

# 40 Years after the end of the Vietnam War

## Interview with historian Andreas Margara



Andreas Margara at Điện Biên Phủ, 2014

The 30th of April marked the 40th anniversary of the fall / liberation of Saigon which was the end of what we call the Vietnam War, the longest military conflict in the 20th century and the first military defeat of the U.S. How has this been celebrated in Vietnam?

Contrary to the western perspective where April 30th is commonly considered to be the date marking the Fall of Saigon, Vietnam officially commemorates a day of victory in the defeat of the biggest military superpower in the world: the U.S. Army.

This year, the 40th anniversary of the triumph has been celebrated with grand military parades and traditional performances in Saigon, the city that formally changed its name to Ho Chi Minh City after the reunification of Vietnam in 1976.

In the presence of numerous government representatives, members of the communist party of Vietnam and war veterans, more than 6,000 people took part in the historical re-enactment of the arrival of the northern troops and the liberation of the city in 1975. For the victory festivities, the whole city was blanketed in red banners and the flags of the communist party.

Vietnam is a very young country. Most Vietnamese living today in Vietnam were born after the end of the war. How is this young generation dealing with the memory of war?

Today, more than two-thirds of Vietnam's young population has been born after 1975 and does not have vivid memories of the American War. Although Ho Chi Minh still is respected as the father of an independent Vietnam and is popular among the young generation, successful businessmen like Bill Gates are more often considered as role models.

Since the economic renovation Doi Moi in 1986 and the first efforts to open up the country for internatio-

nal tourism in the 1990s, young people look into the future with confidence. They live by the motto "song voi" which means live for today. The hardships of the past and the elder generation's sorrows of war are often left behind on the way to self-fulfillment in the new consumerist society of Vietnam.

Some of the historical sites of the war have become profitable tourist attractions today. There, the war is nothing more than a commercial issue. At the famous Cu Chi tunnels near Ho Chi Minh City, for example, Vietnamese tourist agencies sell real life war experiences to westerners. For a few U.S. Dollars, visitors can shoot AK-47 and dress as Vietcong guerrillas during guided tours. As souvenirs, the visitors can keep the bullet casings.

The legacy of the war however is still present as the U.S. left Vietnam in a state of physical ruin. Roads, rails and bridges were devastated by B-52 bombings. In rural areas mostly children still suffer from unexploded explosives. During the war, several million hectares of forest had been stripped of life by high explosives and toxic chemicals such as Agent Orange and Agent Purple. The long-term impact of herbicidal warfare continues to effect health and ecology. Inevitably, the young generation still has to deal with the legacy of war.

The Vietnam War was also a civil war to some extent. Have there been efforts made to reconcile the different parties? I am thinking of the political efforts to reconcile the French and the Germans after WW II. How are the relations between the people in the South and the people in the North today, in general?

One of the key problems of reconciliation is that most of the high-ranking South Vietnamese officials escaped to the U.S. or committed sui-

cide after the war. The lack of southern representatives, who might be responsible spokespersons for the concerns of the South, makes it hard to enable prolific negotiations between the different parties.

The relationship between the people of the North and the South is difficult. Both sides have very different mentalities. After the reunification, prejudices and resentments predominated – similar as in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Germans of two different political systems also had to learn to grow together, however the GDR and FRG never stood against each other in an armed conflict.

In some way the Doi Moi reforms, which combine parts of the free market system with the leadership claim of the communist party, can be seen as progress in rapprochement of North and South.

### Bibliographical Details

Margara, Andreas: *Der Amerikanische Krieg. Erinnerungskultur in Vietnam*. Berlin: Regiospectra Verlag 2012. ISBN: 978-3-940132-48-2



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