nhất Linh and member of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng [Vietnamese Kuomintang]. Such diversity was also a key trait of the *Tự Do*'s staff. The point was that this group was not united on matters relating to the politics of the Vietnam.

On November 17, 1954, the newly formed group gathered for the first time at 25 Hồng Thập Tự Street, Tín's villa in Saigon, finalize plans for the *Tự Do* daily newspaper.<sup>43</sup> At the meeting, the group finalized preparations for the daily, enumerating three major aims: to oppose Communism and “anti-nationalism [phản dân tộc];” to provide a haven for writers, journalists and artists who had migrated South; and to be a source of support and information “to all *Bắc di cư*.”<sup>44</sup> The meeting, however, also exposed the contentious personalities and disparate political outlooks within the group, according to witnesses.<sup>45</sup> These personalities clashed regularly over their conflicting beliefs throughout the *Tự Do*'s existence. But the most important and destructive struggle was between Tam Lang, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, and Mặc Thu, the editor in charge of its editorial column, *Lập trường* [Viewpoint].

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<sup>43</sup> “Đây sự thật về vụ nhật báo Tự Do: Thuyết trình về hoạt động của cơ sở báo chí Tự Do” in *VNTD*, April 1, 1956. Dr. Tín's name also appears as Bùi Kiện Tín. Tín hailed from a wealthy family from Quảng Nam and is a relative of Bùi Giáng. Born in 1912, Tín went to France in 1932 to study medicine. He became a household name in South Vietnam before 1975 for his Eucalyptus oil (dầu khuynh diệp), the eponymous Dr. Tín's.

<sup>44</sup> “Mấy lời thanh minh về vụ Tự Do,” *Tự Do*, February 7, 1956; “Thuyết trình về hoạt động của cơ sở báo chí Tự Do,” *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, April 1, 1956.

<sup>45</sup> “Cuộc phỏng vấn với nhà văn Phạm Việt Tuyền,” *Tin Sách*, December 1965, 2.

In the midst of rising violence between Diệm's National forces and those arrayed against him, the so-called sects of the Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo and Bình Xuyên, the *Tự Do* published a front-page "Viewpoint" editorial critical of recent moves made by the Prime Minister. While the government and opposition factions jockeyed for control, the editorial opined, "the actions and plots of all relevant actors, even those with good intentions, demonstrated a lack of concern for the interests of the people."<sup>46</sup> Essential services needed by the people were being suspended or withheld due to petty political squabbles, according to the paper.

Diệm was furious with the *Tự Do*. Whether prompted by the government or not, Tam Lang unilaterally responded by sacking writers aligned with Mặc Thu. This included Nguyễn Xuân Cầu, arguably the *Tự Do*'s best reportage writer.

Over the previous, several months Cầu had upset certain GVN officials with a succession of articles about the conditions facing refugees and examples of GVN mismanagement of the growing crisis. For instance, in late February 1955, Cầu revealed the tragic situation at a temporary *Bắc di cư* hospital in Gò Vấp. This so-called hospital consisted of 18 makeshift tents with over 650 patients and just 4 doctors and 40 nurses (all of whom were *Bắc di cư*). Its patients were sleeping five to a bed. Beyond capacity, the hospital could not keep pace and was forced to turn people away. Cầu criticized both the minister of health and the refugee commissioner, who were aware of the problems and for sometime had promised significant improvements to the conditions governing

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<sup>46</sup> "Lập trường: Nhân Dân," *Tự Do*, April 19, 1955; "Mấy lời thanh minh về vụ *Tự Do*," *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, February 7, 1956.

*Bắc di cư* health, but seemed to be doing nothing.<sup>47</sup> Such articles may have explained Tam Lang's decision to fire writers like Cầu.

In any event, if friction did not already exist between Tam Lang and Mặc Thu, cracks certainly began to appear. Responding to Tam Lang, Mặc Thu, Như Phong and several others discussed the possibility of breaking from the *Tự Do* and opening a new newspaper. They even went so far as to submit applications to the ministry of information requesting permission to launch two papers: *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* (Free Arts and Literature) weekly and *Người Việt Tự Do* (Free Vietnamese) daily.<sup>48</sup> The problem was that Mặc Thu and Như Phong lacked the necessary finances. Therefore, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* (or VNTD) was launched under the *Tự Do* flagship. Nonetheless, tension now permeated the *Tự Do* newsroom. This conflict was about to be further intensified by Diệm's choice of new information minister.

On May 10, 1955, two weeks after the dismissals and just days after the so-called Battle of Saigon, Diệm introduced his new cabinet. Among the changes, Diệm announced his new Information Minister, Trần Chánh Thành.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not the announcement of a new cabinet was timed to coincide with his success over the so-called sects (Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo and Bình Xuyên) remains unclear. The selection of Trần Chánh Thành suggests Diệm was feeling he could project power.

Thành and Bùi Kiến Tín, Diệm's original Minister of Information, were a study in contrasts. A doctor of medicine by training, Tín was born in Quảng Nam province in

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<sup>47</sup> Nguyễn Xuân Cầu, "Nhà Thương của đồng bào tị nạn," *Tự Do*, February 21, 1955.

<sup>48</sup> CBVN, #142 ND/BTT, May 5, 1955.

<sup>49</sup> Đoàn Thâm, *Hai Mươi Năm Qua: Việc Từng Ngày, 1945-1965* (Los Alimitos, CA: Xuân Thu 1986), 175.

1912.<sup>50</sup> He studied for his Baccalaureate in Huế, where he was a close friend of Ngô Đình Nhu. In 1932, Tín received a scholarship to pursue his studies in Paris. Remaining in France for a decade, he earned both his undergraduate and medical degrees. Tín returned to Vietnam in 1942 to practice medicine. A tinkerer, he developed his own brand of Eucalyptus oil, *Dr. Tín's Oil* [*Dầu BS Tín*], which transformed him into a household name in Vietnam and amassed him great fortune.<sup>51</sup> Though neither a writer nor artist himself, Tín gained a reputation as ‘a friend of the Arts,’ using his money to support writers and painters and organizing salons in his home. As a trusted friend of Nhu, Tín was invited to be a founding member of the Cần Lao Party and served in Diệm’s first cabinet as Information Minister.<sup>52</sup>

Though a close friend of Ngô Đình Nhu, Bùi Kiến Tín still had a major flaw. He lacked political savvy. Diệm and Nhu had asked Tín to join the government as a trusted friend and he agreed out of a sense of loyalty. However, he proved completely ineffectual and his political ineptitude quickly gained him the ire of both Diệm and Nhu.<sup>53</sup> For Tín, his sacking as minister and expulsion from the Cần Lao came as a great relief.<sup>54</sup> He was a

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<sup>50</sup> Dr. Tín’s name also appears as Bùi Kiện Tín.

<sup>51</sup> Even today in the former-South, one can still find Vietnamese over the age of seventy-five who still refer to Eucalyptus oil as ‘Dr. Tín’s.’

<sup>52</sup> Tín’s relationship with the Ngô Đình household was further cemented by the fact that Diệm also admired Tín’s son, Bùi Kiến Thành. Diệm and Thành first became acquainted in the US while Diệm was at Maryknoll Seminary and Thành was studying economics at Columbia University. Shortly after he returned to Vietnam as Prime Minister, Diệm invited Thành to join his government in a post with the State Bank. Recognizing his value, following the reunification of Vietnam, the Communist regime asked him to become an economic advisor.

<sup>53</sup> Chu Bản Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*, 123.

<sup>54</sup> Đoàn Thâm, *Hai Mươi Năm Qua*, 134; Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*, 156; Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống*, 175.

doctor and a businessman with a soft spot for writers and artists. Tín was not cut out for politics, particularly Vietnamese politics of the 1950s.

Diệm and Nhu sought to replace him with a political operator, an individual who could maneuver on behalf of the regime while navigating the internal nuances of the Ngô Đình house. Trần Chánh Thành was capable of both. A 1940 graduate of the Hanoi University Law School, Trần Chánh Thành went on to serve Trần Trọng Kim's short-lived government. Soon there after, he joined the Vietminh and, between 1946 and 1951, Thành served as Liên Khu III Director of Economy and then Director of Justice. Some accounts even claim Thành was a close associate of Trường Chinh.<sup>55</sup> However, in 1951, he left the Vietminh and returned to Hanoi. In July 1954, he joined the Diệm government as Secretary of State of the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>56</sup>

Assuming control of the Ministry of Information in May 1955, Thành immediately made his presence felt. He played a crucial role in the expansion and entrenchment of the *Tố Cộng* or Communist Denunciation campaign, for which he is often recalled, mistakenly, as the campaign's architect.<sup>57</sup> Thành also established and chaired the National Revolutionary Movement [Phong trào Cách Mạng Quốc Gia] and became a key figure in the writing of the 1956 RVN constitution. Of course Thành's other major contribution was initiating the launch of the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* [National Revolution] newspaper, the first state-run newspaper in South Vietnam, in the summer of 1955.

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<sup>55</sup> Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*, 110.

<sup>56</sup> Lê Trọng Văn, *Những Bí Ẩn Lịch Sử Dưới Chế Độ Ngô Đình Diệm* (San Diego: Mẹ Việt Nam, 1989), 35.

<sup>57</sup> For instance Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*.

Unlike Tín, who had played a crucial role in setting the *Tự Do* in motion, Thành allegedly viewed the press with considerable suspicion. The *Tự Do* daily, in particular, troubled him. It was a diverse group whose political orientation was unclear. At the same time it had an established *Bắc di cư* following. With the *Tự Do* daily gone, the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* would then be the only remaining daily serving *Bắc di cư* resettlement villages. It appears Thành hoped to exploit the existing friction between Tam Lang and Mặc Thu to destroy the paper.

By December 1955, Thành could make his move, as the *Tự Do* became mired in a legal fight between a Tam Lang-led faction and a Mặc Thu-led faction. On December 13, Mặc Thu brought a motion to dismiss Tam Lang, Mặc Đỗ and Đinh Hùng from the paper. In a vote of eight to three, Mặc Thu's faction won over Tam Lang. Three days after the vote, the deposed Tam Lang sued Mặc Thu for allegedly "embezzling *Tự Do* finances and illegally appropriating property."<sup>58</sup> The case ultimately went nowhere.

The sacking of Tam Lang, however, had consequences for the *Tự Do* and its remaining members. On December 29, 1955, the Ministry of Information informed Mặc Thu that according to law, because the *Tự Do* daily was registered to Tam Lang, the paper had to suspend publication. Weeks before, as the *Tự Do* was falling apart, Thành had invited Tam Lang to join the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* [National Revolution] as an editor. Did Thành try to orchestrate the permanent closure of the *Tự Do* by luring Tam Lang away with the promise of employment? Whether the invitation had been intended as a move to bury the newspaper or not, the *Tự Do* daily, the preeminent *Bắc di cư*

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<sup>58</sup> "Mấy lời thanh minh về vụ *Tự Do*," *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, February 7, 1956.

newspaper, ceased publication after 328 issues. Thành seemed to score a victory. But, as it turned out, the victory was short-lived.

Though the government rescinded the *Tự Do*'s license, the closure did not prevent the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, the *Tự Do*'s *Arts and Literature* weekly, from continuing to publish. First licensed in May 1955 amidst the rising animosity between Mặc Thu and Tam Lang, the *VNTD* was registered under Mặc Thu's name. Therefore, the closure of the *Tự Do* had no bearing on the *VNTD*. A month after the daily shuttered, the weekly returned looking for a fight with Trần Chánh Thành, the Minister of Information.

#### *The Brief Life of the Văn Nghệ Tự Do*

On January 28, 1956, the reconstituted *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* (*VNTD*) or *Free Arts and Literature* weekly emerged, led by Mặc Thu and Như Phong.<sup>59</sup> No longer composed of intellectuals from a spectrum of political backgrounds, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* was now dominated by men with a deep animus toward Trần Chánh Thành. Như Phong symbolized this shift in the *Tự Do* group.

As a relative of the writers Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo and Thạch Lam—the three brothers at the core of the 1930s literary group, *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* [Self-Strengthening]—Như Phong had grown up in a family deeply opposed to Communism. While still in university, Như Phong became swept up by the events of 1945. He went to work for the *Ngày Nay* [Today] newspaper as a journalist and even moved to Kunming (China) for a

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<sup>59</sup> The new line-up also included Nguyễn Hoạt, Huyền Vũ, Hoa Lê, Duy Việt, Thái Bạch, Thực Đức, Bảo Vân, Hoàng Lan, Hi Di, Đỗ Đức Thu and Thiện Chí.

time, where Nhất Linh, the paper's chief, was in exile.<sup>60</sup> Như Phong later returned to Hanoi, continuing his newspaper career. In 1954, as the exodus began, he fled South. That October, Tam Lang approached Như Phong about joining the *Tự Do* daily's five member editorial board. The invitation may have been extended out of respect for the distinguished Nhất Linh and due to a sense that his family should be represented at the *Tự Do*. In any event, Như Phong had a deep-seated opposition to Communism and, as result, he distrusted Trần Chánh Thành's background as a former Vietminh. Compounding his aversion to Communism, Như Phong believed the minister's tactics against the *Tự Do* daily confirmed his suspicions about Thành.

But personnel could not only explain the *VNTD*'s new content. The weekly's re-launching had occurred as the GVN introduced certain press reforms. Since Diệm first assumed power in 1954, the GVN had employed colonial-era press laws to govern the South. Thus, for instance, newspapers in the South were required to submit each issue to the Ministry of Information for approval before being distributed.<sup>61</sup>

On February 19, 1956, however, just three weeks after the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*'s return, the GVN announced the suspension of such censorship. No longer would the government scrutinize a newspaper's content prior distribution. The reforms did not, however, signify the dawning of full press freedoms either.

