UNDER THE BOMBS

North Vietnam Responds to the Pressures of War

Cynthia Frederick 10¢

The Vietnamese people have spent much of their four thousand year history battling the foreign armies which have invaded and occupied their homeland – Chinese, Mongols, French, and Japanese. Yet in their long past they have never confronted an enemy as savage and as powerful as the United States. Indeed, Washington's air war against the people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is in many ways unique in history. To cite only one recent example of its characteristic and virtually unprecedented intensity and destructiveness, on the evening of April 15, 1972, at least 200 Air Force and Navy planes, including "a score" of B-52's, dropped their loads over the port of Haiphong and the country's capital of Hanoi. One B-52 alone can virtually destroy an area half a mile wide and three miles long in a matter of seconds; its bomb load, which averages about 30 tons, equals the weight of some 60 Volkswagens. The U.S. military brass seems to be taking very seriously the widely publicized assertion by one of its generals that Washington is determined to literally bomb north Vietnam "back to the stone age".

This kind of overkill is even more devastating when we consider that the current bombing raids against northern Vietnam were preceded by three and a half years of the most intensive bombing the world had ever seen. Between March, 1965, and November, 1968 (when LBJ called a "halt" to the bombing) U.S. planes on more than 100,000 different missions dropped a million tons of bombs on the D.R.V. If these figures don't mean much to you (and why should they? The U.S. has never been bombed by a foreign power. "War", as most Americans know it, is something you can catch a glimpse of on the six o'clock news or on a midnight movie), try to imagine how many bombs the U.S. dropped in the Pacific during WWII, or in Korea during the Korean War. Twice that amount has been dropped on the D.R.V. To put it another way, every day for three and a half years 800 tons of bombs, rockets and missles were exploded on the north. The current bombing raids have already set a new world record; in contrast to an average of about 270 sorties a day during the 1965-1968 bombings, some 400 planes are now bombing the north every day. With recent talk about the possible use of nuclear weapons in the north – not to mention rumors of an invasion of the D.R.V. by nearly 20,000 U.S. Marines, etc. – one would hesitate to even speculate on the outcome of Nixon's latest madness.

Can the north Vietnamese survive? How did they manage to withstand the terrors of the 1965-1968 raids, and how, if at all, does that experience relate to the present situation? We don't know all the answers to these questions. But we do have information which sheds important light on the Vietnamese people's ability to survive in the past, on their determination to continue the struggle in the future, and on their determination to continue to win.

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The brutal air war of 1965-1968 cost the north Vietnamese people dearly. In terms of laborpower expended for maintenance alone, official U.S. sources estimated that an equivalent of 300,000 people were diverted from their regular jobs. Many priority projects were drastically cut back, while others were suspended or simply sacrificed. A newly-initiated industrialization program undoubtedly suffered the greatest losses, but the drive to expand cultivated areas in the rural areas was also curtailed and even reversed. Large sections of the countryside, once lush and green, became wasteland. With the reduction in available laborpower,

the day when such areas might be reclaimed for agricultural production was even further postponed.

The effects of these raids on the north not only exposed the hypocracy of the U.S, government's claims that all the targets were of a purely "military" nature. As the months passed it became increasingly clear that the bombing represented a systematic attempt to destroy the very social infrastructure of north Vietnamese society as a means of forcing the D.R.V. to capitulate to American demands. Indeed, given the actual form of attacks, it is difficult to argue that the real targets could possibly have been anything but property, morale and life in the D.R.V.

For rather than "surgical attacks", as the Pentagon claimed, the raids consisted primarily of saturation bombing, which led to the destruction of hospitals, schools and even entire cities, and of enormous quantities of napalm and anti-personnel weapons. (The latter, of course, are virtually useless when used against equipment. Their targets are human beings and the soft internal organs they slice through on their twisted path deep into the body.) By all accounts these attacks caused tremendous damage to the population of the D.R.V, According to CIA estimates, in 1966 there were more than 23,000 casualties, 80% of them civilian. In 1967 the civilian noncombatant casualty rate ran about 1,000 per week. Even more terrible were the consequences which could not be measured: the tension, psychological terror, physical pain resulting from never-ending deprivations, and the constant threat of sudden and violent death. Such wounds would take many years to heal; others would be irreparable.

