

MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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MEMORANDUM FOR: DR. KISSINGER

THROUGH: JOHN H. HOLDRIDGE *JH*

FROM: W. R. SMYSER *WR*

SUBJECT: Communist Problems in South Vietnam
During the 1954-59 "Cease-fire"

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE INSTRUCTIONS APPLY
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This memorandum is an account of the disintegration of the Communist apparatus in South Vietnam during the 1954-59 "cease-fire" period. The account is based on a captured report which has provided us with a revealing description of a significant and little known chapter in the history of the Communist movement in South Vietnam.

The severe Communist reverses suffered during this post-Geneva period probably have much to do with Hanoi's refusal to agree to a cease-fire under present conditions. Until they have gained the upper hand in South Vietnam, both politically and militarily, the Communists no doubt fear that a cease-fire would lead to a repetition of the "dark days" of 1954-59.

Past experience produced present Communist fear of a cease-fire. In rejecting the President's October 7 call for a cease-fire, the Communists claimed that this would lead to a repetition of the "dark days" of the 1954-59 period of "restored peace." This historical comparison was more than rhetorical. It reflects a deepseated determination on the part of the Hanoi leadership to avoid, at all costs, the kind of cease-fire which nearly wiped out the Party apparatus in South Vietnam in the years following the 1954 Geneva Accords.

The traumatic experience of the 1954-59 period no doubt continues to strongly influence Hanoi's attitude toward cease-fire under present conditions. It must also be remembered that the principal Party leader in South Vietnam during the first three years of this disastrous period

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was none other than the present Party chief, Le Duan.

Nothing better illustrates the Party's trials and tribulations during this first "cease-fire" period than a remarkably candid and revealing captured Party report on the Nam Bo Regional Party Committee, the principal Communist organization in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1961.

The following account of the 1954-59 period has been distilled from this lengthy and somewhat disjointed captured report by Bill Stearman. For brevity and clarity most of those parts of the report used in this account have been condensed and paraphrased without, however, distorting the sense of the original text; moreover, no effort was made to correct any factual errors. Although the report was hortative in intent, it probably accurately reflected Hanoi's perception of the events of this period.

A Guide to Current Communist Attitudes Toward Cease-fire

The analysis of this document shows how the Communist experience with the post-Geneva cease-fire probably has colored their view of any cease-fire, making them unlikely to accept one unless they believe that the situation on the ground favors them to such a degree that they will not risk losing their apparatus. It is also apparent that they count heavily on the support which their military effort can give their political pressures.

I doubt that we can conclude that the Communists would never accept a cease-fire, because under certain circumstances they might see it as a preferable option to continued fighting. But they will be very cautious.

On the other hand, the document shows two positive things which we should bear in mind:

-- That virtually nobody on our side seemed to realize how badly the Communists were doing during the 1954-59 period. This could be important when one considers that some of the developments we see today parallel those of 1954-59, particularly the lack of military support for the local Communist infrastructure.

-- That we should not be as concerned about the GVN apparatus being overwhelmed by the Communists in a cease-fire situation. We

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would obviously need to negotiate some very careful controls over any cease-fire, but there is no reason for panic.

The Document is also curiously revealing about Hanoi's mistrust of Moscow. It at least partly blames the 1954-59 reverses on an overly faithful adherence to the Soviet "peaceful coexistence" line. Moreover, the implementation of de-Stalinization in North Vietnam, a la Khrushchev, permitted serious dissent and even revolt.

A COMMUNIST VIEW OF THE 1954-59 "CEASE-FIRE"

Initial Communist Overconfidence. In 1954, the Communists regarded the Diem regime as politically and organizationally weak with no real control, at any level, over the army, the administrative machinery, the police, or the public security services. It was regarded as a relatively harmless "democratic bourgeois" regime which relied entirely on North Vietnamese refugees, Catholic priests, small loyal military units, and U.S. prestige. Furthermore, in 1954 and 1955, it was so preoccupied with eliminating French influence and political rivals that it devoted little attention to thwarting Communist designs.

On the other hand, the Communists were supremely confident of their own strength. They had a superior organization and mass popularity derived from having led the anti-French resistance from 1946 to 1954. They were convinced that the existing balance of forces favored them. Furthermore, their own leaders convinced them that the 1954 Geneva Accords would be implemented and the country would be reunited under Communist control within two years, regardless of Diem.

This overconfidence and a general "obsession with the illusion of peace" led to a widespread breakdown in Party discipline and to a lackadaisical attitude among a majority of the Party members. This resulted in a general purge in the Nam Bo Region which reduced Party strength from a pre-1954 level of 60,000 to 15,000 hardcore members. The Party Committee also began strengthening its clandestine organization; however, a large number of Party cadre continued to operate openly -- a manifestation of overconfidence which was later to have disastrous results.