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<sup>60</sup> Tạ Quang Khôi, "Thời Nhật Báo Tự Do," Voice of America (Vietnamese Language), see <http://www.voatiengviet.com/content/toi-lam-bao-143514366/1120052.html> (accessed August 8, 2013)

<sup>61</sup> See *Công Báo Việt Nam*, 1956, 402; Trần Ngọc Chi, *Pháp Quy Chính Yếu Mục Lục: Các bản văn quan trọng về lập pháp, lập quy án hành trong Công Báo Việt Nam từ 1948 đến hết năm 1971* (Sài Gòn, 1972), 31.

The next day, the government announced Ordinance 13, which outlined the monetary and prison penalties for press law violations and gave the government much latitude to close newspapers for speech it deemed “anti-government,” “pro-Communist,” as well as “slander [vu khống]” against GVN officials.<sup>62</sup> As a result, while a violation of Ordinance 13 carried the possibility of steep punishment—including incarceration on Phú Quốc—nonetheless, newspapers had the ability to publish stories and opinions that previously the government would have suppressed.

The *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* became the first paper to test the new law through a series known as the ‘Cử Tri [Elector]’ letters (due to the fact that each was signed *Cử Tri*).<sup>63</sup> Appearing between February 18 and May 6, 1956, the editorials addressed issues relating to the National Assembly elections, democracy and the Constitution in South Vietnam. Each letter grew more antagonistic than the previous one and all of them were ultimately directed at the group’s nemesis, Trần Chánh Thành. Taken collectively, the letters argued that the government of South Vietnam could not hope to survive by employing individuals like Thành, individuals who embraced autocratic notions of government and sought to deny citizens the right of free speech.

The letters began benignly avoiding naming those it attacked. For instance, prior to South Vietnam’s March 1956 National Assembly elections, *Cử Tri* poked fun at

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<sup>62</sup> For an in-depth look at Ordinance 13 (February 20, 1956) see Hà Như Vinh, *Hình Luật Đặc Biệt Việt Nam* (Saigon: Đại Học Sài Gòn, 1969), 414-425.

<sup>63</sup> *Cử Tri*, “Thư ngỏ gửi các ông bà ứng cử viên” in *VNTD*, February 18, 1956 (#3); “Lá thư gửi cho tôi: người đi bỏ phiếu” in *VNTD*, February 25, 1956 (#4); “Bức thư của những ông nghị không đắc cử gửi đồng bào toàn quốc” in *VNTD*, March 18, 1956 (#7); “Lá thư gửi những phần tử cách mạng trong Quốc hội” in *VNTD*, April 8, 1956 (#10); “Lá thư gửi cho những phần tử không chịu phục thiện” in *VNTD*, April 15, 1956 (#11); “Lá thư gửi các ông bà dân biểu di cư” in *VNTD*, April 22, 1956 (#12); “Lá thư gửi Ủy ban thảo hiến của Quốc hội” in *VNTD*, April 29, 1956 (#13); “Lá thư gửi Ông dân biểu Trần Chánh Thành” in *VNTD*, May 6, 1956 (#14).

“certain candidates” for running on nothing more than their relationship with the President. There were those candidates just over thirty years old, the paper lampooned, “who claim to have followed Ngô Đình Diệm in the name of revolution for twenty five years. Surely we are lucky that they have not yet declared that they have been revolutionaries since they were still in their mothers’ wombs.”<sup>64</sup>

The paper also warned voters to avoid casting ballots for “tools” of Colonialism, Communism and Feudalism. At the time, such rhetoric was, in fact, normal for the South. The government itself regularly cautioned Vietnamese to be vigilant against the machinations of this so-called “evil three.” But in the context of the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, the remark drew the attention of Thành’s office, which highlighted its copy with the margin comment [bút phê], “who are they writing about [viết về ai đó]?”<sup>65</sup> This was not asked out of genuine curiosity. Among those running for the National Assembly with former connections to the Communist government in the North was, in fact, Trần Chánh Thành, the Minister of Information, a man who had proven indisposed to a free press and the *VNTD*’s adversary.

Following the Assembly elections on March 4, the *Cử Tri* attacks quieted for a few a weeks. In early April, however, it initiated a new far more intense round of criticisms, focusing on the new assembly’s failure to draft a constitution. In its conclusion, the April 8 *Cử Tri* letter quoted Ngô Đình Diệm’s address to the National Assembly’s inaugural session, warning that South Vietnam “still has many saboteurs [kẻ

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<sup>64</sup> *Cử Tri*, “Là thư gửi cho tôi: người đi bỏ phiếu” in *VNTD*, February 25, 1956 (#4).

<sup>65</sup> Trần Chánh Thành to President, April 11, 1956; File 4989, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

phá hoại] both inside and outside...”<sup>66</sup> In drawing from Diệm’s address, the letter took advantage of his words to imply that the lack of progress toward a constitution was the result of a deliberate effort by “certain elements.”<sup>67</sup>

Diệm’s attitude toward the latest letter remains unclear. Trần Chánh Thành, on the other hand, was furious. The *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* was publicly insulting him.<sup>68</sup> In a letter to the president, Thành wrote that in its abuse, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* was “sully” the National Assembly and the Republic.<sup>69</sup> On April 12, 1956, the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* newspaper—Thành’s state-run newspaper—published an editorial cautioning newspapers against seeking to exploit the expanded freedoms in the South to diminish the prestige of the national assembly.<sup>70</sup> Though, to date, the *Cử Tri* had not singled anyone out by name, Thành was clearly the individual of interest and the hostility was only growing.

The *Cử Tri*’s next letter was entitled “The letter to those who refuse to listen to reason.” It depicted Thành, though still unnamed, as a man bent on exploiting Communist “deceptions” to destroy opposition and those who speak in defense of democracy. Thành was smearing the name of the *VNTD*, wrote *Cử Tri*, claiming the paper hoped to “sabotage” the National Assembly. Such efforts, the letter argued, differed little from the Communists who vilified their enemies with labels like “Vietnamese traitor [Việt gian].” The implication was that, though he may have severed his ties from Communism, Thành

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<sup>66</sup> *Cử Tri*, “Lá thư gửi những phần tử cách mạng trong Quốc hội,” *VNTD*, April 8, 1956 (#10).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*, 110.

<sup>69</sup> Trần Chánh Thành to President, April 11, 1956; File 4989, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>70</sup> “Xây Dựng,” *CMQG*, April 12, 1956.

still embraced its most vile characteristics.<sup>71</sup> He was betraying all Vietnamese, but in particular, the *Bắc di cư*. Invoking its writers' membership as northern migrants, the paper wrote:

Did we entrust [giao phó] our destiny, that of our brothers and sisters who remain in the North and that of tomorrow's generation in the hands of... opportunists who intend to build an authoritarian regime [chế độ cực quyền] in the style of Communism? How is this any different from escaping hell only to enter into a world of darkness [cõi u]?<sup>72</sup>

Still, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* had been vigilant in not using Thành's name. That change on April 29, 1956. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, in its thirteenth issue, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* unleashed its strongest condemnation of the Minister of Information. This attack included his name.

The offending letter alleged that certain powerful members of the National Assembly with “anti-democratic tendencies” had thwarted the efforts of representatives, both members of minority blocs and independent, to unite in order to influence the formation of the new Committee to Draft the Constitution.<sup>73</sup> This had allowed, the *VNTD* claimed, Trần Chánh Thành and his Cách Mạng Quốc Gia [National Revolution] Movement to capture the majority of seats on the new Committee and gave Thành—the former Vietminh political cadre and a man who seemed distrustful of democratic values—the chairmanship of the committee endowed with the power to write South Vietnam's constitution. Quoting assemblywoman Madame Ngô Đình Nhu's speech before congress, the *VNTD* wrote, it seemed that those who did not belong to the

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<sup>71</sup> Cử Tri, “Lá thư gửi cho những phần tử không chịu phục thiện,” *VNTD*, April 15, 1956 (#11).

<sup>72</sup> Cử Tri, “Lá thư gửi các ông bà dân biểu di cư,” *VNTD*, April 22, 1956 (#12).

<sup>73</sup> Cử Tri, “Lá thư gửi Ủy ban thảo hiến của Quốc hội,” *VNTD*, April 29, 1956 (#13).

political majority, apparently headed by Thành, “no longer have the right to breath, the right to eat or the right to speak. Is this democratic freedom?”<sup>74</sup> Thành was an opportunist, charged the paper, bent on destroying democracy in South Vietnam. Nonetheless, government confiscation and threats to close the paper did not halt the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*.

On May 4, Thành learned that the *VNTD* was preparing to publish an installment entitled “The letter to Mr. Representative Trần Chánh Thành.” Couched as an appeal to Thành and his experience as “a former member of the Indochinese Communist Party,” it once again questioned his real motives as a member of the assembly and the head of the committee formed to draft the constitution. Was he trying to safeguard the spirit of a fledgling democracy or use Communist methods to “strangle genuine public debate?”<sup>75</sup>

This time the Ministry of Information’s response was unequivocal. It immediately shut the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* down, making it the first newspaper to be closed following the 1956 press reforms. In addition, the two men behind the ‘Cử Tri’ series, the editor-in-chief Mặc Thu and journalist Nguyễn Hoạt were arrested and incarcerated. Due to American pressure the two men were freed after just a few weeks.<sup>76</sup> However, the eighteen-month run of the most influential northern migrant-established newspapers, the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* weekly and the *Tự Do* daily, was finished.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Cử Tri, “Lá thư gửi Ông dân biểu Trần Chánh Thành,” *VNTD*, May 6, 1956 (#14).

<sup>76</sup> “Writers detained in Saigon,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1956.

<sup>77</sup> Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*.

*Conclusion: The Tự Do's Resurrection and Legacy*

In silencing the *Tự Do* and *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, however, Trần Chánh Thành had done nothing to cope with the other members of the *Bắc di cư* press. A misstep he and Diệm would come to regret. The disappearance of both papers merely gave others the chance to step into the void left.

Newspapers, like the *Dân Chủ* [Democracy] and *Ngôn Luận* [Comment], now frustrated the regime with a steady stream of stories about poor migrant living conditions.<sup>78</sup> Adding to the frustration, Thành's apparent project to replace the *Tự Do* daily at resettlement sites with state-run periodicals, like the *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia* daily and *Dân Việt* magazine, failed, lacking credibility with northern refugees. Despite these problems, authorities did not attempt to respond until October of that year.

As discussed in chapter five, on October 13, 1956, the influential Catholic northern migrant weekly, the *Đường Sống* [Path of Life], published a letter from disgruntled *Bắc di cư* living in the RVN's model resettlement region, Cái Sắn, and an article exposing a deep rift between Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, the Vietnamese Catholic leader tasked with assisting authorities with resettlement, and the regime's leadership, including Ngô Đình Diệm.<sup>79</sup> It was no accident that these pieces appeared in the *Đường Sống* at this time.

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<sup>78</sup> See for instance "Diễn đàn công cộng: Đồng bào định cư Tha La thắc mắc," *Ngôn Luận*, September 3, 1956; "Diễn Đàn Công Cộng: Lá thư thứ 2 của bà quả phụ Nông Đình Thông về việc bị mất 12 tháng lương tử tuất," *Ngôn Luận*, October 5, 1956; "Diễn Đàn Công Cộng: Đồng bào định cư Cái Sắn đang bị buộc phải ký khế ước cầu cứu ô Bộ trưởng CCĐĐ," *Ngôn Luận*, October 10, 1956.

<sup>79</sup> "Tiếng vọng từ Cái Sắn," *Đường Sống*, October 13, 1956; Minh Sơn, "Bên lề kỷ niệm hai năm di cư: các vị lãnh đạo tinh thần," *Đường Sống*, October 13, 1956.

On October 11, South Vietnam commemorated the second anniversary of the migration and introduced the *Localization* [Địa Phương Hóa] process. The launching of localization had been intended to publicly signal the government's achievements in the field of resettlement. The government had proclaimed Cái Sắn, in particular, to represent these successes. In addition, the government was about to celebrate the first anniversary of Diệm's election as President and the establishment of the Republic. As a result, Diệm felt deeply stung by the *Đường Sống* weekly. In response, Diệm, Nhu and Thành made a remarkable decision: re-launch the *Tự Do* daily.<sup>80</sup>

On October 22, 1956, President Diệm and his brother, Nhu, held a secret meeting in Saigon's Presidential Palace. The meeting included the president, Nhu, Trần Chánh Thành, Trần Kim Tuyên (the chief of the GVN's de facto secret police) and an intellectual named Phạm Việt Tuyên. The reason for the gathering: to discuss plans to reintroduce the *Tự Do* daily and *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* weekly.

Scholars have long noted, correctly, that northern intellectuals represented opposition to Diệm. They tend to imply, however, that this conflict was restricted to elites only, that the broader northern migrant community was insulated from the friction. Such portrayals fail to account for one of the key defining traits of the northern migrant press, its focus on issues affecting the *Bắc di cư*. Therefore, as I demonstrate, despite their short-lived existence, the *Tự Do* and *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* had a tremendous following within the refugee community. This helps explain Diệm's attempt to resurrect the two papers. He hoped to tap into their prestige.

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<sup>80</sup> Đặng Văn Nhâm, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Việt Nam: Từ khởi thủy đến hiện tại [1861-1999]* (California: Việt Nam Văn Hiến, 1999), 349.

