



# V I E T N A M



## VIETNAM

Almost all of the Vietnamese people are peasants. Their main food is rice, but they also have some fruits and vegetables. Some can get fish from the canals and ponds near the great rivers where most of them live.

Most peasants live in tiny scattered towns in these river areas. The towns usually have a few hundred families and are located near the rice fields. A few of these towns together make up a village--the village owns some land too, and the poorer peasants without any land of their own are supposed to be able to farm the village's land.

It is hard to say exactly how poor Vietnamese peasants are. Since they eat the rice they farm, not much money is used. But we do know that it takes about one acre of rice field per person to feed people decently. Vietnam has very good land, and enough of it to go around. But still, for the last fifty or sixty years very few peasants have had nearly the one acre needed to survive decently.

This means that the peasants have been in a desperate struggle for survival--a struggle to get enough to eat and to keep the tax collector and landlord from taking the rice first. The peasants must use all their skills to squeeze more rice out of the land; as a result, they have become experts at building canals and dikes to hold water in the fields, at draining the water from the fields at just the right time, and at making tools to do this. Also, they must be experts at knowing exactly when the rain should come and exactly what the river level should be.

Building dikes, harvesting, and planting rice all need large numbers of people working together. This means that a lot of the work is done cooperatively; and the peasants in any town or village are very close with one another. Most of them are Buddhists, but most religious ceremonies in Vietnam are done at home, so not too many Vietnamese very often go to church (called a "pogoda").

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At the end of the 1880's, most of the European countries were in a race to see which could get the most and best colonies in Asia, Africa, and South America. Each European country wanted a bigger empire than the next one; to get this they needed colonies where they could draft soldiers, sell European products, and get native products at a very cheap price.

The French began making a colony out of Vietnam in the middle 1800's when they sent French priests over to try to convert the Vietnamese. But France didn't become really serious until about 1870. Then France was in a war with Germany and the French needed soldiers. So they began drafting the Vietnamese to serve in the war against Germany.

The French conquest of Vietnam took a long time, and wasn't really finished until 1930. The Vietnamese put up some resistance, but they never had the kind of organization necessary to defeat the French.

The French invented many ways of making a profit off the Vietnamese. They encouraged the Vietnamese to become opium dope addicts. The more addicts there were, the more opium the French could sell and make money on. This problem of drug addiction is very serious even today in Vietnam.

The same thing was done with alcohol. Each village was required to drink a certain amount of French alcohol each year--so the French were guaranteed a high profit. Salt, too, which the Vietnamese peasants desperately need, was controlled by the French and kept at a very high price.

But even more important, the French stole the land where the peasants lived. The French made enormous rubber, rice, and coffee plantations. The Vietnamese who used to work this land had the choice of either becoming wandering beggars; or they could become underpaid workers (nearly slaves) on the new plantations. Often they became sharecroppers on what used to be their own land. Much of what was harvested they had to give to the new French landlord.

The French also let landlords seize the common village lands. This land had always belonged to the whole village and was used by peasants who had no land of their own. But now, rent on this land had to be paid to landlords. Often the French gave these Vietnamese "collaborators" landlord rights to plantations or to the common village lands. Land thefts by the French and by their lackeys was often done with weapons. Peasants who resisted were killed.

The result was, in the course of French rule, more than two million people died of starvation--and by 1945, about 70% of the farmland in Vietnam belonged to the French or to their Vietnamese lackeys.

By 1945, one-twentieth of the population was French and Vietnamese landlords; they owned more than two-thirds of the land. This includes land which used to belong to peasants and common land which used to belong to villages. But the nineteen-twentieths of the people who were peasants owned altogether only about a quarter of the land (and most of them owned no land at all). (An exact way of putting it is: 5.2% of the people owned 71.5% of the land, and 94.8% of the people owned 28.5% of the land.)

We don't know how the French used all the land they stole by 1945. But we do have some figures on what was going on while the theft was still in process in 1930. At that time, the French did not even cultivate about half the land they stole!