Emphasis on Political Struggle. As soon as peace was restored in 1954, the Party shifted almost its entire effort to the political struggle and made little preparation for a possible return to military struggle. The

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Party then had a vital stake in preserving the Geneva Accords which, it believed, would bring the Communists to power in South Vietnam within two years. Moreover, the population was tired of war and opposed to further armed struggle. In addition, the dominant "international" (i. e., Soviet) line called for "peaceful coexistence."

At this point, the Party did not intend to overthrow the Diem regime, but rather gradually to gain control of it by forcing Diem to take Communists or "progressives" into his government. In this connection, the Party called for a National Assembly election to enable them to gain control of this body. The army, they believed, could be subverted and converted into a "revolutionary" army.

The political struggle was concentrated primarily in urban areas and was aimed at creating popular pressure for implementing the Geneva Accords, holding National Assembly elections, and normalizing relations with North Vietnam. Party cadre openly agitated for these goals by organizing demonstrations, (and later strikes) and by mobilizing the intellectuals' "peace movements," and the various "mass organizations" (for farmers, women, students, etc. which were later to form the National Liberation Front) they had created. By and large the rural areas were neglected -- an oversight that was later much regretted -- and even the Party Regional Committee operated out of a provincial capital.

Troubles with Diem. The Diem regime remained unfazed by these Communist political efforts. By July 1955, it became clear to all that Diem did not feel himself bound by the Geneva Accords; was not going to establish "normal" relations with North Vietnam; and was beginning to take an active anti-Communist position. This made Party members increasingly skeptical of the Party's reliance on the Geneva Accords; however, they continued to expect a favorable outcome, possibly through the intervention of North Vietnamese troops.

In 1956, Diem had largely eliminated his non-Communist opposition, and consolidated his control over the army and governmental machinery. He then concentrated on gaining control of the population and eliminating the Communists -- who were quite literally caught out in the open. Since much of the Communist effort was overt, many Party cadre were easily identified and arrested.

The Party was then forced into a precipitous effort to go underground. This largely destroyed the effectiveness of the previously "legal" peace

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movements and mass organizations, and created considerable confusion in the Party. Most of the remaining overt cadre were instructed either to go covert and move to other areas or to stop operating temporarily. Many of those who tried to go covert were arrested anyway, and most of those ordered to stop temporarily stopped permanently. The Party even tried a "false rallier" program; however, most of those involved either dropped out of the movement, really defected, or were arrested.

The Party rank and file became disillusioned, not only because of the disarray in their own ranks, but also because of the disarray in the world Communist movement brought on by the de-Stalinization campaign, launched at the 20th Soviet Party Congress, which resulted in open revolts not only in Hungary and Poland, but also in North Vietnam. Furthermore, descriptions of North Vietnam brought south by refugees did much to discredit Communism in South Vietnam.

As the Party suffered one blow after the other, many members began openly to question the Party Committee's policy of sole reliance on the political struggle which was still being doggedly pursued despite the radically changed situation.

Party Hesitant to Engage in Armed Struggle

The Party Committee, unimpressed by the weak forces under Diem's command, made only halfhearted attempts to replace the Viet Minh troops withdrawn to the North in 1954-55. Some units armed with cached weapons were created in more remote areas, but were used primarily for local defense and terrorist activities. Initially, the Communists seemed to have relied more on the armed forces of various religious sects and other groups (e. g., Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen) which the Communists had infiltrated and which were actively fighting Diem forces.

The Party Committee seriously underestimated Diem's ability to suppress these dissident elements and was ill-prepared to cope with Diem's strengthened military position. Despite the substantial losses resulting from Diem's anti-Communist campaign, the Party continued its increasingly futile emphasis on political struggle -- to the dismay of the hard-pressed Party rank and file. In an effort to preserve its armed units, the Party generally ordered them to avoid combat which, in turn, prevented them from adequately protecting the Party infrastructure. In 1957, Communist armed units were increased and engaged in limited

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actions, but were still mostly kept out of combat. This led to a general demoralization of the troops, and to a reluctance on the part of the population to support them against the more successful Diem forces. Armed propaganda missions could not be effectively carried out and terrorist tactics had little impact. Communist military impotence had, by 1958, brought the Party's efforts to a virtual standstill.

How Diem Suppressed the Communist Movement

From 1955 to 1959, the Diem regime took a number of steps which severely crippled the Communist movement in South Vietnam. In 1956, Diem gained control of the entire administrative machinery down to the district level -- and later to the village level. The various branches of the regular armed forces were increased and modernized. Regional and Popular Forces and Montagnard units were organized. Armed units of religious sects were organized into Regional Forces which were, in turn, upgraded to main force units. The People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF) was created to guard villages and hamlets. Military bases, airports, and strategic highways were constructed and expanded. GVN military units were stationed in traditional Communist bases areas (e. g., Zone D, and the U Minh Forest). To facilitate control of these areas, they were divided into smaller areas through construction of canals and roads and settled by loyal groups of refugees.