Banking on its reputation, they expected that with the *Tự Do*'s resurrection, the paper would also regain its original status as the voice of the *Bắc di cư*, while simultaneously providing coverage more sympathetic to the government. Phạm Việt Tuyền seemed like a man well suited to the job. A Catholic who fled South in 1954, Tuyền was an editor for the *Ngôn Luận* daily at the time of the secret meeting.<sup>81</sup> Two other issues boosted Tuyền's credentials.

First, he had a longstanding relationship with Trần Kim Tuyền, the chief of the Socio-Political Research Service (*Sở Nghiên Cứu Chính Trị và Xã Hội*), the South's secret police apparatus.<sup>82</sup> Both Trần Kim Tuyền and Phạm Việt Tuyền hailed from Thanh Hóa province in northern Việt Nam, where they attended Catholic seminary together and, in 1950, they both abandoned their studies. Trần Kim Tuyền joined the French military and studied medicine and law. Phạm Việt Tuyền, on the other hand, enlisted in the Việt Minh, becoming a political officer in Inter-regional Zone IV. As the First Indochina War progressed, however, Tuyền's class background allegedly became problematic. He was arrested and held by Vietminh authorities. He was, however, released in 1954 and fled South.<sup>83</sup> Certainly, the fact that Tuyền had served as a Vietminh political officer may have also attracted the attention of Trần Chánh Thành.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 350; Du Tử Lê, "Phạm Việt Tuyền, người chọn 'vắng mặt'" (unpublished).

<sup>82</sup> Tuyền taught high school and university literature in Saigon in addition to his duties as a journalist and editor.

<sup>83</sup> Phạm Việt Tuyền's involvement with the Việt Minh, his 'mysterious' release and subsequent flight South in 1954 have led some to allege that Tuyền, in fact, operated as a spy for the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. There, however, seems to be little evidence for this beyond circumstance. Nguyễn Văn Lục has argued that nearly every *Bắc di cư* newspaper had at least one Communist infiltrator working on its staff. Lục singles out the *Ngôn Luận*, *Dân Chủ* and *Thời Luận* newspapers as examples. And in his provocative 1987 memoir *Nhà Tù* [Prison], the *Bắc di cư* writer, Duyên Anh, implied that Phạm Việt Tuyền was able to avoid prison after 1975 due to

The second reason for Tuyền's selection was his position as a respected intellectual. In Saigon, he became a high school and university instructor as well as a journalist. He was a founding member of PEN International in Vietnam, serving as its vice-chairman and chairman for over a decade.<sup>85</sup> Tuyền was, as police surveillance reports later noted, "a good man [người tốt bụng]."<sup>86</sup> Still, in spite of his reputation and the paper's earlier prominence, the *Tự Do* never recaptured the standing it once enjoyed. Instead, other *Bắc di cư* newspapers replaced it. Several reasons help explain this.

Due to the circumstances surrounding the paper's revival, the *Tự Do* under Phạm Việt Tuyền endured a reputation as a "Diệm-paper." Though closer examination of the *Tự Do* during this period suggests this to be unfounded, it did not matter. The paper was never able escape this label.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, the rationale for resurrecting the *Tự Do* was flawed. In resolving to bring back the newspaper, Diệm, Nhu and Thành based the decision on the paper's earlier prestige within the *Bắc di cư* community. However, they did so at a moment when the

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certain Communist connections. Nguyễn Văn Lục, *20 Năm Miền Nam, 1955-1975* (Tiếng Quê Hương, 2010), 435; Duyên Anh, *Nhà Tù, Hồi Kí* (Los Alimitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1987), 218.

<sup>84</sup> Duyên Anh, *Nhà Tù, Hồi Kí* (Los Alimitos, CA: Xuân Thu, 1987), 218; Đặng Văn Nhâm, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Việt Nam: Từ Khởi Thủy Đến Hiện Tại, 1861-1999* (California: Việt Nam Văn Hiến, 1999), 351; Nguyễn Văn Lục, *20 Năm Miền Nam, 1955-1975* (Tiếng Quê Hương, 2010), 435.

<sup>85</sup> At the time Tuyền was asked to take charge of the *Tự Do*, he was preparing to attend Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium for a PhD in Literature.

<sup>86</sup> Saigon Chief of Police, 896-M (Top Secret), September 9, 1957, File 5969, PTTĐỊCH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>87</sup> Just seven months after its return, for instance, the *Tự Do* published several editorials supporting the right of free expression and condemning the use of "force" to quiet the press. The articles led directly to the destruction of the *Tự Do*'s offices in a raid apparently orchestrated by the government. "Lập trường: Chung quanh việc đập phá báo Thời Luận," *Tự Do*, September 9, 1957; "Lập trường: Không được phép lạm dụng lực lượng quân chúng," *Tự Do*, September 10, 1957; "Lập trường: Không nên giết chết báo Thời Luận," *Tự Do*, October 4, 1957.

GVN was seeking to deemphasize the northern migrant-specific problems, about which the original *Tự Do* had made its name covering. The *Localization* campaign, for instance, represented the government's effort to integrate northern migrants into local communities by terminating GVN assistance based on regional heritage. The *Tự Do*'s reputation was based on a mission that contradicted GVN efforts to reduce those sectional distinctions. Accordingly, the *Tự Do* began its second incarnation casting about for a new calling.

Meanwhile, an unintended consequence of the *Tự Do*'s early domination of the *Bắc di cư* press was that it had compelled other northern migrant-established newspapers to seek alternative niches. Consequently, they branched out beyond refugee-centric issues and, in most instances, sought to capture a readership not based solely upon regional demographics. In the next chapter, I examine one such example, the *Thời Luận* [Contemporary Comment], and its rise from a struggling newspaper to become South Vietnam's first political opposition newspaper. No longer were the *Tự Do* and *Văn Nghệ* *Tự Do* the trendsetters.

Each effort by the GVN to navigate the *Bắc di cư* press back to the original mission Buttinger had first introduced to Diệm in September 1954—to serve as a conduit between the government and northern migrants—seemed to backfire. Founded as a resource for northern migrants, the group conventionally portrayed as the loyal backbone of the Diệm regime, these newspapers instead became site of the most intense print confrontations between the regime and press, debating such topics as freedoms of expression and press as well as the role of democracy in South Vietnam.

Thus, in retrospect, it is not a coincidence that of the eight major newspaper closed by the GVN between 1956 and 1959 for offenses deemed “slanderous and a threat

to national security,” seven were northern migrant-established: the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* [Free Arts and Literature], *Đường Sống* [Path of Life], *Dân Chủ* [Democracy], *Tân Dân* [New People], *Thời Luận* [Contemporary Comment], *Người Việt Tự Do* [Free Vietnamese] and *Tin Bắc* [News of the North].<sup>88</sup> As the next chapter exhibits, however, no newspaper had a greater impact on the RVN government’s growing distrust of the *Bắc di cư* press nor reflected the flawed assumption that northern migrants would provide the Diệm government a loyal coalition more than the *Thời Luận* daily.

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<sup>88</sup> *CBVN*, 1956, 391; Trần Ngọc Chi, 31. The lone exception was the *Tiến Thủ* [Struggle For Progress] weekly. The government shut down the *Tiến Thủ* for alleged Communist associations following its publication of the poem “Một thế kỷ - mấy vần thơ [One century – Several poems]” on April 27, 1956. Written by Truy Phong Dương Tấn Huân of Vĩnh Long, a poet and Vietnam veteran of the First Indochina War, the poem portrayed the Diệm regime as a puppet of the United States. The poem became a rallying cry for the student and youth movements in the South in the 1960s.

**Chapter 7—“Renegades:” The Making of South Vietnam’s  
First National Opposition Newspaper, 1955-1958**

*Introduction*

On May 3, 1957 at 5 p.m., fifty Vietnamese and foreign journalists, among them representatives from the *Tự Do*, *UPI*, *AP*, *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time*, gathered at 248 Cao Thắng Street in Saigon, the home of Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, the editor-in-chief of the *Bắc di cư*-established *Thời Luận* [Current Commentary] daily. A group of northern migrants, including Thiện, had convened the press conference promising a “significant” announcement.<sup>1</sup> The group’s leader and spokesperson, Dr. Phan Quang Đán, addressed the assembled correspondents:

Two fundamental weaknesses of the southern regime today are the total absence [khiếm diện hoàn toàn] of an opposition camp both recognized and tolerated by the ruling authority and the existence of an independent press... For that reason, we are declaring the formation of the *Khối Dân Chủ Đối Lập* or Democratic Opposition Bloc, the first political opposition alliance of its kind [in South Vietnam].<sup>2</sup>

The announcement also signaled the transformation of the *Thời Luận* newspaper. A heretofore-struggling member of the *Bắc di cư* press, the paper quickly became the unofficial voice of the *Democratic Opposition Bloc* and the most widely read newspaper in South Vietnam.

The timing of the announcement and the launching of a reformed *Thời Luận* were no coincidence. Đán and Thiện coordinated them to occur as President Diệm was departing on his historic US state visit. Informed of the union between the Bloc and *Thời*

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<sup>1</sup> “Bên lề cuộc ra mắt của Khối Dân Chủ,” *Thời Luận*, May 12-13, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> “Lời tuyên bố với báo giới ngày 3-5-57 của Khối Dân Chủ,” *Thời Luận*, May 19-20, 1957. Other members included Liêu Quang Khinh, Đinh Xuân Quảng, Lê Thị Ân, Nguyễn Xuân Quang, Hoàng Cơ Thụy and Nguyễn Văn Cẩn.

*Luận*, an incensed Diệm is reputed to have spit, “renegades [bọn phản bội].”<sup>3</sup> From the president’s perspective, Đán and Thiện were bent on humiliating him.

As the last chapter demonstrated, the *Thời Luận* was not the first *Bắc di cư*-established newspaper to voice dissent. In the wake of the 1956 press reforms, several members of the northern migrant press had challenged the government on a variety of issues relating to policy, freedom of press and democracy in South Vietnam. However, two issues make the story of the *Thời Luận* newspaper qualitatively different. First, the *Thời Luận* spoke as a voice of a self-described independent non-Communist opposition movement. Second, it made no effort to maintain its *Bắc di cư* roots. In its reorganization, the *Thời Luận* aimed to become a *national opposition* newspaper. As a result, a newspaper originally launched with Diệm’s blessings, now represented—outside of Communism—perhaps the most important propaganda challenge to his regime.

The president’s frustration aside, between May 1957 and March 1958, the *Thời Luận* captured the imagination of Vietnamese unlike any newspaper ever had and, arguably, ever did again during the RVN period (1954-1975). By August of 1957, writing on behalf of the voiceless, the so-called “people of short necks and small mouths [thấp cổ bé miệng],” the *Thời Luận* was printing 100,000 copies per issue, an unheard of number and equivalent to five times the amount of paper distributed by the government to each newspaper.<sup>4</sup> Though officially only sold in the Saigon capital region, the *Thời Luận* could

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<sup>3</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1971), 124.

<sup>4</sup> “Tại sao Thời Luận chưa tái bản hàng ngày?,” *Thời Luận*, September 29-30, 1957; Dương Kim Thanh, “Thời Luận hay quyền tự do báo chí ở miền Nam sẽ chết?,” *Thời Luận*, November 16-17, 1957.

be found on black markets across the Mekong Delta as well as in Central Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Thus, I argue, the *Thời Luận* was South Vietnam's first non-state-run national newspaper.

It is worth noting that the *Thời Luận* adopted this persona as American observers and press were overwhelmingly championing the so-called “miracle” unfolding in South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> *The Saturday Evening Post*, for example, wrote that the RVN was a “bright spot in Asia.”<sup>7</sup> Diệm was, in the words of the *New York Times*, “the Asian Liberator,” while *Life* magazine called him “the tough miracle man of Vietnam.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, in his essay “The Miracle of Vietnam,” Joseph Buttinger wrote that in just a brief few years, South Vietnam had been transformed into “a unified and strong republic.”<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the *Thời Luận* became one of the few newspapers to contest this view of South Vietnam on either side of the Pacific and even warned readers that Americans' ability to speak objectively about Vietnam might have been compromised by the Red Scare then gripping the United States.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Phải chăng báo Thời Luận không có bán ở miền Trung?,” *Thời Luận*, September 8-9, 1957; “Tại sao Thời Luận chưa tái bản hàng ngày?,” *Thời Luận*, September 29-30, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Western scholars and observers have long stressed the role the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) played in engineering American beliefs about South Vietnam in the late 1950s. See for instance, Robert Scheer and William Hinckle, “The Viet-Nam Lobby,” *Ramparts*, July 1, 1965; James T Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A Dooley, 1927-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1997); Joseph G Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby: The American Friends of Vietnam, 1955-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997); John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1998); Seth Jacobs, *America's miracle man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, religion, race, and U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham: Duke University, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Demarre Bess, “Bright Spot in Asia,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, September 15, 1956, 36.

<sup>8</sup> “An Asian Liberator: Ngo Dinh Diem,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1957; John Osborne, “The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam,” *Life*, May 13, 1957.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Buttinger, “The Miracle of Viet-Nam” in *Viet-Nam: The First Five Years* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1959), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Quan Niệm Dân Chủ...,” *Thời Luận*, June 2-3, 1957.