About one-tenth of the French controlled land was turned into rubber plantations. The plantations were in an area of southern Vietnam where not many peasants lived. As a result, a group of labor contractors toured the rice farming areas of central and northern Vietnam. They looked for peasants who were deeply in debt for back rents, taxes, or loans which they had taken out in order to eat. The contractors lied about the rubber plantation work. Sometimes they forced peasants to come with them. About 80,000 peasants were recruited in this way by 1930. The peasants who reached the rubber plantations almost never were able to return home because the wages were so low that they soon fell into debt to the plantations. In effect, they became slaves for the rest of their lives.

About one-third of the French land was kept for rice farming, in the form of sharecropping plantations owned by the French (or Vietnamese) landlords. The peasants usually had to pay to the landlord between half and two-thirds of the rice they harvested. They also had to pay "extra rents" as "gifts" to the landlord; and sometimes peasants had to do forced labor on the landlord's rice fields. In addition, the peasants had to pay part of their rice as taxes to the French colonial government. This taxation was never set and you never knew how much you would have to pay. Good land was taxed higher than poor land. But if the French needed more money they would simply say that poor land was now "good land".

If the starving peasant could not pay all these rents and taxes, his landlord was usually willing to make him a loan. The loan, of course, was only the rent the peasant had paid the week before, but now there was 50% to 100% interest on it.

When the Vietnamese peasants were no longer able to keep up their debt payments they would give up their last rights to farming, or else sell their children to live without wages as household servants for the French.

In addition to the land system, the French also overturned every other part of Vietnamese life. Beginning in 1927, the French began appointing village officials to take the place of the elected village councils which the Vietnamese had always chosen. Once the village councils had been replaced by French appointed officials, it became much easier to take away the common lands, to collect taxes, and to make sure that things like the alcohol quota were kept.

The French also destroyed the Vietnamese school system. Before the French came, the central government of Vietnam was run by a group of very educated people called "mandarins". In order to get government jobs, the Vietnamese had to take national tests held every three years. Only those who were able to pass the test could get government jobs.

The result was that the Vietnamese had a school set up in every village, run by the village council. Of course, poor peasant children did not get as good an education as did the children of the mandarins; and the children of the mandarins were much more likely to pass the test to become mandarins themselves. But at least, nearly every Vietnamese child got some education--enough to read and write.

The French ended the examinations for mandarins in 1918. By the time the village councils had been replaced by French officials, the village schools had disappeared too. The French set up their own school system, but it was very small and not at all concerned with the average Vietnamese child. By 1938 only one in every five Vietnamese children got to go to elementary school. Far fewer people could read and write under the French than were able fifty years before.

Most Vietnamese were still peasants, but some lived in cities. They worked in small factories the French set up. Others worked on French ships, carrying products from Europe and America to sell to the Vietnamese, or carrying rubber or other exports to European markets.

One of these Vietnamese cabin-boys was Ho Chi Minh. He got to see the world in this way (When his ship stopped in Boston, Ho Chi Minh got a job as a dishwasher there.) In 1919, he wound up at a peace conference to end World War I. Here he saw the treaty signed where it was promised that all nations would be able to rule themselves.

But when Ho returned to Vietnam, he saw that the French had no intention of giving Vietnam the independence that the treaty promised. So Ho became an organizer, trying to build a movement in Vietnam which could kick the French out.

In 1930, Ho Chi Minh organized the Communist Party of Vietnam. The program of this Communist Party was to make Vietnam independent from the French; to set up a new "worker-peasant-soldier" government; to take over the French banks; to take back the plantations and give land to poor peasants; to have an eight hour working day in the cities; to abolish unfair taxes on the poor people; to bring back "freedoms" to the people; to set up education for everybody; and to have "equality between man and woman."

Soon there were demonstrations by peasants all over Vietnam to protest their starvation and misery. Next there were strikes in plantations and factories. Finally in two provinces the communists actually took over the village and began to give back the common village land to the peasants.

