Why Vietnam Isn't Talking About 1968

Fifty years after a turning point in the Vietnam War, the country's communist government is stamping out public discussion of painful memories.

By BENNETT MURRAY · February 15, 2018

HANOI, Vietnam — Ngoc Dai, a 23-year-old soldier in the People's Army of Vietnam, was fighting the Americans near the besieged Khe Sanh combat base when his unit received elating orders. They were to emerge from the jungle, "liberate" the old imperial capital of Hue in central Vietnam and stir up a nationwide popular uprising. It was January 30, 1968, three years after President Lyndon B. Johnson had ordered 125,000 American troops to Vietnam to ward off a communist takeover of the south, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Dai and his comrades saw things differently: With nationalistic pride, they were on a mission to reunify Vietnam, launching the surprise assault on South Vietnamese and American troops now known as the Tet Offensive.

"The revenge deep inside the northern soldiers was so big," Dai, 73, said in an interview at his Hanoi home in January. "All the soldiers believed we could liberate all the country."

Nguyen Qui Duc, only 9 years old at the time, has a very different memory of early 1968. Duc was visiting family for the Lunar New Year, known as Tet, Vietnam's most important holiday. His father was a regional governor attempting to maintain a semblance of normalcy in South Vietnam as the war raged. A ceasefire was in place for Tet, with much of the South Vietnamese military on leave. It was meant to be a joyous week providing a reprieve from the war. But while sleeping in his grandfather's house, Duc was awakened around 1 a.m. by gunshots. The soldiers assigned to protect the family had vanished, with men speaking in the distinctive northern Vietnamese accent closing in.

"My mom went to the door and said, 'I have two kids in here,' and the soldiers said, 'We'll shoot anybody we find if you don't tell us about everyone here,'" Duc recently recalled at the bar and restaurant he now owns in Hanoi. He saw his father taken away and presumed him killed, while the rest of the family huddled in a basement for several days until they were rescued by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces.

On the occasion of its 50th anniversary, the battles of the Tet Offensive, in Hue and elsewhere, have been discussed and dissected in news outlets, books, symposiums, TV segments and exhibits across America, where the attacks are remembered as the moment that turned U.S. public opinion against the war. But in Vietnam, the anniversary of this moment in history, leading up to the Tet holiday on February 16, is being observed very differently—if at all. In fact, Dai's and Duc's willingness to share their memories is a rarity in a country where the event is seldom discussed publicly.

Despite Hanoi's gradual market reforms and increasing friendliness with the United States, old divisions between north and south remain highly sensitive in Vietnam. For the millions of South Vietnamese who found themselves on the war's losing side, along with the handful of northerners who have come to regret communist rule, the anniversary is a painful reminder of a violent past. Those who lived through the Tet Offensive also tend to fear speaking out in a country where vaguely worded laws prohibit "propagating" against the state, a crime punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Accounts of a series of communist purges in the city of Hue—among the bloodiest battles in the war—have been all but stamped out by the regime, which considers the subject of Vietnamese killing their own among the most sensitive of all topics.

When the 50th anniversary of start of the Tet Offensive arrived in Vietnam, there were few signs of any widespread commemoration. Hanoi's communist party propaganda posters—an omnipresent feature of streetscapes here—instead celebrated the 88th anniversary on February 3 of the founding of the party. The main commemoration of 1968 took the form of a lavish banquet for senior party officials in Ho Chi Minh City, complete with acrobatic performances and traditional dance.

Among Vietnamese citizens, memories of the Tet Offensive are brought up publicly only in vague terms that portray the party in a celebratory light, says Nguyen Quang A, 72, a retired businessman and former communist party member turned dissident activist in Hanoi. "I think they want to bury all the old memories, because that undermines their legitimacy," Quang A says of the communist party in Vietnam.

Duc, whose father, the civil servant, was sent to a prison camp for 12 years without trial, says the lack of wider recognition of old suffering is personally painful. "It hurts. You walk around and see a lot of people, particularly the young people, who don't know what happened," he says.

Most accounts of the Hue battle and purges—disproportionately American accounts—are shared safely out of reach from Vietnam's well-oiled police state. But in recent weeks, I tracked down a handful of aging witnesses of what happened in Hue who agreed to speak frankly on record. With one exception, they have never before spoken out about their memories of the bloodshed in 1968.

The battle at Hue, which raged from January 30 until early March, was at the heart of the Tet Offensive. While other attacked cities were cleared of communist forces within a few days, Hue was seized almost entirely, leaving only small pockets of U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers to ultimately ward off the communists in a vicious monthlong battle.