Still, the *Thời Luận*'s transformation and subsequent success leaves several unresolved issues. What explains the newspaper's sudden change in format? Why did the paper attract such interest following its change? Finally, what impact did the *Thời Luận*'s new direction have on South Vietnam's press in general and the *Bắc di cư*-established press in particular? These questions are important because the *Thời Luận*'s ten-month reign as the voice of opposition marked the first time South Vietnam experienced sustained open debate regarding democracy, rights of the individual, the future of the country and policy making. At the same time, this also signaled the end of a press dedicated to the plight of the northern migrant.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in this chapter, I continue to examine the impact of the *Bắc di cư* press by considering the following question: how did the *Thời Luận*, an uninspiring *Bắc di cư*-established newspaper, become arguably South Vietnam's first national and political opposition newspaper? To begin answering this question we turn to the paper's beginnings and its founder, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện.

*Background: Nghiêm Xuân Thiện and the Establishment of the Thời Luận*

The *Thời Luận*'s editor-in-chief, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện launched the paper on February 22, 1955.<sup>12</sup> In his introductory editorial, he explained the paper would serve the interests of the *Bắc di cư*, who had “given up everything, come South empty-handed and now found themselves having to embark on an uncertain [resettlement] odyssey.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, like the *Tự*

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<sup>11</sup> Certainly, there would continue to exist periodicals with coverage of northern migrant issues. But these were largely monthly journals with very limited audiences, such as *Sống* and *Di Cư*.

<sup>12</sup> The *Thời Luận* received official permission on December 24, 1954, ND 328-BTT.

<sup>13</sup> “Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Góp phần xây dựng miền Nam ước vọng và trách nhiệm của chúng ta,” *Thời Luận*, February 22, 1955.

Do, the paper's mission was to provide information to refugees as well as a voice for them to communicate with the government.

Between 1955 and 1957, the *Bắc di cư* writer Nguyễn Đình Tạo regularly published accounts about life of the northern migrant. Tạo's writing arguably represents some of the best reportage accounts about their plight. In Gia Định province, he uncovered the failure of authorities to distribute financial assistance promised northern migrants.<sup>14</sup> On another occasion, Tạo reported stories of Catholic priests allegedly diverting resettlement funds into their personal coffers.<sup>15</sup> He also exposed several instances where authorities' inaction was responsible for escalating regional animosity between southerners and *Bắc di cư*.<sup>16</sup>

In January 1957, Tạo's most important articles about the *Bắc di cư* appeared in a heartbreaking series about the people of Lạc An District, Biên Hòa Province. Tạo had spent several weeks in the district reporting about a situation so dire for the nearly 15,000 migrants that Lạc An's make-shift cemetery no longer had any space. In the final part of the series, Tạo described a distraught Father Ngu—the spiritual head of one of the Lạc An villages—coping with numerous children suffering from hunger and inadequate access to medicine.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Tình hình sinh hoạt của đồng bào tị nạn trong mấy trại định cư thuộc về Gia Định,” *Thời Luận*, May 1, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Chuyện đồng bào di cư các vị trại trưởng kể cả những vị linh mục cần làm sáng tỏ hành động của mình,” *Thời Luận*, July 25, 1955.

<sup>16</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Tình hình sinh hoạt của đồng bào tị nạn trong mấy trại định cư thuộc về Gia Định,” *Thời Luận*, May 4 and 5, 1955.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyễn Đình Tạo, “Trại định cư Lạc An với sức sống đang dâng lên,” *Thời Luận*, January 6 and 7, 1957.

As evocative and concerned with the plight of the *Bắc di cư* as Tào's work was, it represented an exception for the *Thời Luận*. A close look at the paper reveals it failed to live up to the mission Nghiêm Xuân Thiện had articulated. Its content, for the most part, ignored the needs of most northern migrants.

The paper, instead, had a predilection toward nostalgia about Hanoi. For instance, Nguyễn Trung Ngọc recounted wistfully, “gone was the phở soup of Hàng Than Street, the bánh cuốn of Hòm Market, the grilled chopped fish of Lả Vọng and Hoàn Kiếm Lake ice cream.” The paper regularly ran an advertisement for the Tan Tan tailor shop that boasted of how it had brought “Hanoi elegance to the South.”<sup>18</sup> On April 23, 1955, in the waning days of the migration, the *Thời Luận* published a special issue devoted expressly to the capital and included the poem “Nhớ về Hà Nội [Recalling Hanoi], in which the poet Nguyễn Thạch Kiện wrote.

I recall so fondly Hanoi and its people  
Visiting together the lake's edge  
Clothing flapped in the autumn winds  
An unrealizable dream...<sup>19</sup>

This romancing of the past and of the “city” had little to do with the experiences of most refugees. As many pointed out, most refugees had never even experienced Hanoi, its delicacies or its fashion.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, the *Thời Luận* failed to publish the sorts of information and articles that the general *Bắc di cư* population either needed or wanted. Unlike the *Tự Do*,

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<sup>18</sup> See *Thời Luận*, January 5, 1956.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyễn Thạch Kiện, “Nhớ về Hà Nội,” *Thời Luận*, April 23 and 24, 1955.

<sup>20</sup> Nguyễn Nhã, Interview with Jason Picard, Ho Chi Minh City, July 4, 2008.

the *Thời Luận* did not have a special ‘inner page’ devoted to migrant life in the South. Absent as well were columns allowing migrants to find and connect with family or providing health and work advice. Finally, not once did the *Thời Luận* publish a petition of grievance by northern migrants that might have antagonized the GVN. While the paper did not live up to the mission it articulated, blame for this unfulfilled promise did not solely rest with the *Thời Luận*.

From the beginning, the PTUDCTN and Ministry of Information denied the *Thời Luận* and other *Bắc di cư* newspapers distribution in resettlement villages. As we saw in *chapter six*, only two newspapers, in fact, were afforded this privilege the *Tự Do* and *Đường Sống*. Refused access to at least 500,000 northern migrants, as a result, the *Thời Luận* was at a serious disadvantage.<sup>21</sup> Why did the regime restrict the *Thời Luận* this way? Two explanations shed light on this question.

In the late 1940s, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện had served as governor of Tonkin or *Bắc Kỳ*, the northern third of Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> During his tenure, he regularly used strong-armed tactics against newspapers. Thus, when Thiện declared his intent to open a newspaper in Saigon, many journalists scoffed and few if any had interest in joining Thiện’s endeavor.<sup>23</sup> The man who had once hounded them was now seeking to join their ranks.

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<sup>21</sup> Between 1955 and 1957, the only periodicals officially reported to have been distributed in *Bắc di cư* resettlement villages were the *Đường Sống*, *Tự Do* and the PTUDCTN’s own *Dân Việt*. Bùi Văn Lương, 259/TU/HC/VP/M (Secret), August 12, 1955, 9, File 4041, PTTĐỊCH, NACII.

<sup>22</sup> “Joint Communique Made on June 5, 1948 in Ha Long Bay,” Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 13 – The Early History of Vietnam, Vietnam Virtual Archives, Texas Tech University, Lubbock; Đặng Văn Nhâm (2000), 235. When Bảo Đại ordered Nguyễn Hữu Trí to replace Thiện in 1949, Thiện allegedly threatened Trí with arrest if he dared come to Hanoi. Soon afterward, however, relinquished power without incident.

<sup>23</sup> It is, indeed, unclear why Nguyễn Đình Tạo agreed to join the *Thời Luận* staff.

Among those who reviled Thiện were several members of the *Tự Do*. This included Mặc Đỗ and Vũ Khắc Khoan, both of whom initially worked in the Ministry of Information's Chief of Staff office and continued to have strong ties to the Ministry after leaving. It is reasonable to assume that Thiện's poor relations with both his colleagues in the *Bắc di cư* press and the Ministry of Information—coupled with the *Tự Do* being the regime's preferred *Bắc di cư* newspaper in 1955—made it unlikely that the government would grant his newspaper access to northern migrant relocation villages.

Furthermore, as someone who served in the Bảo Đại government during the First Indochina War and had been a member of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (VNQDDĐ), Vietnam's Kuomintang party, neither Diệm nor his brother, Nhu, trusted Thiện. One police report from 1955, in fact, described Thiện as a man interested only in his own “preservation.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, all of this begs the question why the new regime gave Thiện permission to open a newspaper in the first place. The answer remains unclear. Perhaps, the brothers believed that licensing Thiện's newspaper might make him more amenable to the regime.

If this was their objective, they appear to have succeeded. In early 1956, for instance, the *Thời Luận* spearheaded the publication of a volume of anti-Communist, pro-RVN propaganda entitled *Blood On Their Hands*.<sup>25</sup> The book presented alleged first-hand *Bắc di cư* accounts about Communist depravity and violence in the North. Just a few months later, as the government was closing the *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* due to its ‘Cử Tri’ series, the *Thời Luận* published an editorial condemning the weekly while giving

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<sup>24</sup> Chu Bằng Lĩnh, *Đảng Cần Lao*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, *Blood On Their Hands* (Saigon: Thời Luận, 1956).

unstinting support to Diệm. Despite the need for all Vietnamese people to stand in support of the Diệm government, wrote the *Thời Luận*, the *VNTD*'s editors “deliberately closed [their] eyes and spewed irrational, incendiary rhetoric” meant to foment division in the South.<sup>26</sup> But if the *Thời Luận* was doing its part, Diệm certainly did Thiệu few if any favors.

Originally founded as a daily, without access to *Bắc di cư* resettlement areas, the *Thời Luận* struggled mightily to survive during its first two years of existence. “The *Thời Luận*,” Vietnamese observers noted, “was just one of many newspapers struggling for readership.”<sup>27</sup> Providing undistinguished content, the *Thời Luận* did nothing to stand apart and attract readers. To cope it scaled back publication three times, to the point that by early 1957, the *Thời Luận* published as a weekly. Still, Nghiêm Xuân Thiệu continued to hemorrhage money. A public confrontation between Thiệu and a Ministry of Information official illuminates Thiệu's predicament.

In July 1955, at a meeting between South Vietnam's newspaper editors and the Director of the Ministry's Information Department, Phan Quang Bồng, Thiệu complained,

Papers that defend the government and nationalist spirit are often ignored, tossed aside or placed at the bottom of the newspaper piles. Only those newspapers willing to print salacious news and depraved novels are able to ‘crab’ (cua) the readers.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Độc Gia, “Bức tâm thư gửi ông Cừ Tri nào đó trong tuần báo ‘Văn Nghệ Tự Do,’” *Thời Luận*, May 22 and 29, 1956.

<sup>27</sup> “Lập trường: Không thể đi xin quyền tự do ngôn luận,” *Tự Do*, November 21, 1957.

<sup>28</sup> “Phát thẻ nghề nghiệp cho các người bán báo,” *Tự Do*, July 27, 1955; *Việt Tấn Xã* press release, July 29, 1955; Nghiêm Xuân Thiệu, “Vấn đề Phát hành báo chí ở Việt Nam” *Thời Luận*, July 29, 1955.

The *Thời Luận* failed to attract readers because ‘nationalism did not sell,’ according to Thiện. Bồng condemned Thiện for even suggesting that to sell a newspaper one had to report “half-truths,” adding that the *Thời Luận*’s lack of success was due to its failure to establish a clear agenda.<sup>29</sup>

Thiện and the *Thời Luận* were desperate, barely surviving as a weekly on the editor’s depleted resources. Denied access to resettlement centers across the South and, therefore, much of the *Bắc di cư* community, he needed a new direction, a vision that would ‘crab’ readers. The response by two newspapers to the February 22, 1957 attempt on Diệm’s life provided the *Thời Luận* with a possible blueprint.

*The Model: The Đường Sống – Dân Chủ Affair*

In chapters 4 and 5, I discussed the role played by the *Đường Sống* weekly in the growing conflict between Catholic *Bắc di cư* leaders—in particular, Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi—and the Ngô Đình house. The *Đường Sống* was widely recognized as Bishop Chi’s newspaper and therefore the preeminent voice amongst Catholic *Bắc di cư*. During its brief history, the paper had gained the ire of Diệm by publishing numerous articles and editorials deeply critical of resettlement-related policy. This, of course, eventually played a crucial role in the president’s decision to resurrect the *Tự Do* paper.

But the return of the *Tự Do* did nothing to reduce the *Đường Sống*’s influence or its criticisms of the government. In fact, following the attempt on Diệm’s life at Ban Mê Thuột, the *Đường Sống*’s attacks of the regime intensified. This included the paper’s infamous suggestion that Diệm had “lost the trust” of the people and revelations of *Bắc di*

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

*cu* hostility toward the regime. By late March of 1957, the regime had closed the newspaper and arrested its editor-in-chief. The *Đường Sống*, however, was not the only casualty of this episode. The clash also claimed another newspaper, the *Dân Chủ* [Democracy] daily.

Originally founded at Hanoi in 1952, the *Dân Chủ* was re-established in Saigon by its editor-in-chief, Vũ Ngọc Các, in 1955 as part of the rising *Bắc di cư* press.<sup>30</sup> Like Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, Các had found it difficult to compete with the *Tự Do* news group, which already dominated the *Bắc di cư* community by the time the *Dân Chủ* opened its doors. Unlike Thiện, however, Các had a reputation as a respected journalist and editor, which he was able to parlay into a small but reliable readership. Moreover, rather than hiring well-known writers and journalists, *a la* the *Tự Do*, Các turned to young *Bắc di cư* writers, most of whom were members of the recently-arrived Hanoi Student Union. This group included Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Nguyễn Sỹ Tế and Trần Thanh Hiệp.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the *Dân Chủ* became the preferred newspaper of northern migrant students and young people.

In contrast to the *Đường Sống*, the *Dân Chủ* daily was not religious in orientation. Thus, it seized on the dispute initiated by the *Đường Sống* to discuss broader questions

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<sup>30</sup> Thê Phong, *Lược Sử Văn Nghệ Việt Nam, Tổng Luận 1900-1956* (Saigon: Đại Nam Văn Hiến, 1965), 10.