But the French struck back quickly. In 1939 Ho Chi Minh was arrested. By 1932, the French had arrested 10,000 political prisoners and had begun to execute many Communist Party leaders.

Ho Chi Minh was sent to Hong Kong where he got out of jail. He returned to Vietnam and until 1945 he travelled through the Vietnamese mountains organizing guerilla fighters and passing out leaflets.

During this time, the Communist Party was forced to go underground. In 1939 World War II broke out. Soon the Japanese took control of Vietnam from the French. The Vietnamese Communists began a new movement to fight the Japanese.

This new movement included not only the communists but anyone (even landlords) who wanted to get the Japanese and the French out of the country. It was called the Vietminh. By 1940, the Vietminh was strong enough to start a revolt in southern Vietnam. But the French turned against the Vietnamese and about 6000 Vietnamese were killed.

But by May, 1945, Ho Chi Minh had an army 10,000 strong which was gaining control from the Japanese. In August, the Japanese surrendered to the Vietminh; in September, the Vietminh put out a Declaration of Independence, and released the thousands of patriotic Vietnamese who were being held in prisons.

In the next few months, the Vietminh government, led by Ho Chi Minh, began a reform program. It outlawed prostitution and gambling, did away with many taxes on the poor, and began a campaign against illiteracy.

The Vietminh took the land back from many French (and collaborating Vietnamese) landlords. This land was given to the tenant farmers who lived on these plantations. On other lands, the Vietminh reduced all rents. The Vietminh had peasants elect new village councils. Common village lands were given back to these village councils. The Vietminh abolished debts after 1945. From 1945 to 1954, the Vietminh gave over two and a half million acres of land back to the peasants.

In 1951, the Vietminh made a new tax system. This new tax system was the most progressive tax system the Vietnamese ever had. "Poor peasants", according to the new law, had to pay from six to ten per cent tax; "middle peasants" had to pay fifteen to twenty per cent tax; and landowners had to pay thirty to fifty per cent tax.

But meanwhile the French, British, Russians, Chinese, and Americans decided that Vietnam should be returned to France as a French colony. They decided this despite the fact that the Vietminh had liberated Vietnam from the Japanese; and even though France had promised Vietnam independence.

The result was the "Indochinese war" which lasted until 1954. The French, even with enormous amounts of American aid, were finally defeated by the Vietminh at the famous battle of Dienbienphu. At the peace conference of 1954, it was decided that Vietminh troops would withdraw to the north and French troops would withdraw to the south--until elections were held to decide who should rule all of Vietnam.

But despite this, the Americans helped set up a government in the south--headed by a Vietnamese Catholic named Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem decided that there would be no elections to unify the country. This decision violated the basic idea of the peace treaty. The Vietminh never would have withdrawn from the territory they controlled unless they believed that they soon would be back, elected by the majority of the Vietnamese peasants.

This is how today's situation began; with a communist government headed by Ho Chi Minh in the northern part of the country; and an American supported government in the southern part, headed first by Diem and now by General Ky.

After 1954, the Diem government in the South began to take back many of the Vietminh reforms. The land which peasants had received under the Vietminh land reform was now taken back by the Diem (Saigon) government. And Diem appointed his own village chiefs to take control away from the councils elected while the Vietminh was in power.

In 1958, Diem announced his own "land Reform" law. This law allowed the Diem government to purchase land from landlords who owned more than 247 acres. This land was then to be sold to peasants who worked the land--the peasants could pay for the land in six yearly installments.

The American-supported Diem government was very proud of this law. They thought that if they let peasants buy land in this way, they would be outdoing the communists, who also promised land reform. But much to the surprise of Diem and his American advisors, the peasants began rioting when Diem announced this law.

The reason for this riot, which soon spread all over the country-side was that under Diem's "reform", peasants were being required to buy land which seven years earlier, the Vietminh had given to them free! And the peasants were being required to pay such high prices for the land that it wasn't much different from paying fantastic rents to the old landlords.