In their struggle to ward off these attacks militarily, the Vietnamese gratefully accepted air from the other socialist countries, and especially from the Soviets and the Chinese. By 1968, 60% of the total assistance from the USSR (about $800 million a year was promised in 1966) had been earmarked for military expenditures. By 1967, the Chinese had supplied some $250 million in aid, mainly AK-47 rifles and other small arms. Yet unlike the Saigon puppet forces, the Vietnamese never forgot the fact that foreign weapons alone could never win the war for them. Essentially, they would have to rely on their own forces, just as they had done during the First Indochina War against the French.

As a first step towards building up their necessary defenses, the Hanoi government initiated large-scale evacuations of most of the D.R.V.'s larger urban centers. By 1966, as a result of this policy of "preparing for the worst" (based on the expectation of continued U.S. escalations –including the sustained bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong), practically the entire industrial and urban framework of the nation was dismantled and dispersed throughout the countryside, where its component parts were less vulnerable to attack. Schools, hospitals and factories were rebuilt in the countryside; urban families left their homes to join their village relatives. Supplies were dispersed as a means of minimizing bombing losses. Even the country's food supply was radically decentralized, with distribution carried out at the provincial and local levels rather than by the central government's agencies in the capital.

These undertakings, which required a general mobilization of the country's nearly 17 million people, were of course tremendously expensive. It is therefore not surprising in terms of time, energy, and laborpower, that a number of western observers interpreted the decentralization campaign to be a significant reversal in the D.R.V.'s efforts to build a self-supporting, economi-

cally viable state. Some even claimed that by the fall of 1968 the Vietnamese had suffered an ignominious defeat both on the battlefield and in terms of their "social dream" for the future.

The Vietnamese have maintained that the opposite is true. In fact, they have even insisted that in many cases the bombing actually proved **beneficial** to the socialist transformation of their state. For example, contrary to the Pentagon's well-publicized predictions that the raids would bring about widespread demoralization in the north, and thereby hasten the end of popular support for the Hanoi government, one of the bombing's most immediate and lasting effects was to increase the north Vietnamese people's sense of national purpose and solidarity with their leaders. Why the Pentagon so greatly underestimated the Vietnamese people's determination is not clear; the most likely reason seems to be simply that the U.S. brass, blinded by their own racism, overlooked the often demonstrated fact that the threat of a foreign invasion is more likely to strengthen a people's resolve than to weaken their loyalty to their own leadership. Indeed, this was true not only in England during the Nazi blitzkrieg, but also in Vietnam itself during the 1945-1954 war against the French colonialists!

At any rate, this mass popular support was of crucial importance to the struggle for several reasons. As was the case during the first Resistance War, it provided the basis for the involvement of the entire population in a PEOPLE'S WAR against the foreign aggressors. As past experience had shown, this involvement would be just as critical as anti-aircraft guns and automatic rifles (of not moreso) in sustaining the energy, ingenuity and self-reliance needed to continue the fight while maintaining and even increasing production. At the same time, the D.R.V. leadership was able to direct this heightened consciousness towards

a new attack on the stubborn vestiges of feudalism and colonialism in the country – thereby linking the military struggle with the struggle against past oppression.

Secondly, although forced to sacrifice or shelve many projects and plans soon after the air war began, the Hanoi government quickly recognized that the bombing afforded an opportunity to introduce a variety of important new political innovations. For once the bombing was underway, theoretical discussion about many of the problems facing the D.R.V. was no longer possible: the country's very survival depended on finding practical and immediate solutions. In this way, instead of destroying the Vietnamese vision, the Pentagon generals actually helped create a situation conducive to building a more rational and just society in the D.R.V.

