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30 Years Ago...

The fall of Saigon

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Description:

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Thirty years ago, the Vietnam War came to an end with the fall of Saigon. This was the final episode in the epic struggle of the Vietnamese people to liberate and unify their country. In the course of over thirty years of war and suffering, they inflicted not just one but two major defeats on imperialism.

Already in 1954, the forces of the Viet Minh under Vo Nguyen Giap had inflicted a crushing military defeat on the French colonial army at Dien Bien Phu. This victory was not only important for Indochina: it reverberated around the world, providing formidable encouragement to other colonial peoples fighting for independence.



North Vietnamese tank breaks down gates of US embassy

In 1954, Vietnam was left divided: in the North, in Hanoi, the regime of the Vietnamese Communist Party, in the South a pro-Western regime based in Saigon. It rapidly became clear that the unification evoked in the Geneva Accords of 1954 was not going to happen peacefully. Furthermore the Saigon regime was ruthlessly hunting down those it defined as communists. In 1959, the Communist Party leadership in Hanoi decided to launch an armed struggle to unify the country and in 1960 the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was formed.

The main backer of the Saigon regime was now no longer France, but the United States. US involvement rapidly escalated, from a few hundred advisers in 1961 to 500,000 combat troops by 1965. The Vietnamese fought the army of the most powerful imperialist power to a standstill. The Tet offensive in 1968 convinced the Americans that they could not win militarily, and the movement against the war was shaking America itself. Following the Paris Peace Accords, the last American troops left Vietnam in March 1973. That was the second major defeat inflicted on imperialism by the Vietnamese.



Desperate pro-American Vietnamese try to climb into US embassy compound

The Saigon regime was now on its own. The decision was taken in Hanoi at the end of 1974 to launch a military offensive to conclude the final stages in the unification of the country. The Vietnamese leaders thought it would take up to two years. In the event it took four months, as the South Vietnamese Army unraveled. By the end of March the

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old imperial capital, Hue, and the former massive US base at Da Nang had fallen. The fall of Saigon on April 30th was the final act. The debacle of Washington and its Vietnamese clients was symbolized by the disorderly flight from the US embassy.

Three elements explain the victory of the Vietnamese. The first was the struggle on the ground in Vietnam, which was not only military. The military struggle was the expression of a revolutionary process of national and social liberation that had mass support. Of course the North Vietnamese regular army played a decisive role. But for example, the NVA never penetrated into the key region of the Mekong delta. There the fighting was always done by local NLF units, and by the time Saigon fell, the delta had basically liberated itself [1].

The second element was the demoralization and disintegration of the US army. This was a result not only of the casualties suffered but of the realization by soldiers of the mainly conscript army that they were up against a whole people. The disaffection of the US forces was helped by, and in its turn reinforced, the international campaign in solidarity with Vietnam, and above all the mass movement in the USA to bring the troops home. The combination of the quagmire in Vietnam and the effects of Vietnam on American society convinced Nixon that it was time to get out. [JPEG - 44 kb] Helicopter on roof of US embassy evacuates US personnel and South Vietnamese employees

Thirty years later it is important to remember how and why the Vietnamese won. It is important whatever one thinks of the Vietnamese regime before and after 1975, and whatever one's opinion of the processes at work in Vietnam today [2] America has still not recovered from the "Vietnam syndrome".

In spite of the aggressiveness of Bush and the neo-conservatives, the American ruling class remains haunted by the memory of Vietnam - not just of the 57,000 US soldiers who died there, but of the radicalization and destabilization of US society as a result of the war. As Bush struggles to extricate himself from Iraq, while continuing to threaten Iran, Syria, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela...it is worth remembering that for all its military might, US imperialism is no more invincible today than it was thirty years ago.



Final indignity: with no room to house them on carriers, US sailors threw dozens of helicopters from Saigon into the sea

[1] Le Monde, 2nd May, 2005.

[2] See interview with Tuan, IVP 366, April 2005.