As the riot spread, many of the Diem-appointed village officials were killed by the peasants, and village councils were again elected. By the time the riot was over, a new guerilla movement was started. The new peasant guerilla movement was called the Vietcong. The Vietcong was made up mostly of former Vietminh soldiers and their sons.

In 1960, the Vietcong communists got together all of the south Vietnamese groups who had opposed the French and were now opposed to the American supported Diem government. These groups--trade unions, youth groups, socialists, democrats, some Catholic priests, farmers' groups, as well as the Communists and Vietcong--now make up the National Liberation Front (NLF). The National Liberation Front claims that it (and not the American supported Saigon Government) is the true government of Southern Vietnam.

The Vietcong and NLF were not formed only to protest Diem's phony "land reform". The NLF believes that in almost every area, life under the American supported governments (of Diem, Ky, and others) is not much different than under the French colonial government.

The American supported governments in Saigon have spent most of their time trying to fight the peasant movements, and make things attractive for businesses. Very little effort has gone into trying to improve the life of Vietnamese peasants.

The Diem government built miles of roads and railways, and built ports as well, but by 1958, half of the villages in South Vietnam did not even have a first aid station.

In spite of the great rice shortages all during the 1950's, the Diem government did not concentrate on increasing rice production. Instead, it concentrated on developing farms to grow jute for export.

By 1963, the Americans had trained 90,000 policemen, 102,000 "civil guards", and 122,000 militiamen (all this in addition to the regular army) for Diem and other puppet governments. But schools were being built so slowly that there will not be a school in every village until 1970.

In the late 1950's, the United States paid one billion dollars for Vietnamese businessmen to import American goods into Vietnam. But at the same time, the United States has spent only 1 and 1/2 percent that amount (15 million dollars) on improving Vietnamese agriculture. The result is that there is now a rich class of businessmen in Saigon. But the 90% of the population that lives off the land is still near starvation. Another interesting fact is that the United States has trained ten times as many policemen as it has trained agricultural experts.

Nearly a million Vietnamese suffer from malaria, and the United States has been unable to control this. But at the same time, we have trained the Vietnamese police so well that by now the entire Vietnamese population has been fingerprinted.

Sometimes the American trained Civil Guard recaptures a village from Vietcong control. Then the Vietminh land reform is undone and back rents and taxes are collected. Anyone suspected of sympathizing with the Vietcong is sent to "re-education camp" for brainwashing and torture. In the first five years of Diem's rule, one million citizens were arrested. By 1963 there were three million citizens who had been put in these concentration camps. A law passed in 1959 enables the government to punish by death anyone who disagrees with government policy. Today there are thousands of prisoners in American-paid-for jail who have never even been brought to trial.

Public education is still not far advanced in South Vietnam. Pupils are expected to provide their own textbooks and supplies--so this immediately rules out the poorest children. Only about 60% of all young Vietnamese children gets to go to elementary school. Only one child in seventeen of high school age gets to go to high school. And only one child in a thousand graduates from high school--these are mostly the children of businessmen and government officials in Saigon and a few children of landlords in Saigon-controlled areas.

Those children who do get to go to school probably don't learn very much about thinking for themselves. For all teachers and university professors in South Vietnam are required to go to political indoctrination courses run by the government.

There is no free press in South Vietnam. Over one hundred newspapers and magazines have been closed down by the government for saying the "wrong" things. Unions are not allowed to engage in any "political" activities.

Life for the poor people who live in the cities is no better than for peasants. In 1964 there was a general strike of 50,000 workers in Saigon--all electricity was off and the whole city was shut down. The strikers were protesting conditions

at an American owned clothing mill. Women who worked in the mill were not allowed to leave the mill area. Even on Sundays they could not leave without permission and without being searched. The women were required to work twelve or thirteen hours a day, they were not allowed to meet with each other, and on top of this-- they could be fired any time the factory manager pleased.