Throughout the battle for Hue, 216 American troops, mostly Marines, were killed as they fought house to house. The communists fought hard, "grabbing them by the belt buckle," as they described their strategy—that is, staying as close to the American lines as possible to prevent artillery strikes. The North Vietnamese army listed 2,400 killed, while South Vietnam recorded 452 soldier's dead. Although the communist forces were eventually forced to abandon Hue, their ability to hold on to the city for as long as they did undermine the Johnson administration's claims that an American victory was in sight.

Duc recalls that while many in Hue were unhappy with the American presence in Vietnam, the residents largely welcomed the American intervention in the battle, which drove off the communists from the city until their ultimate return in 1975. "The Americans were the saviors in that particular case, saving the city and saving others," he says, adding that Hue was a center of scholarship and debate that tended to shun both foreign interventionism and communist totalitarianism.

Claims of mass civilian killings by the communists in Hue have been shoved under the rug in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government only vaguely admits to "mistakes" committed during the battle and fiercely refuses to characterize the events as "massacres," as is common outside Vietnam. The first reports of such killings originated from U.S. government studies conducted in the immediate aftermath of the battle. Mass graves were discovered around the city—many for victims of the crossfire and bombings that flattened Hue, while other people were found bound and executed, in some cases evidently buried alive. The official South Vietnamese estimate for extrajudicial killings carried out by the communists was 4,856, while Douglas Pike, a U.S. foreign service officer who documented the battles, estimated 2,800.

Mark Bowden, author of the 2017 book *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*, the most authoritative history of the battle, says he estimates about 2,000 killings took place in pre-planned "purges" of citizens working for the southern regime, though he believes the true number will never be known. "Certainly, everyone I interviewed, people who fought for the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese army or civilians—no one denied it had happened. The only dispute seems to be over how many," Bowden says.

In a country marred with a 2,000-year history of bloody wars against foreign invaders, the fratricidal nature of the killings made the communists "much more cruel than ISIS," says Truong Van Quy, a 74-year-old Hue resident who makes his living teaching guitar. Quy was a young journalist for South Vietnamese state media during the Tet Offensive; when news of the attack reached him in Saigon, where he was based, he headed home to Hue to see the carnage firsthand. While his family, who worked for the Americans, had safely fled, many of his neighbors were less lucky. "I saw people digging up the mass graves, people buried alive," Quy recalls.

The North Vietnamese soldier Dai, who is now a composer and among the relatively few Vietnamese citizens who openly calls for an end to single-party rule, remembers seeing people being taken away in vehicles. They were affiliated with the South Vietnamese government, he was told by his superiors, while the men taking them away were part of a "secret unit." Dai did not personally witness the prisoners' fates, but he says his friends received chilling orders: "They took them to the cars and they said these men needed to go to re-education. … I heard some stories from other soldiers that they had a mission to dig a mass grave."

Duc, who emigrated to California in 1975 and became a naturalized U.S. citizen before returning to Vietnam in 2006, tries to avoid visiting Hue these days. Invoking the terminology of Vietnamese culture, which is steeped in belief in the supernatural, he says that "ghosts" haunt the city. "You come to a particular corner of the street, and you remember that there was a grave there in 1968," he says. (He recently wrote about family's experience in an essay for *Smithsonian* magazine.)

Tran Viet Man, the 54-year-old abbot of Hue's Vien Quang Buddhist pagoda, says memories of Hue live on if not in public then in the private ancestral worship that permeates Vietnamese society—family members of the perished honor their ancestors quietly in their homes, for instance. Man says the people of Hue have achieved *hoa binh*—the Vietnamese word for the absence of war. They have not, however, reached *thai binh*, or harmony. "The war is finished, but the peace has not arrived completely," he says.

Nguyen Quang A, the communist turned dissident, contrasts the Vietnamese government's unwillingness to acknowledge the past with the long reconciliation following the American Civil War. Such healing, he points out, takes time even in democratic societies— "still there are problems" between the northern and southern United States, he says.

Attempts at reconciliation are virtually nonexistent in Vietnam. Half a century after the Tet Offensive, the communist party still maintains that there was no civil war. To express any other viewpoint is to be labeled a "reactionary" by the state and society, which can yield consequences ranging from unemployment to lengthy prison sentences.

"The rhetoric of the war was that the party led the war against the Americans, that there was no other Vietnamese side that didn't believe in communism," Duc explains. "To say there was no civil war is to ignore the millions of Vietnamese that died fighting each other, and that hurts and angers me."

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https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/15/vietnam-war-government-accounts-1968-216973