An extensive intelligence and police network was organized which made use of Communist defectors and former French agents and which had numerous agents planted throughout the population and in all civilian and military organizations. Party cadre and members were arrested or killed in large numbers. Diem created his own party and political organizations. He required the rural population to join these organizations or the PSDF and carried out an extensive anti-Communist indoctrination program. The regime further tightened control over the population through the "inter-family system," travel controls, curfews, and restrictions on meetings of over three people. The regime subjected the families of known Party cadre and regroupes to close surveillance, pressure, and indoctrination. When cadre tried to enter villages, guards sounded the alarm and cadre were pursued and arrested "by the people."

By 1959, Diem controlled most of the Nam Bo Region, including the most remote areas, and his agents could, with impunity, enter most villages to arrest suspected Communists. Diem's anti-Communist campaign, which

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intensified in 1958 and peaked in 1959, wreaked havoc with the Party apparatus and threatened it with near annihilation.

The Party Apparatus Disintegrates

By mid-1959, the entire Party apparatus had seriously disintegrated. Party strength in the Nam Bo Region dropped from 15,000 in 1955 to 5,000 in 1959. Most provincial Party chapters were down to a handful of members. For example, the key Party Chapter of Saigon's neighboring Gia Dinh Province dropped from 1,000 in 1954 to 385 in 1957, and finally to only 6 in 1959. (The Province Party Secretary committed suicide.) The important Kien Tuong Province Chapter was down to three members. Thousands of Party members, Communist sympathizers, and their families fled to remote jungle and forest areas. About 15,000 in Ca Mau Province alone took refuge in the U Minh Forest. Eighty to ninety percent of the Party organizations in many of the key base areas (e.g., the U Minh Forest area) were destroyed.

From 1954 to 1959, hundreds of district, provincial, and even regional Party Committee members, and thousands of ordinary Party members and cadre were killed. Many more were arrested. Those remaining were given greater responsibilities which, if performed conscientiously, exposed them to even greater danger. Many Party members lived the year round in tunnels, emerging only at night.

By 1959, Party followers were confused and demoralized and generally refused to endanger themselves by any further participation in a futile political struggle. For example, the Party's call for demonstrations in Saigon for "social welfare" and "democratic rights" was heeded by only eighty people. "From the middle of 1958 to the end of 1959, the revolutionary movement in South Vietnam remained at a standstill."

Party Reappraised Southern Strategy

The report was highly critical of the Nam Bo Party leadership's continued concentration on the political struggle after it was apparent that only a shift to military struggle would save the situation. The leadership was, inter alia, blamed for erroneously applying the "international" (i.e., Soviet) peaceful coexistence line to the special situation in South Vietnam. The report pointed out that "even" the resolution of the Soviet 20th Party Congress indicated that revolution by peaceful means could only be achieved in certain democratic capitalistic countries.

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Differences within the Party Committee on the "peaceful struggle" issue seem to have come to an end during the Committee's 3rd Conference in August 1958 where it was unanimously agreed that a flexible combination of military and political struggle was needed; however, little was done to increase military activities.

The report criticized the Committee for disregarding the concern of the Party rank and file and for only heeding instructions from "higher echelons" (presumably Hanoi); furthermore, until early 1959 the Committee had hesitated to explain its problems to the Central Committee (in Hanoi).

The Party's basic policy was finally clarified in January 1959 when the Central Committee's 15th Conference decided to step up the military struggle in the South. This decision, plus a mid-1959 Central Committee directive on combatting Diem's 10/59 Law (designed, inter alia, to eliminate the Communist apparatus) finally provided the Nam Bo Committee with clear instructions to resume open warfare.

Renewed Military Struggle Helps Restore the Party

In October 1959, Communist forces in Nam Bo took the offensive, concentrating on attacking Popular Force units and eliminating GVN administrative personnel. The military effort was particularly strong in Kien Hoa Province where, prior to Tet 1960, Communist forces attacked an ARVN regimental stronghold at Trang Sup "annihilating" one main force battallion and seizing 1,000 weapons (sic). This stimulated attacks in other Nam Bo provinces.

As a result of stepped-up Communist military activity and increased terrorism, GVN personnel at the village and hamlet level were shaken into passivity or flight. GVN armed forces were driven into a defensive position and would launch only large operations. They did not dare operate in smaller units or penetrate deeply into Communist areas.

As a result of stepped-up Communist military activity, the Party apparatus grew stronger. For example, in the 21 villages of Kien Tuong Province (west of Saigon) the Party had only one small chapter in October 1959, but in a short time this grew to 20 chapters. In December 1960, the Party created the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) in order to capitalize on this political momentum and to attract a broad popular following.

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Evaluation

This remarkable document provides us with an unusually candid and (by Communist standards) objective account of a little known, but crucial development in Communist movement in South Vietnam. We have no reason to doubt the document's authenticity; although, the first translation contains some inaccuracies which are now being corrected before the document is released to the public.

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