The servants, factory workers, messengers, and other poor people who live in Saigon usually go barefoot. Most of them live in barges or huts made of dirt and straw. The minimum wage for a man with a family of four is \$1.50 a day. And he, of course, unlike the peasant farmer, must buy his food. Those families who rent tiny apartments (without toilets, water, or electricity) must pay about \$9.00 a month rent--a large security deposit is also required.

Every day, these poor Saigon workers can see the way the rich Saigoneses live. The landlords, lawyers, and businessmen who live in Saigon have late model American or European cars (the poor people are lucky to have bicycles), live in fancy old French houses, have refrigerators, radios, and expensive Western food (not rice and fish sauce like the poor). The rich send their children to college in the United States or France; they have movie theaters, night clubs, and restaurants where they can take life easy.

The South Vietnamese tax system is as regressive as ever. It squeezes the peasant and city worker, while favoring the landlords and rich city dwellers. In 1962, for example, the South Vietnamese government raised slightly less than half its budget from sales taxes, land taxes, and a rice milling tax (a tax on all rice which was processed and sold in the cities.) The next largest tax was on imported goods--this tax did not affect the poor Vietnamese very much at all. Alcohol and tobacco are taxed very highly and there is also a tax of \$10 a year on every person in South Vietnam. There is an income tax of 2% on everyone.

The slogans of the National Liberation Front are "Land to the Tiller", "The Soldier Helps the Peasant", and "The Government Exists for the People". So it is not hard to see why the average Vietnamese peasant supports the Vietcong against the American supported Saigon dictatorship. In fact the peasants support the guerillas so much that it is impossible for the Saigon government to control much of the country-side. As soon as government troops leave a village, the Vietcong assassinate the government appointed village chief--to the satisfaction of the villagers.

In order to try to keep the Vietcong out of the villages, the Saigon government has instituted the world's largest and most horrible "urban renewal" program. This is called the "strategic hamlet" program. Under this program, villages are burned to the ground and the peasants are forced to move to a new "village" inside a barbed wire fence. Everybody in the new "strategic hamlet" is given an identity card; nobody is allowed to leave the fort without permission, and a strict curfew is enforced.

But even this program has not convinced the peasants of the Vietcong that the Saigon government is worth supporting. By 1962, 3,000 strategic hamlets had been built; more than 2,000 of these were destroyed by the hamlet residents and the Vietcong as soon as the government looked the other way.



The program of the National Liberation Front promises to overthrow the American supported Saigon government; to elect a democratic government with freedom of speech, of the press, and of belief; to outlaw all illegal arrests; to take away the property of American businesses; to help Vietnamese industry replace imported products; to modernize farming equipment and to try to convert bad land into rice land; to set up a fair tax system; to abolish firings of workers without reason and to protect the working conditions of city workers; to set up a welfare system for those who cannot work and whose crops have failed; to set up good relations with the Ho Chi Minh government of North Vietnam; and to abolish strategic hamlets and other types of concentration camps.

Of course, there is no way of knowing whether the National Liberation Front is telling lies about its aims; there is no way of knowing whether the NLF will be able or willing to put its promises into effect if they win the war. All the Vietnamese peasant can do is make a choice between the promises of this movement or the reality of the present Saigon government. Which do you think they should choose?

The Saigon government tax system is as regressive as ever. It assesses the peasant and city worker, while favoring the landlords and rich city dwellers. In 1962, for example, the Saigon government raised slightly less than half the budget from sales taxes, land taxes, and a rice milling tax (a tax on all rice which was processed and sold in the cities). The next largest tax was on imported goods--this tax did not affect the poor Vietnamese very much at all. Alcohol and tobacco are taxed very highly and there is also a tax of \$10 a year on every person in South Vietnam. There is an income tax of 2% on everyone.

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This paper was written by members of JOIN (Job's or Income Now). JOIN is a group of whites, mostly Southerners, who moved to Chicago seeking employment.

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