<sup>31</sup> Dương Nghiễm Mậu, “Thanh Tâm Tuyền và những người bạn trước khi có tạp chí *Sáng Tạo*,” *Hợp Lưu*, August-September, 2010 (111), 7; Trần Thanh Hiệp, “Ngày ấy *Sáng Tạo*,” *Tuyển Tập Văn Đàn Đồng Tâm*, Vol. 15, Part 1 (2011), 22-23. In 1956, the four men joined forces with another refugee, Mai Thảo, to found the *Sáng Tạo* journal. The new journal quickly became known as the gathering place for young, promising *Bắc di cư* writers. Though it only published 37 issues over the course of five years (1956-1961), the *Sáng Tạo* is regarded as one of the most influential intellectual journals of the RVN period and, even today, continues to be recognized as a benchmark amongst Vietnamese intellectuals.

relating to freedoms of press and speech. As the *Đường Sống* criticized the failures of resettlement and the regime's overreliance on Catholic clergy, the *Dân Chủ* published a series of columns celebrating the value of free expression and the role of the press in a democratic society.

On March 6, the *Dân Chủ* editorialized that, "Nation building [kiến quốc] requires the courage and sincerity of the press," in spite of the conflicts that may arise.<sup>32</sup> The next day, Vũ Ngọc Các added that "a newspaper wanting to be worthy of the name *Dân Chủ* [Democracy]... cannot shy away from the struggle for freedom of expression."<sup>33</sup> The press, the paper insisted, had a sacred responsibility not to submit to the desires of authorities.<sup>34</sup> Had it stopped here, the *Dân Chủ* might have escaped punishment. It did not.

The March 8<sup>th</sup> *Hai Bà Trưng* Celebration—touched upon in *chapter three*—proved to be the turning point. Madame Nhu gave the event's keynote address. When the South Vietnamese press ignored the speech, the Ministry of Information condemned the neglect as "a failure."<sup>35</sup> The *Dân Chủ* immediately condemned the government for, in its words, "violating" the spirit of free speech. As "the fourth estate [quyền thứ tư]," the press had an obligation not to bend to government coercion.<sup>36</sup> The only way the RVN

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<sup>32</sup> "Thời Bình: Chúng tôi quan niệm một thái độ của báo chí trong giai đoạn hiện tại," *Dân Chủ*, March 6, 1957.

<sup>33</sup> "Thời Bình: Không thể được," *Dân Chủ*, March 7, 1957.

<sup>34</sup> "Hội báo chí Việt Nam đã triệu tập Hội báo xét về việc Dân chủ bị tịch thu," *Dân chủ*, March 8, 1957.

<sup>35</sup> "Đây bức thư cảnh cáo báo chí của ban tổ chức ngày lễ Hai Bà Trưng," *Dân Chủ*, March 12, 1957.

<sup>36</sup> Vũ Ngọc Các, "Thời Bình: Nhân danh quyền lực nào," *Dân Chủ*, March 14, 1957. Days later the *Dân Chủ* printed an article "The case of the Nhân Văn paper in North Vietnam" at first glance

would defeat Communism was by “defending freedom,” according to the *Dân Chủ*.<sup>37</sup> By the end of the month, the *Dân Chủ* and *Đường Sống* newspapers were both closed and their editors jailed.

It is fair to assume that Nghiêm Xuân Thiện saw in the *Đường Sống – Dân Chủ* affair a model for increasing the *Thời Luận*’s readership. In the weeks and months after the *Thời Luận*’s reorganization, the paper frequently referred to the *Đường Sống* and *Dân Chủ* closures and the arrests of their respective editors-in-chief as a “tragic day [ngày thảm kịch]” in the struggle for press freedom in South Vietnam, one that must not be “forgotten.”<sup>38</sup> Of course, the *Đường Sống*’s success largely rested on its connection to the Catholic Church, which had given the paper a loyal *Bắc di cư* following. Thiện could not invent such an association. The *Dân Chủ*, however, offered an alternative.

The *Dân Chủ* had ignited interest with a politically combative style devoted to questions of democracy and freedom. Obviously, its brief foray into this realm had crossed a line that the GVN would not tolerate. However, as the events of the last fifteen months had demonstrated, reforms to South Vietnam’s press laws invited a degree of experimentation. If managed with better execution, a newspaper might be able to establish itself as a voice of non-Communist opposition.

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this might appear to mean nothing at all other than coverage of the famous Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm Affair. However, closer examination of this article, an article appearing in the *Đường Sống*, and articles appearing later in the year, suggest that the Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm Affair had become a device for expressing concerns surrounding in South Vietnam without addressing those worries directly.

<sup>37</sup> “Phải tự do mới thắng được Cộng Sản,” *Dân Chủ*, March 22, 1957.

<sup>38</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Tự do báo chí,” *Thời Luận*, July 14-15, 1957; Minh Tâm, “Cần mở rộng cuộc thảo luận về tự do báo chí,” *Thời Luận*, July 21-22, 1957; Lý Bình Hòa “Tòa án và quyền tự do báo chí,” *Thời Luận*, November 16-17, 1957; Lý Bình Hòa, “Từ Đường Sống, Dân Chủ đến Thời Luận: Kiểm điểm lại cuộc tranh đòi tự do báo chí,” *Thời Luận*, November 23-24, 1957.

As the *Đường Sống* and *Dân Chủ* newspapers neared closure, the *Thời Luận* signaled its intentions to replace them. On March 17, 1957, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện argued that while the present political landscape of Vietnam lacked politicians with moral fiber, there were certainly Vietnamese capable of bringing morality to politics.<sup>39</sup> Sadly, Thiện continued two weeks later, Vietnamese politics was a world of “invisible forces [những thế lực vô hình]” that allowed the corrupt and ruthless to destroy the people’s trust in the government. This situation, Thiện concluded, had left deep “divisions [chia rẽ]” within the nationalist camp and threatened “to sabotage [phá hoại]” it.<sup>40</sup> Though vague, in retrospect, the editorials seem to anticipate the *Thời Luận*’s transformation five weeks later. Thiện, however, would not make this move alone. To turn the fortunes of the *Thời Luận* around, he joined forces with Dr. Phan Quang Đán, Diệm’s most outspoken non-Communist opponent.

#### *The Opponent: Phan Quang Đán*

A native of Nghệ An province (northern central Vietnam) and born in 1918, Phan Quang Đán had been politically active at least as early as his medical school days in Hanoi.

Impressed by his intelligence, in 1945, the Vietminh approached Đán about joining their government.<sup>41</sup> He declined.

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<sup>39</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Chính trị và đạo đức,” *Thời Luận*, March 17-18, 1957.

<sup>40</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Chúng ta phải quan niệm chính trị như thế nào?,” *Thời Luận*, March 31- April 1, 1957.

<sup>41</sup> “Đề trả lời những sự xuyên tạc về Bác Sĩ Phan Quang Đán,” *Thời Luận*, July 21-22, 1957; Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 82; Phan Quang Đán, “Tôi không hề chủ trương hợp tác với ông Diệm,” *Tia Sáng*, January 1988 (#23), 50.

Đán instead participated in the founding of several political groups, including the Ngũ Xã Movement and its newspaper, *Thiết Thực* [Realistic].<sup>42</sup> By 1947, Đán was serving as political advisor to Bảo Đại in Hong Kong. Convinced, however, the French only wanted to “reestablish the old colonial regime,” he stepped down.<sup>43</sup>

Over the next six years, Đán remained politically engaged with Vietnam while living abroad. As a PhD student in Public Health at Harvard University, Đán established the Đảng Công Hòa or Republican Party and, in 1951, published his accompanying political treatise, *Volonté Vietnamiennne*, in which he outlined his vision for an independent non-Communist Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> Even his dissertation, entitled “Vietnam’s Health: Present Conditions and Proposals of Reorganization,” demonstrated Đán’s concern for Vietnam and its political future.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it seemed clear Đán was destined to play some role in Vietnamese politics after 1954. Diệm evidently recognized this as well.

According to Cao Văn Luận, a Diệm confidante and former seminary classmate of Đán, the two men had shared a cordial relationship during their respective stays in the United States, meeting several times to discuss politics. This led Diệm to believe he had Đán’s political backing. Therefore, after assuming power in 1954, Diệm offered Đán the Social Welfare portfolio. Đán, however, was unsatisfied and demanded a higher profile

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<sup>42</sup> Hoành Linh Đỗ Mậu, *Việt Nam Máu Lửa Quê Hương của Tôi* (California: Văn Nghệ, 1993). While by no measure a success, nonetheless, Ngũ Xã – *Thiết Thực* would later provide a template for Đán and Nghiêm Xuân Thiện’s reorganized *Thời Luận* newspaper.

<sup>43</sup> Phan Quang Đán, *Volonté Vietnamiennne: Le Parti Républicain Vietnamienn, ses buts, son programme* (Geneva: Edition Triết Huc, 1951); Phan Quang Đán, “Tôi không hề chủ trương hợp tác với ông Diệm,” *Tia Sáng*, January 1988 (#23), 50.

<sup>44</sup> “Để trả lời những sự xuyên tạc về Bác Sĩ Phan Quang Đán,” *Thời Luận*, July 21-22, 1957.

<sup>45</sup> See Dan Q Phan, “Vietnam’s Health: Present Conditions and Proposals of Reorganization” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1954).

ministry. Diệm rebuffed him. Luận suggests that ambition sparked Đán's opposition to Diệm.<sup>46</sup> Đán, however, offered a markedly different account.

Đán, indeed, turned down the offer, but not due to ambition. "I declined," he explained, "because I never intended to cooperate with Mr. Diệm."<sup>47</sup> Diệm could not form the government necessary to build a modern, democratic Vietnam, according to Đán. As far as Đán was concerned, the Ngô Đình family represented a feudal past out of step with Vietnam's present. Diệm, however, found Đán's ideas for a republican Vietnam very compelling. So much so, Đán claimed, that a year later, when he returned to Vietnam from Boston on September 2, 1955, GVN officials greeted him at Tân Sơn Nhất Airport. The premier, they informed him, wanted urgently to meet. Thus, early the next morning, Đán visited Diệm in Norodom Palace and, as Đán recounts, the Prime Minister immediately extended another invitation to join his government. But once again, Đán refused and used the opportunity to criticize the president.<sup>48</sup>

Đán took the prime minister to task for nepotism. In particular, he scolded Diệm for his dependence on his brother, Ngô Đình Nhu, who Đán said bluntly, should assume duties as "the director of the National Library." This was in reference to Nhu's graduate studies in library sciences. Finally, in concluding their meeting, Đán informed Diệm he

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<sup>46</sup> Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, 1940-1965* (Saigon: Trí Dũng), 167. Đán and Cao Văn Luận were classmates at Pellerin Seminary (Huế) between 1931-1934.

<sup>47</sup> Phan Quang Đán, "Tôi không hề chủ trương hợp tác với ông Diệm," *Tia Sáng*, January 1988 (#23), 50.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

intended to demonstrate his support for the Prime Minister by organizing “a constructive, legal *opposition* (the italics are mine).”<sup>49</sup>

While Đán’s depiction of the encounter may be true, the evidence suggests Diệm had another motive in summoning the public health activist. The then-Prime Minister wanted to assess Đán’s political intentions. In mid-August of 1955, just prior to his return, Đán published a Vietnamese translation of *Volonté Vietnamiennne* in Vietnam for the first time.<sup>50</sup> Only two months remained until South Vietnam’s referendum. Diệm construed the timing as a challenge to his authority. The meeting merely confirmed his fears.

Diệm was furious. Đán came across as arrogant and impetuous.<sup>51</sup> He had been absent from Vietnam for several years and less than twenty-four hours after returning, he was reprimanding the head of state for the latter’s conduct and making “unseemly [không hợp]” demands.<sup>52</sup> Đán had failed his test. When Đán left the palace that day, Diệm looked upon the doctor as trouble.

In response, authorities issued a secret order prohibiting both the schools of medicine and pharmacy from employing Đán. Moreover, he was placed under regular

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<sup>49</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Tôi không hề chủ trương hợp tác với ông Diệm,” *Tia Sáng*, January 1988 (#23), 50.

<sup>50</sup> Phan Quang Đán, *Chỉ định Việt Nam* (Saigon, Khái Trị, 1955).

<sup>51</sup> Cao Thế Dung and Lương Khải Minh, *Làm Thế Nào Để Giết Một Tổng Thống* (Saigon: n.p., 1971), 81.

<sup>52</sup> South Vietnam National Police Directorate, 3820 bis PC-1/M (Secret), February 19, 1956, 3; File 5969, PTTĐICH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City.

police surveillance.<sup>53</sup> But by preventing Đán from teaching and having him constantly shadowed, Diệm may have inadvertently goaded Đán into keeping his word.

In any event, twenty months later, on May 3, 1957, Đán announced the formation of the Democratic Opposition Bloc. The man who had promised to establish a legal opposition to Diệm's government did just that. And two days later, as Diệm boarded the President Eisenhower's Columbine III for his official US state visit, the *Thời Luận* published under its new format. In the Diệm's eyes, Đán and Thiện timed this to damage his trip.