Many specific examples of such innovations could be cited here, such as the "democratization at the bottom" and the "rationalization of local administration" campaigns. These movements, which grew out of the strategy of preparing for the worst" (i.e., to decentralize all possible administrative, production and social welfare facilities), not only enabled the government to maintain the high standards of its welfare services despite the heavy bombing. They also helped to lessen pressures resulting from two of the more serious problems which had arisen in the north after 1954: a burgeoning bureaucracy and over-centralized authority, both of which would have hindered the smooth functioning of a people's war. With the physical reorganization of the nation's resources and the destruction of communication and transportation facilities, the central government was obliged to allocate much of its power to local administrative bodies. Consequently, in addition to acquiring a number of important administrative perogatives regarding production and distribution, the local organs also took on responsibility for directing a wide range of welfare services. Lower level officials thus decreased their dependence on the central bureaucracy and increased their responsiveness to the demands of their constituents. At the same time, the people themselves assumed a more active political role in local affairs.

The impact of these campaigns on the functioning of the north Vietnamese government and society did not end with the 1968 "bombing halt". Nor was the policy of "preparing for the worst" abandoned at that time. For the north Vietnamese suspected, with good reason, that Johnson's "halt" would prove to be nothing more than the eye of the hurricane. Consequently, although some factories and schools were moved back to their original locations after November 1, dispersion rather than centralization has remained the key to the struggle in the north.

The strengths of this policy of "preparing for the worst" can in part be attributed to its pragmatic approach to the military defense of the country against U.S. raids. Equally significant, however, are the political, social and economic aspects of its success. From the outset of the air war, the Hanoi government has been aware that decentralization involved far more than a defensive response to aerial attack. It also provided the countryside with a viable means of maintaining prodection, distribution, and administration. The success of self-reliant administrative units is important as an indication of the flexibility of the Vietnamese governmental system and its ability to formulate national policy guidelines acceptable to the peasantry. But it also demonstrates, by responding effectively to the obvious need for protection, that decentralization is compatible with less obvious and more traditional concerns – concerns which have grown out of the traditional Vietnamese relationship between urban and

rural areas in which individual villages enjoyed considerable autonomy from the central government.

Although many Vietnamese industries were initially concentrated in the large urban centers of the D.R.V., unlike the Western city, the Vietnamese urban agglomerations have never been regarded as the critical focus of the nation's economic well-being. This can be largely attributed to the fact that on the eve of the air war, northern Vietnam was still a predominately agricultural country in which industry, although rapidly expanding, accounted for only 15% of the G.N.P. The main concern, therefore, – then as now – has been agricultural rather than industrial production: the machines might stop, but food would still be needed for the workers and peasants. This means that in the eyes of the Vietnamese, the economic heartland of the country was not located in Hanoi or Haiphong but rather in its choicest farmlands – especially those in the Red River Delta, the home of some 75% of the population. And, as has been the case for thousands of years, the nerve centers of the Delta have remained rooted in the thousands of village communities which dot the green paddy fields.

Thus when the bombing of Hanoi and the other larger northern Vietnamese cities forced most of their residents to abandon their homes, the political, administrative and economic fibre of the country was not destroyed. In fact, even the anticipated loss of their capital city failed to destroy the people's morale. As New York Times reporter Harrison Salisbury wrote during his visit to Hanoi in 1966:

> As to the future of Hanoi, the North Vietnamese displayed remarkable aplomb. They expected that their capital would be wiped out. They were not despondent. They already had in preparation architectural plans for the construction of a new capital. They would not rebuild Hanoi, at least not as a seat of government. They had picked a new site not far distant where the new capital would be erected once the war was over. After all, they said, Hanoi is a small old ugly city. It symbolizes the French occupation. After the war we will build our own capital. In fact, we have been thinking of doing this in any event.