With Phan Quang Đán joining the *Thời Luận* as the featured writer and Thiện manning its editorial column, the paper adopted a combative style reflecting Đán's political persona. Thiện articulated the paper's new mission as follows:

To defend the rights of the citizenry: individual freedom; freedom of speech and press; freedom of assembly and association... The intent is to promote debate on significant issues shaping the future of the nation. The existence of opposition, of debate can serve to improve government. This is only prohibited in dictatorships, where the government treats its citizens as objects to be exploited. In a free, democratic society, the people have the right to speak out.<sup>54</sup>

Jettisoning its limited *Bắc di cư* coverage, the paper attracted an enormous audience that defied regional heritage. After two years decrying his inability to make money, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện had discovered a cash cow and Đán had found a vehicle to publicize his ideas and criticisms of the regime. In the process, the feud between Diệm and Đán was transformed into a public debate about the fate of an independent, non-Communist Vietnam. Moreover, originally established as part of the *Bắc di cư* press, the *Thời Luận*

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<sup>53</sup> “Hồ sơ về hoạt động của Đảng Dân Chủ Tự Do do Ô Phan Quang Đán lãnh đạo năm 1956-1959,” File 5969, PTTĐICH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City; “Để trả lời những sự xuyên tạc về Bác Sĩ Phan Quang Đán,” *Thời Luận*, July 21-22, 1957.

<sup>54</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Đối lập Dân Chủ và hữu trách,” *Thời Luận*, May 26-27, 1957.

became the regime's most outspoken critic and, in the process, arguably South Vietnam's first *national* opposition newspaper. In the next section, we explore the *Thời Luận*'s new direction.

*“Creating Our Own Destiny:” The Thời Luận’s Transformation*

The paper wasted little time in introducing new its aggressive formula. In his first *Thời Luận* column, Phan Quang Đán ripped South Vietnam's press for failing in its duty. In a democracy, he wrote, the press served the interests of the people, not the state. The RVN press, however, had forsaken its duty. Rather than working on behalf of the people, it had given its “loyalty [trung thành]” to the president. The *Thời Luận*, Đán declared, would no longer participate in such a charade.<sup>55</sup> While Đán's appraisal ignored the examples of the *Tự Do*, *Văn Nghệ Tự Do*, *Đường Sống* and *Dân Chủ* newspapers, nonetheless, prior to the *Thời Luận*, no newspaper had articulated an *agenda* devoted both to political opposition and issues affecting *all* Vietnamese.

Stripped away was the romantic nostalgia for the North. Occasionally one might find an article about life in a resettlement camp, but readers were just as likely to find such articles in non-*Bắc di cư*-established newspapers as well. Instead, the overwhelming focus of its coverage related to issues concerning Vietnamese regardless of regional background, such as democracy, policy-making and freedom. The substance awed South Vietnamese readers and infuriated RVN officials.

In early June, the *Thời Luận* greeted the president on his return from the United States with a column by Phan Quang Đán entitled “Democratic Ideas and Democratic

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<sup>55</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Khối Dân Chủ đối lập có hợp pháp không?,” *Thời Luận*, May 19-20, 1957.

Actions.” In it, Đán demanded to know when Diệm intended to follow through on his promises to build a free and democratic society. Before both houses of the US Congress, Diệm had espoused the virtues of democracy, of constructing a society that protected the “rights of all citizens” and, in the process, “destroyed dictatorial oppression.”<sup>56</sup> Democracy, Diệm insisted, was imperative to defeating Communism and creating a stable society in Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

The *Thời Luận* criticized the apparent cognitive dissonance. “Words mean nothing,” the paper wrote, “if the government fails to enact real democratic reform.”<sup>58</sup> Almost three years had past since the Geneva Accords, where was this democracy to which the president referred? Why did so many “anti-democratic and unconstitutional” laws still exist in South Vietnam? Any discussion of democracy without protection of free speech and opposition was, Phan Quang Đán scoffed, “disingenuous [bất thành].”<sup>59</sup>

The *Thời Luận* blamed the failure to achieve democratic reform on authorities’ abuses of Vietnamese “traditions” mediating relations between the ruler and ruled. Historically, for instance, to challenge the ruler was a taboo known as “contempt for the king [khinh quan],” an offense punishable by death.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Vietnamese tended to associate the idea of *opposition* with “public disorder [quấy rối trị an]” and “the

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<sup>56</sup> “Quan niệm Dân chủ và hành động Dân chủ,” *Thời Luận*, June 2-3, 1957.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Kêu gọi của Khối Dân Chủ,” *Thời Luận*, May 6, 1957.

<sup>60</sup> “Đổi lập dân chủ: không có đổi lập là bất thành dân chủ,” *Thời Luận*, May 26-27, 1957. Diệm again had recently endorsed this view of ruler – ruled relations in a republication of his essay “Democratic Development in Vietnam,” writing that the people owed their leader a “scared respect.” See Ngo Dinh Diem, “Democratic Development in Vietnam,” in *Democracy in East Asia*, ed. Paul K.T. Sih (Taipei: China Culture Publishing, 1957): 69.

usurpation of power.”<sup>61</sup> At the same time, decades of colonialism and war had left many Vietnamese scarred and suffering from a “defeatist [thất trận]” mentality. All of this, coupled with the fact that most Vietnamese remained unaware of their rights as citizens [dân] of a democratic society, the paper concluded, allowed leaders to demand the people’s “unconditional support” as a show of loyalty.<sup>62</sup>

For Vietnam to flourish as a non-Communist country, exclaimed Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “We must create our own destiny.”<sup>63</sup> Vietnamese had to become active participants in the politics of their country. No longer could they sit passively while leaders attended to the affairs of state with “outdated” traditions. Vietnam needed an environment in which people could speak comfortably about politics.

Laying claim to the mantle of national opposition newspaper, the *Thời Luận* promoted dialogue on those issues most affecting the country as a whole, including Vietnam’s reunification and American assistance. The Geneva Accords had mandated that a national election be held by July 1956, the conference’s two-year anniversary, at which point Vietnam would be reunified. Yet by the summer of 1957, few Vietnamese harbored optimism that those elections would be held.

Diệm, however, had refused to participate in such a nationwide referendum for two reasons. First, his government had not been a signatory to the agreements and, therefore, was not obliged to abide by them. Second, Diệm maintained, communist

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<sup>61</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Đối lập dân chủ và hữu trách,” *Thời Luận*, May 26-27, 1957.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Chúng ta phải tự tạo lấy số mệnh của chúng ta,” *Thời Luận*, June 9-10, 1957.

authorities in the North would never permit a “free, democratic election.”<sup>64</sup> The *Thời Luận* agreed with Diệm’s assessment.

The Communist authorities in the North could not be trusted, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện concurred.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, wrote Phan Quang Đán, the great powers had deprived the State of Vietnam any meaningful role at Geneva while imposing the parameters for Vietnam’s future. Only the Vietnamese people, wrote Đán, had the right to determine the country’s future.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, the *Thời Luận* decried, Diệm’s refusal to even hold dialogue with the North ignored the desires of the Vietnamese people.

Vietnam was a “single nation, with a single past,” according to Đán. Virtually all Vietnamese on either side of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel claimed friends and family on the other side. Moreover, those who fled South in 1954-1955 continued to nurture the hope of one day returning North. An uncertain and prolonged division of Vietnam threatened the wellbeing of the Vietnamese people and was transforming the nation into a Cold War battleground. Only through communication and exchange, Đán concluded, could Vietnam avoid being pulled into another war.<sup>67</sup> But if most Vietnamese hoped for dialogue between North and South, why were authorities refusing to participate? The answer, Nghiêm Xuân Thiện argued, was that strong incentives existed for officials to

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<sup>64</sup> For discussion about the State of Vietnam’s attitude toward the Geneva Accords see for instance: Hoàn Linh Đỗ Mậu. *Vietnam: Máu Lửa Quê Hương*, California: Văn Nghệ, 1986; Pierre Asselin, “Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreements on Vietnam, 1954-1955,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2007): 95-126; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Thống Nhất là tranh thủ nhân dân,” *Thời Luận*, August 18-19, 1957.

<sup>66</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Vấn đề thống nhất Việt Nam,” *Thời Luận*, July 28-29, 1957.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

avoid talks with the North. Chief among these was the regime's relationship with the United States.<sup>68</sup>

No one could deny the importance of US assistance following 1954. It was essential to building South Vietnam's military and the resettlement of northern migrants. If dispersed strategically, the *Thời Luận* asserted, such aid could prove integral to the development of Vietnam. However, as presently crafted, American assistance was threatening to turn Vietnam into an economic mendicant.<sup>69</sup> The United States, Đán warned,

sprinkled aid as if scattering paper flowers over all aspects of Vietnamese life. It supplies the newest commercial products, distributing them like Santa Clause at Christmas. Sadly, this is not in the best interests of the Vietnamese people.<sup>70</sup>

American aid lacked a long-term vision for establishing either economic stability or developing domestic industry in South Vietnam. Instead, it appeared most concerned with promoting the interests of American industry and encouraging Vietnamese to “consume [tiêu xài].” Furthermore, such assistance ignored what Đán called Vietnamese traditional ethic of “self-sufficiency [tự túc tự lập].”<sup>71</sup> If this persisted, warned Đán, Vietnam would watch as its “mountain [of money] crumbled [ngồi ăn núi lở],” inflation

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<sup>68</sup> Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, “Xã Luận: Thống Nhất là tranh thủ nhân dân,” *Thời Luận*, August 18-19, 1957.

<sup>69</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Nhân việc khởi công xa lộ Saigon – Biên Hòa: Bàn về Viện Trợ Mỹ,” *Thời Luận*, August 11-12, 1957.

<sup>70</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Nhân việc khởi công xa lộ Saigon – Biên Hòa: Bàn về Viện Trợ Mỹ,” *Thời Luận*, August 11-12, 1957.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. To explain this ethos, Đán referred to the well-known folk tale of “Lư Bình and Dương Lễ,” the lesson of which is analogous to the proverb “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

grew and the people suffered as a result.<sup>72</sup> This kind of investment would destroy the Vietnamese economy.

The obstacle, however, was that while American assistance did not benefit Vietnam as a whole, those crafting the regime's policy did profit. As a result, Đán argued, South Vietnam's reliance on American aid allowed the United States to dictate policy. Its demands included that South Vietnam limit its contact with the North. In Đán's opinion, this seemed to serve the interests of the United States rather than the people of Vietnam.<sup>73</sup>

The *Thời Luận*'s popularity soared, at once surprising and frustrating the government, especially Diệm. The paper had achieved a readership never seen before in the annals of the modern Vietnamese press. On August 4, 1957, issue 411 of the *Thời Luận* printed a staggering 100,000 copies. To do so, it apparently bought most of its paper from the black market, as even official GVN rations only provided enough for 20,000.<sup>74</sup>

In response, officials tried to quiet the newspaper through certain extralegal means at their disposal. As we will see, however, short of forcibly closing the *Thời Luận*, the government's actions did nothing to intimidate the paper. Instead, authorities seemed only to further rouse the paper's hostilities and, in the process, increase its popularity.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Phan Quang Đán, "Viện trợ Mỹ chuyển hướng thế nào cho thêm hiệu quả," *Thời Luận*, August 18-19, 1957.

<sup>74</sup> Đặng Văn Nhâm, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Việt Nam: Từ Khởi Thủy Đến Hiện Tại (1861-1999)*, 275.

Vietnamese recall waiting breathlessly to see what the next issue would bring.<sup>75</sup> Part of the intrigue was that readers fully expected that each issue would be its last and that Thiện and Đán would be sent to Côn Đảo Island's prison. The *Thời Luận*'s fate even became a popular bet for Saigon – Cholon's vast gambling world, as the city's illegal gambling dens allegedly took wagers on when the paper would be closed and what would be the fate of its staff.

*“Throwing Stones with Concealed Hands”: The GVN's Response*

In spite of the 1956 press reforms reducing censorship, the GVN continued to control the newspaper market. In 1969, the writer and journalist Vũ Bằng recalled in his celebrated book, *Bốn Mươi Năm Nói Láo* [Forty Years of Lying], that during the Diệm years any journalist who proved recalcitrant could expect a midnight “visit” from the police:

Or one lovely day, he might suddenly find himself accused of running a gambling den, of relations with an underage girl, or fraud. He would have to go before the court, his property would be confiscated and his remaining funds would be spent to defend himself.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to such personal attacks, however, the government could also strike directly at a newspaper that caused trouble.

The government remained the only official supplier of paper in South Vietnam and the only institution sanctioned to distribute newspapers. As a result, if a particular paper's content was felt to be too “provocative,” the government could suspend a newspaper's paper ration or, if the authorities chose, it could order a newspaper discarded

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<sup>75</sup> Trần Tử Thanh, “XYZ, Ông là ai?,” *Pháp Luật và Đời Sống*, November 2007. [http://thangtienvn.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=928&Itemid=297](http://thangtienvn.de/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=928&Itemid=297) (Accessed on June 27, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Vũ Bằng, *Bốn Mươi Năm Nói Láo* (Saigon: Sống Mới, 1969), 205.

or “buried.” In addition, rumors might be spread warning that individuals caught with a particular newspaper would be detained for reading “seditious material.”<sup>77</sup> Finally, in the most egregious cases, the government might resort to organized violence. To tamp down interest in the *Thời Luận*, the government used several of these devices, which the paper referred to as “throwing stones with concealed hands [ném đá giấu tay].”<sup>78</sup>

For instance, in the wake of its recent success, on July 23, 1957, the *Thời Luận* requested that it once again be allowed to publish as a daily.<sup>79</sup> The Ministry of Information balked. Trần Chánh Thành, the Minister of Information, explained that he had agreed months earlier to allow the *Thời Luận* to formally publish as a weekly. Thành informed the paper that it could not go back and forth in this manner.<sup>80</sup> The *Thời Luận*, however, pointed out that there existed no statute in the Vietnamese press law justifying this decision. According to decree 328 ND-BTT issued on December 24, 1954, the paper was a daily and should be treated as such.<sup>81</sup> Still, Minister Thành stood firm: the *Thời Luận* was to remain a weekly. Though the decision limited the paper’s publication, it did not prevent the newspaper from challenging the regime.

In early September 1957, a trial opened to hear the cases of 23 people with suspected ties to the outlawed Bình Xuyên.<sup>82</sup> Phan Quang Đán appealed to officials to

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<sup>77</sup> Tam Lang and Lưu Đức Sinh, “Lá thư ngỏ,” *Tự Do*, February 2, 1955.

<sup>78</sup> “Trăm hoa đua nở ở đất Bắc hay là vụ báo Nhân Văn,” *Thời Luận*, September 22-23, 1957.

<sup>79</sup> “Tại sao Thời Luận chưa tái bản hàng ngày,” *Thời Luận*, September 29-30, 1957.

<sup>80</sup> Trần Chánh Thành, 2829-BTT/BC1, July 23, 1957, 22; File 5563, PTTĐỊCH, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>81</sup> “Tại sao Thời Luận chưa tái bản hàng ngày,” *Thời Luận*, September 29-30, 1957.

<sup>82</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Nhân mấy vụ án chính trị,” *Thời Luận*, September 2, 1957.

show clemency and release the individuals in question. They posed no threat to the government.<sup>83</sup> “An attitude of amnesty by the government,” wrote Đán, “would go a long way toward building solidarity. Conversely, even a single execution would create a dangerous chasm of division.”<sup>84</sup>

Just days after the *Thời Luận*'s defense of the accused, a mob attacked the *Thời Luận* offices and the private residences of Nghiêm Xuân Thiện and Phan Quang Đán.<sup>85</sup> The total damage caused was over 1.2 million piasters (about 35,000 USD).<sup>86</sup> While no direct links could be established between the government and the mob, circumstantial evidence indicates that the GVN authorities orchestrated the affair.

First, the protesters were employees of the government who worked as porters of the Saigon wharf. Second, they were transported to the sites in GVN-owned vehicles.<sup>87</sup> Third, national police records suggest the government did little to intervene, waiting until 11:45 am, almost four hours *after* the rampaging began, to deploy the police.<sup>88</sup> With temperatures in Saigon reaching as high as 36 C (96.8 F) that day, the mob had, in fact, long since left. Instead, the *Thời Luận* alleged later, authorities had positioned fire hoses

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<sup>83</sup> The organization was the Unification Front or Mặt Trận Thống Nhất and included Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, Bình Xuyên as well as their sympathizers. The defendants included Hồ Hữu Tường, Nguyễn Thành Phương, Nguyễn Thành Danh and Lê Văn Phiên.

<sup>84</sup> Phan Quang Đán, “Nhân máy vụ án chính trị,” *Thời Luận*, September 2, 1957.

<sup>85</sup> “Một số Đảng viên Đảng Xã Hội và VN Phục Quốc đã kéo tới chắt vắn ông Phan Quang Đán tại Tư Gia và Phá tờ Báo ‘Thời Luận,’” Việt Tấn Xã (VTX), September 7, 1957, File 5563, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>86</sup> “Về vụ Đập phá hại báo Thời Luận và Tân Dân và những nhà in liên hệ,” VTX, September 8, 1957, File 5563, PTTĐICH, NACII.

<sup>87</sup> *Thời Luận*, November 18, 1957.

<sup>88</sup> “Công Nhân Bến Tàu ở Khánh Hội Biểu tình về vụ Báo Thời Luận và Tân Dân,” VTX, September 9, 1957, File 5563, PTTĐICH, NACII.

not to scatter rioters—who by midday were gone—but to cause further damage to the *Thời Luận*'s offices.<sup>89</sup> However, if the intent of authorities was to send the *Thời Luận* a message or force it to close, they failed.

In the *Thời Luận*'s return issue two weeks later, it printed 120,000 copies. The issue included the piece “100 Flowers bloom in the North and the *Nhân Văn* Affair.”<sup>90</sup> Referring to North Vietnam's so-called *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* Affair, in which northern intellectuals demanded reforms of the Communist government as well as expanded freedom of expression, the affair drew its name from the two journals at the center of the episode, the *Nhân Văn* [Humanity] and *Giai Phẩm* [Master Works].<sup>91</sup>

This article focused on the *Nhân Văn*. The DRV, it explained, had grown fearful of the *Nhân Văn* as support for it rose among “the people.” To stem the threat, the article explained, the North had “thrown stones with concealed hands [*ném đá giấu tay*],” that is, northern authorities had attacked the paper furtively. In the coming weeks, the *Nhân Văn* had not received paper for print and copies on sale in post offices “mysteriously

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<sup>89</sup> *Thời Luận*, November 18, 1957.

<sup>90</sup> Trăm hoa đua nở ở đất Bắc hay là vụ báo Nhân Văn,” *Thời Luận*, September 22, 1957.

<sup>91</sup> For more about the *Nhân Văn* – *Giai Phẩm* Affair see Hoàng Văn Chí, ed., *Trăm Hoa Đua Nở Trên Đất Bắc* (Saigon: Mặt Trận Bảo Vệ Tự Do Văn Hóa, 1959); Nhu Phong, “Intellectuals, Writers and Artists,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 9 (January–March 1962), 47–69; and Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964); Yinghong Cheng, “Beyond a Moscow-centric Interpretation: An Examination of the China Connection in Eastern Europe and North Vietnam during the Era of De-Stalinization,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (December 2004), 487–518; Balazs Szalontai, “Political and Economic Crisis in North Vietnam, 1955–1956,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (November 2005), 395–426; Peter Zinoman, “*Nhân Văn*–*Giai Phẩm* and Vietnamese “Reform Communism” in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter 2011), 60–100.

disappeared,” according to the article. Subsequently, the DRV intensified its attacks, with criticisms of the *Nhân Văn* in state newspapers.<sup>92</sup>

Out of context, the article seemed benign. It was not a *Thời Luận* feature, but instead an official release of the RVN’s press agency, the *Việt Tấn Xã* (VTX), and, therefore, approved by the government. The article, however, was almost a year old. The *VTX* had distributed it for print in late 1956, when the story of the *Nhân Văn* first broke in the South. At the time it appeared in several Saigon newspapers. Now ten months later, in the shadow of GVN – *Thời Luận* conflict, the piece adopted a different tone. Readers could not avoid recognizing in the *Nhân Văn* an allegory for the experiences of the *Thời Luận* newspaper. The government was now calling the *Thời Luận* “a threat to national security.”<sup>93</sup>

In early October, the *Thời Luận* found itself in an RVN court on charges of “disturbing the public order” and “defaming [phỉ báng]” public officials.<sup>94</sup> Though the paper continued to publish, it was clear that eventually the government would silence the *Thời Luận* once and for all. The paper’s final act began in late December 1957 with the publication of a series of ten letters, known simply as the “XYZ” correspondences.

#### *Conclusion: The “XYZ” Series and The End of the Bắc di cư Press*

Dubbed “XYZ” on account of the alias used by the writer, to this day the identity of the person responsible remains uncertain, though it has generally been assumed to be Dr.

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<sup>92</sup> “Trăm hoa đua nở ở đất Bắc hay là vụ báo Nhân Văn,” *Thời Luận*, September 22-23, 1957.

<sup>93</sup> Minister of Justice, 357-BTP/VP/M (secret), March 13, 1958, 29; File 5563, PTTĐICH, NACII, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>94</sup> “Lập Trường: không nên giết chết báo Thời Luận,” *Tự Do*, October 4, 1957.

Phan Quang Đán.<sup>95</sup> The first XYZ dispatch, “The letter addressed to my representative in the National Assembly,” appeared in the *Thời Luận* on December 28, 1957.<sup>96</sup> A highly critical “report card [kiểm điểm],” it accused the National Assembly of kowtowing to “authority” and ignoring its responsibilities to the people. In drafting the constitution, the congress had failed to protect basic freedoms such as press, assembly and movement and, at the same time, had provided the president “arbitrary [vũ đoán]” powers that included the authority to *suspend* the constitution.<sup>97</sup> “On behalf of the people,” the letter chastise,

you are bestowed the power to monitor the government, to prevent legislation that brings authoritarian dictatorship or abuses the people. Your purpose is to protect the people from threat of dictatorship. The essence of our democratic regime must be in the rule of law and the ability of the assembly and president to oversee one another. The problem lies in the fact that you have revealed yourselves to be afraid of the authority.<sup>98</sup>

The national assembly had forgotten who put it there, the people. Alluding to an old Vietnamese saying, XYZ wrote of the National Assembly, “having caught the fish, it tossed the net aside [*Đặng chim bẻ ná, đặng cá cho nom*].”<sup>99</sup> Of course, in criticizing the congress, the letter was also deeply critical of Diệm as well.

The letter, published just days before the president’s official birthday celebration on January 3, 1958, sent shockwaves through the government and enraged Diệm.

Reading his birthday address, a visibly upset Diệm warned of certain domestic

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<sup>95</sup> In November 2007, Trần Tử Thanh published an article entitled “XYZ, ông là ai [XYZ, who was he],” in which he claimed that the person known as XYZ was none other than his father, Trần Văn Tuyên. Outside of Thanh’s assertion, however, there is scant evidence to support this. See Trần Tử Thanh, “XYZ, Ông là ai,” *Pháp Luật và Đời Sống*, November 2007.

<sup>96</sup> XYZ, “Thư gửi cho ông đại biểu củ tôi trong Quốc Hội,” *Thời Luận*, December 29, 1957.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

“elements” bent on fomenting internal discord. Their activities threatened the solidarity of the Vietnamese people in their “sacred struggle” against Communism and would not be tolerated.<sup>100</sup> But the XYZ attacks had only begun. Over the next two months, the dispatches would criticize all aspects of the government.

Finally, on March 1, 1958, the *Thời Luận* published the tenth XYZ installment. Entitled “Letter to my Assembly Deputy [Thư gửi ông Nghị của tôi],” the writer eviscerated President Diệm:

You have established a sham democracy [một nền dân chủ giả dối] that attempts to disguise a dictatorship. Two people alone [Diệm and Nhu] arbitrate all of the South Vietnam’s activities, from big to small. We have no democratic freedoms and our independence has been subordinated to the United States... Are you proud of what you have created for Vietnam? You believe this to be a regime similar to that of the U.S. If they are similar, then they are as related as a skyscraper is to a tin roofed shack, in that both provide shelter...<sup>101</sup>

The government’s despotic policies *not* political opposition, the letter charged, had produced significant failures in the countryside and inspired a climate of distrust that was allowing the North to infiltrate the South undetected.

While the government ordered the issue, the *Thời Luận*’s 440<sup>th</sup>, impounded, an estimated 80,000 copies were sold anyway. The failure to confiscate the paper further humiliated Diệm. Stunned readers waited for the government’s hammer to drop on the newspaper.<sup>102</sup> They did not have to wait long. The 440<sup>th</sup> issue proved to be the *Thời Luận*’s last.

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<sup>100</sup> *Cách Mạng Quốc Gia*, January 4, 1958.

<sup>101</sup> “Lập Trường: Vụ án Thời Luận 1/3/1958,” *Tự Do*, March 12, 1958.

<sup>102</sup> Đặng Văn Nhâm, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Việt Nam: Từ Khởi Thủy Đến Hiện Tại (1861-1999)*; Trần Tử Thanh Trần Tử Thanh, “XYZ, Ông là ai?,” *Pháp Luật và Đời Sống*. The failure to confiscate the paper also apparently produced tensions between the president and Trần Chánh Thành, the

In a secret memorandum dated March 4, 1958, the Secretary of State of Internal Affairs wrote the Secretary of State of Justice that the XYZ series had stirred “alarm” among the people and was “damaging” to the security of South Vietnam.<sup>103</sup> Within two weeks, both Internal Affairs and Justice were treating Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, his wife and Phan Quang Đán as public enemies with “ties to the Communists” and issued an all-points bulletin warning that the three were flight risks.<sup>104</sup> By the end of the month, the three were in custody and the *Thời Luận* was closed. But the newspaper’s impact was not so easily extinguished

Not long after the *Thời Luận*’s closure, Phạm Việt Tuyền of the *Tự Do* wrote that the paper had touched a nerve with readers, who felt “dissatisfaction [sự bất mãn]” with regime policy.<sup>105</sup> The government refused to listen to the concerns of the people, preferring in Tuyền’s words, “to hear only praise” for the regime.<sup>106</sup> The *Thời Luận*’s critiques of the government and its policy reflected the people’s disillusionment. Moreover, by demonizing the paper, in fact, the government drew the public’s attention to the *Thời Luận*. Authorities had inadvertently become the paper’s foremost publicists.

The story of the *Thời Luận* also demonstrated an inherent problem with the *Bắc di cư* press. When Joseph Buttinger proposed the idea of newspapers dedicated to the plight

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Minister of Information. Thành would later be sacked as Diệm and Nhu increasingly distrusted the Information tsar.

<sup>103</sup> Secretary of State of Internal Affairs, 2524- BNV/NA/MP5 (Secret-Urgent), March 4, 1958, 23; File 5563, PTTĐICH, NACII, Hồ Chí Minh City.

<sup>104</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs, 463-BNV/NA/MP2 (Secret), March 20, 1958, 29; File 5563, PTTĐICH, Hồ Chí Minh City.

<sup>105</sup> “Lập Trường: Vụ báo Thời Luận 1-3-1958, III—Chứ nên chính mình tự đối mình,” *Tự Do*, March 14, 1958.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

of the northern migrant, Diệm had imagined them as an *extension* of authority, a medium through which to publicize [công bố] government policy and directives relating to northern refugee resettlement.<sup>107</sup> Yet many of these newspapers had concerns unrelated to the plans of Ngô Đình Diệm. A combination of the demands of market forces and the inability of many of these newspapers to reach the majority of *Bắc di cư* made attracting and maintaining a readership chief among them.