Quite understandably, most western visitors to the D.R.V. have been frankly incredulous about their hosts' quiet determination. Yet this attitude is not unusual in a country where foreign invasions and occupations have been the historical rule rather than the exception. Nor is it incompatible with many of the ideas the Vietnamese have about the moral and spiritual as well as material development of their state. One of the best descriptions of the nation's response to the air war was offered by Susan Sontag, who visited Hanoi in 1967:

> When Ho Chi Minh said that bombing heightens the "spirit" of the people, he meant more than a stiffening of morale. There is the belief that the war has effected a permanent improvement in the moral level of people. For instance, for a family to be uprooted and have all its possessions destroyed (many families have relics going back ten centuries) has always been considered in Vietnam the worst possible fate, but now that just this has happened to so many tens of thousands of families, people have discovered the positive advantages of being stripped of everything: that one becomes more generous, less attached to "things".

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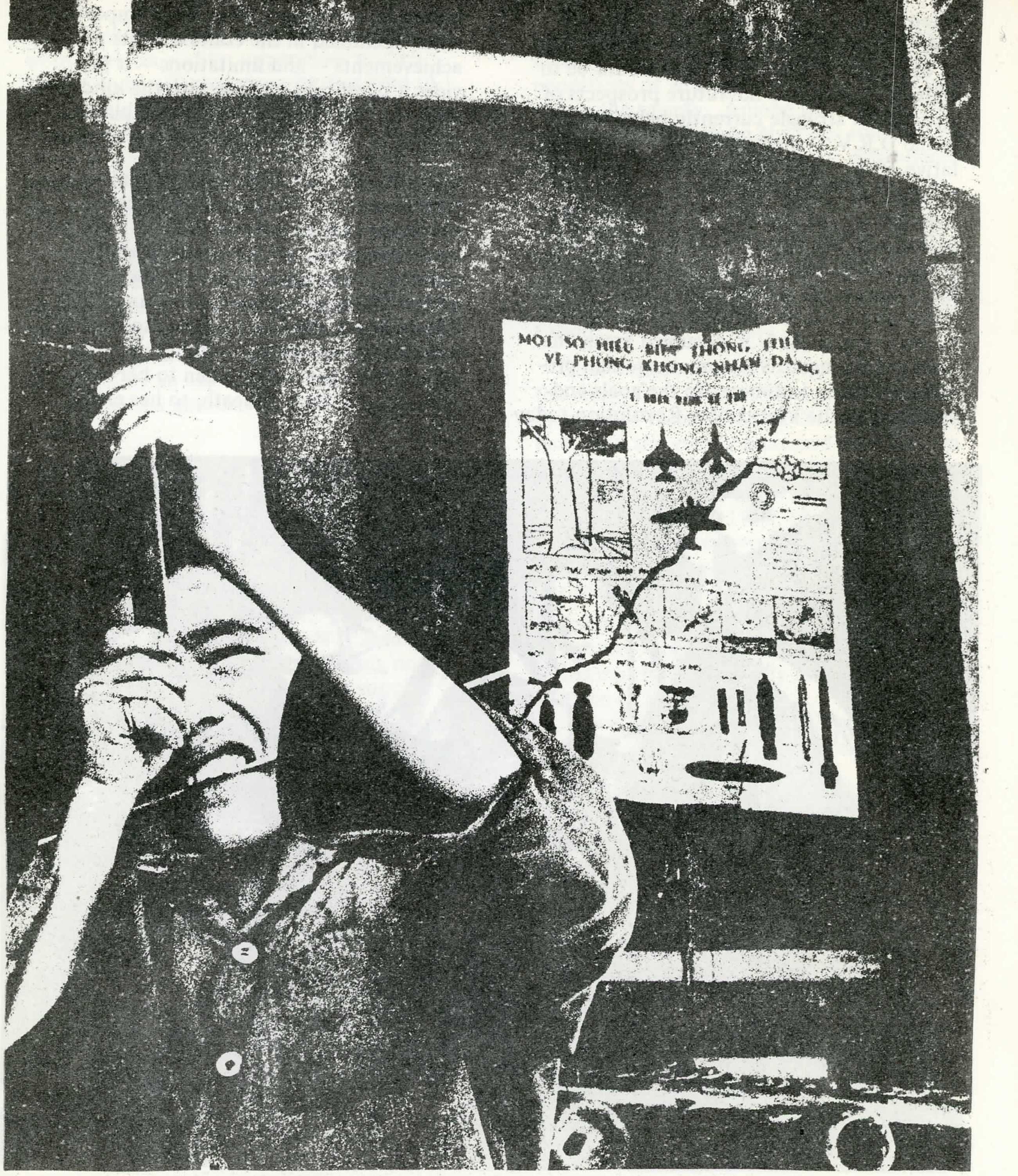
One of the most important questions which still remains unanswered at this time is to what extent the lessons learned and the successes scored on the economic, political and social levels will continue to influence the future development of socialism in the D.R.V. once an independent peace has been achieved. In other words, will the Vietnamese be able to maintain their solidarity and commitment once the pressure has been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lifted, or will they lapse back into the old way of doing things? Perhaps the best way of dealing with these questions would be to address ourselves to the future prospects of a particular struggle currently being waged in the D.R.V. – a struggle which is representative of the many campaigns and movements designed to combat the last remnants of feudalism in the country. Specifically, let us consider the women's movement in the north, which already has a long history and many impressive results to its credit. Indeed, when compared to the plight of her southern sisters living in the U.S.-occupied areas, the status of the north Vietnamese woman provides a striking testimony to the goals and successes of the Vietnamese Revolution today – bombs or no bombs. Even more important, when examined in the context of its past achievements – and limitations – it provides a significant glimpse into the kinds of attitudes and concerns which will play a critical role in shaping the country's future.