Unable to survive as a *Bắc di cư* newspaper, the *Thời Luận* recreated itself as the voice of political opposition in South Vietnam's press. Led by Phan Quang Đán and Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, the paper took on issues affecting all Vietnamese, not merely a special interest like the northern migrants. While it is unclear what Diệm hoped would become of these newspapers once *Bắc di cư* resettlement had run its course, clearly the *Thời Luận*'s transformation into the vanguard of political opposition was not it. Still one has to wonder, when Diệm cursed Đán and Thiện as "renegades" in May 1957, did he recognize, in retrospect, the central role that GVN policy played in the metamorphosis of the *Thời Luận* from northern migrant-established to national opposition newspaper.

The *Thời Luận* affair left the Diệm government even more distrustful of the press. Recalling the death of the *Thời Luận*, one journalist of the era noted that, "Everyone understood the implications."<sup>108</sup> Press opposition would no longer be tolerated. Never again would newspapers in Diệm's South Vietnam enjoy the relative space to pursue the kind of content that the *Thời Luận*, *Dân Chủ*, *Đường Sống* and *Văn Nghệ Tự Do* had. When two *Bắc di cư*-established newspapers, the *Tin Bắc* [News of the North] and *Người*

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<sup>107</sup> Minh Tâm, "Cần mở rộng cuộc thảo luận về tự do báo chí," *Thời Luận*, July 21-22, 1957.

<sup>108</sup> Đặng Văn Sung, "Nhớ lại báo Thời Luận," *Chính Luận*, March 3, 1965.

*Việt Tự Do* [The Free Vietnamese], published articles supporting Phan Quang Đán the following year, they were summarily closed.<sup>109</sup>

Nonetheless, the impact of the *Thời Luận* and, more broadly, *Bắc di cư*-established newspapers on the press, politics and culture of South Vietnam would continue to be felt for years to come. Newspapers like the *Thời Luận*, *Tự Do*, *Ngôn Luận* and *Dân Chủ* provided the ferment for many of the most well known journals and writers of the RVN period. Journals such as the *Sáng Tạo* [Innovation], *Văn Nghệ* [Arts and Literature] and *Văn* [Literature] as well as writers such as Mai Thảo, Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Thanh Tâm Tuyền and Dương Nghiễm Mậu, who later rose to fame, announced themselves on the pages of this *Bắc di cư* press.

With the fall of Diệm in November 1963, the new government relaxed the laws relating to print media and a press renaissance of sorts followed. Out of this emerged an array of new newspapers and journals led by the *Chính Luận* daily. Universally recognized as the most important newspaper of the post-Diệm era, the *Chính Luận* was established by Dr. Đặng Văn Sung and a group of *Bắc di cư* writers and journalists.<sup>110</sup> A friend and contemporary of Phan Quang Đán, Sung fashioned the *Chính Luận* after the *Thời Luận* of 1957.

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<sup>109</sup> Đặng Văn Nhâm, *Lịch Sử Báo Chí Việt Nam: Từ Khởi Thủy Đến Hiện Tại (1861-1999)*, 278.

<sup>110</sup> Hà Thúc Ký, *Sống còn với Dân Tộc*, Hồi ký Chính trị (N.p.: Phương Nam, 2009). Dr. Sung was born in Nghệ An province in 1905. He attended school in Huế and then university in Hanoi where he received a medical degree. He never, however, practiced medicine. Instead, he became involved in politics and was a founding member of the Đại Việt Party in 1940. In 1968, allegations were made that Sung was a part of an elaborate conspiracy of prominent *Bắc di cư* in South Vietnam with ties to and working on behalf of the Communist government in the North. Richard Critchfield, *The Long Charade: Political Subversion in the Vietnam War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968).

But the *Thời Luận*'s real legacy was as the first national opposition newspaper in Vietnam. Launched in the shadows of other more popular *Bắc di cư*-established newspapers, the chronicle of the *Thời Luận* again demonstrated the limits of the relationship between Ngô Đình Diệm and the northern migrants. However, unlike the story of the *Bắc di cư* in state-directed resettlement villages, the *Thời Luận*'s leadership converted its differences with the government into an effort to direct a national dialogue about the future of Vietnam. Distrustful from the beginning, the Diệm regime increasingly viewed the paper as challenging its mandate. In Diệm's eyes, loyalty and opposition were anathema.

The *Thời Luận* reflected the fractures caused in the wake of the Great Migration. It also, however, demonstrated the possibilities. While it is not the job of a historian to deal in counterfactuals, one cannot help but wonder what might have been had the *Thời Luận* survived. Could it have served as a medium for resolving the societal discord present in South Vietnam? Perhaps not, but for ten months during the Diệm-era, the *Thời Luận* shook the government and society of the South as Vietnam's first non-state-run national newspaper.

### *Conclusion: Fragmented Legacies*

On April 30, 1975, just hours after PAVN forces secured South Vietnam's Presidential Palace [Dinh Độc Lập], an urn was removed from the premises. What became of it remains mystery. This was, however, no case of plunder. The vase contained soil that had been collected from across northern Vietnam during the final weeks of the 1954-1955 Great Migration. Stored in a large iron chest, the earth was then carried southward aboard the *Ville de Haiphong*.

It arrived at Saigon's Catinat Wharf on May 18, 1955, the last official day of the exodus, and was paraded through the streets of Saigon in an event that authorities called *The Welcoming of the Sacred Earth* or *Tiếp Đón Đất Thiêng*.<sup>1</sup> Following a ceremony at Saigon's Botanical Gardens, authorities placed the soil inside several urns and deposited them at sites of official and ritual significance in Saigon. One of these was installed at the then-Prime Minister's residence, the Norodom Palace. It was this vase that North Vietnamese soldiers removed from the Presidential Palace nearly twenty years later, a symbol still pregnant with ghosts of the migration and partition of Vietnam. This was part of a broader effort to impose order and unity upon a defeated South.

This dissertation has aimed to illuminate the origins and causes of early fragmentation in the southern Vietnam by asking the question: how did the Great Migration and resettlement impact the RVN? More specifically, how did government policy, societal relations and the nature of the migrants themselves shape South Vietnam between 1954 and 1963? I have made the case that the migration and resettlement process

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<sup>1</sup> "Lời kêu gọi của Ủy Ban tổ chức Lễ rước đất miền Bắc," *Thời Luận*, April 14, 1955; "Đất thiêng miền Bắc đã vô Nam trong một cuộc rước long trọng tưng bừng và muôn vàn cảm động," *Thời Luận*, May 21, 1955.

caused deep division in all aspects of society and contributed to the regime's ultimate demise.

The transmigration had a remarkable impact on the economy, society, and government of the RVN. In the span of less than a year over 860,000 people fled from northern to southern Vietnam. This number was roughly 4% of the entire Vietnamese population and increased the South's inhabitants by almost 10%. Even in a developed country facing no significant political, social or economic upheaval, an exodus of this size would have a profound impact. In 1954, southern Vietnam was a land reeling from a host of problems associated with almost a decade of war and ninety years of colonialism. Trying to cope with these challenges was a new government assuming authority in a region of tremendous religious and ethnic diversity.

Diệm and the government plainly made promises regarding material assistance, land, and future prospects to northern migrants. This, however, should not be confused with GVN favoritism. Instead, it exposed a state unprepared for the events that transpired after 1954. As a result, the task of resolving the many resettlement challenges fell to the refugees themselves.

On the other hand, southerners did not respond to the new arrivals with open arms. Hostility and conflict marred relations between migrants and their southern counterparts. The GVN hoped that its campaign to promote northern migrant "self-reliance" would integrate *Bắc di cư* into their new communities and compel cross-regional cooperation. The campaign, however, proved ineffective, as migrants generally lived in unassimilated parishes and villages. Rather than a tool for integration, self-reliance served to reify and further entrench northern-southern division.

Under these circumstances, refugees turned to institutions and customs with which they were familiar—most notably the parish Church and corporate village—those common to the Red River Delta. Yet as this dissertation shows, while these forms of organization may have served as instruments of survival for migrants, they too became sources of regional tension, as we saw in the case of Cái Sắn. The GVN's inability to provide security, necessitated the new communities establish militias of their own. Ostensibly armed for the sake of protection against Communist forces, these self-defense forces increasingly provoked regional disputes.

Diệm envisioned that the Catholic Church and *Bắc di cư* press could play prominent roles in shoring up the GVN's own shortcomings. In so doing, however, Diệm ignored the contingent nature of these partnerships. In the case of the Catholic Church, Diệm and the PTUDCTN demanded clergy mediate on behalf of the government and mobilize migrants to relocate to areas that were often both remote and inhospitable. Potentially damaging to their relations with parishioners, Catholic clergy balked at the expectations. Likewise, Diệm's efforts to establish a press devoted to the needs of *Bắc di cư*, ironically, produced the regime's earliest popular anti-Communist voices of opposition in South Vietnam. It was also the impetus for the founding of arguably Vietnam's first national newspaper, the *Thời Luận*.

Despite the many shortcomings and failures of state-directed resettlement, it nonetheless played a formative role in the planning and execution of subsequent RVN land development projects, including the infamous Strategic Hamlet [Áp Chiến Lược] program. In particular, Diệm and others claimed that the supposed success of the Cái Sắn resettlement region in the lower Mekong Delta offered a blueprint for all of Vietnam.

Such promotion, however, functioned to transform *Bắc di cư* into the face of official policy, further straining sectional relations.

The story of the Great Migration and its impact on South Vietnam also complicates our understanding of Ngô Đình Diệm as a leader. Scholarship has reflexively used terms like ‘Diệm’ and ‘government’ interchangeably. As a result, the many problems facing southern society and politics are subject to dramatic oversimplification. Close attention to the state-directed resettlement helps to challenge this prevailing approach. Emerging as a complex individual navigating the needs and demands of numerous forces, Diệm’s failures do not appear to be the mark of an inept or power hungry leader but of a man with a fixed, perhaps intractable vision, facing an insurmountable situation.

\* \* \*

In 2007, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) established a national holiday to honor the Hùng Kings, the eighteen dynasties said to have ruled proto-Việt society for over twenty-five centuries prior to the Common Era and recognized as the supposed founders of the Vietnamese nation.<sup>2</sup> As part of this national project, the regime has incorporated numerous local temples dedicated to the ancient rulers dotting the country. This includes one along the banks of the Đông Bình canal in Kiên Giang province, in the heart of Cái Sắn (photograph below).

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<sup>2</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Thuần, *Thế thứ các triều vua Việt Nam* (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 2008), 14-15. Between 1962 and 1975, South Vietnam observed a national holiday in honor of the Hùng Kings.



The Hùng Kings National Founders' Temple, Kiên Giang Province

The temple was, in fact, erected by a group of *Bắc di cư* from Thái Bình province (in the Red River Delta) in 1957.<sup>3</sup> To the migrants, in addition to paying tribute to the Hùng Kings, they also intended the site as a monument to the land they fled during the exodus of 1954-1955. Later, at the height of the Vietnam War, the temple also became a site to venerate those who fell in battle fighting against the North and the National Liberation Front (NLF). So why would the present government, from whom the

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<sup>3</sup> The inhabitants of Đông Bình continue to use the pre-1975 name *Đền Quốc Tổ Hùng Vương* [Hùng Kings National Founders' Temple] rather than the current *Đền Thờ Vua Hùng* [The Temple to Venerate the Hùng Kings].

inhabitants of Đông Bình Canal took flight, want to nationalize a shrine pregnant with clear anti-Communist significance?

The answer lies in the fact that though the Vietnam War came to an end in 1975, the present government has confronted many of the same problems that its RVN predecessor did. *Bắc di cư* descendants continue to dwell in closed communities and have immediately detectable accents that distinguish them from their southern neighbors. ‘Southerners’ remain wary of ‘*Bắc di cư*’ as economic competitors.<sup>4</sup> When beyond earshot, they still speak of each other with derision.<sup>5</sup>

Ready to spend over forty billion đồng (nearly two million USD) on temple and grounds, SRV authorities see nationalizing the shrine as an opportunity not only to capture its narrative about the past but also to smooth over a persisting symbol of southern Vietnam’s fractured relations.<sup>6</sup> Yet symbolic acts such as this and the removal of the soil-filled urn also serve as a reminder that six decades after the Great Migration and almost forty years since the end of the war, Vietnam remains scarred by the legacy of *fragmented loyalties*.

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Ehlert, *Beautiful Floods: Environmental Knowledge and Agrarian Change in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), 132-133.

<sup>5</sup> Nguyễn Đức Lộc, *Cầu Hình Xã Hội: Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Bắc Di Cư tại Nam Bộ* (Hà Chí Minh: Đại Học Quốc Gia, TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2013), 61.

<sup>6</sup> “Những Đền Thờ Vua Hùng ở Đồng Bằng Sông Cửu Long,” *Cần Thơ*, April 13, 2013.

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*Cách Mạng Quốc Gia (CMQG)*

*Chính Văn*

*Dân Chủ*

*Dân Chúng*

*Dân Ta*

*Dân Việt*

*Đạo Binh Đức Mẹ*

*Đi và Sống*

*Đồng Nai*

*Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp (ĐMHCG)*

*Đường Sống*

*Hop Luu*

*Hòn Quê*

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*Nghien Cuu Lịch Su*

*Ngôn Luận*

*Nhân Dân*

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