Although the traditional Vietnamese woman played a major role in her society, during periods of Chinese rule and cultural domination her privileges were drastically reduced. According to the narrow confines of the 'Chinese-inspired Confucian "Three Obediances", she was supposed to remain obediant to her father until her marriage – arranged by her family, then to her husband, and after the latter's death, to her eldest

son. Both polygamy and child marriages were legal. In reality, upper-class women tended to be affected more by this kind of social conditioning than were peasant women, who for economic reasons were often forced to shoulder responsibilities as great as any man's. But under the French, the status of the peasant woman deteriorated significantly. Life became ever more difficult and humiliating for those who were forced to sell their labor to the colonials in order to pay the rapidly rising taxes and living costs. Indeed, in many respects, her position in society became that described by an old Vietnamese proverb, "One hundred girls aren't worth a single testicle."

The question of women's rights was first seriously broached in 1930, when the newly-formed Vietnamese Communist Party established the Women's Union for Emancipation (the predecessor of the Vietnamese Women's Union, founded in the early 40's) as the feminist arm of the anti-colonial movement. During the Resistance War against the French, women played an active role not only as rearguard production and supply cadres, but also as front-line combatants. Nevertheless, although they helped to liberate their country from French rule, in 1954 they themselves were still relegated to second-rate status in many respects: nearly all working and middle-class women were, for example, still illiterate, and virtually none had any professional qualifications. They were also confronted by long-standing problems resulting from what one contemporary north Vietnamese spokeswoman described as "contempt for women, underrating of her capacities, her own inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence".

Clearly, without the participation of half the population, no social revolution could ever be waged. In order to encourage this participation, therefore, a series of concrete measures were initiated to ameliorate the conditions of women both in the family unit and in the society. Among these measures was the 1960 "Law on Marriage and the Family", which outlawed polygamy, discouraged compulsary marriages, and granted women equal rights in property ownership and on the question of divorce. Provisions for the industrialization of housework and communal childcare (regarded as the "key to liberating women") were written into the 1960 Constitution.

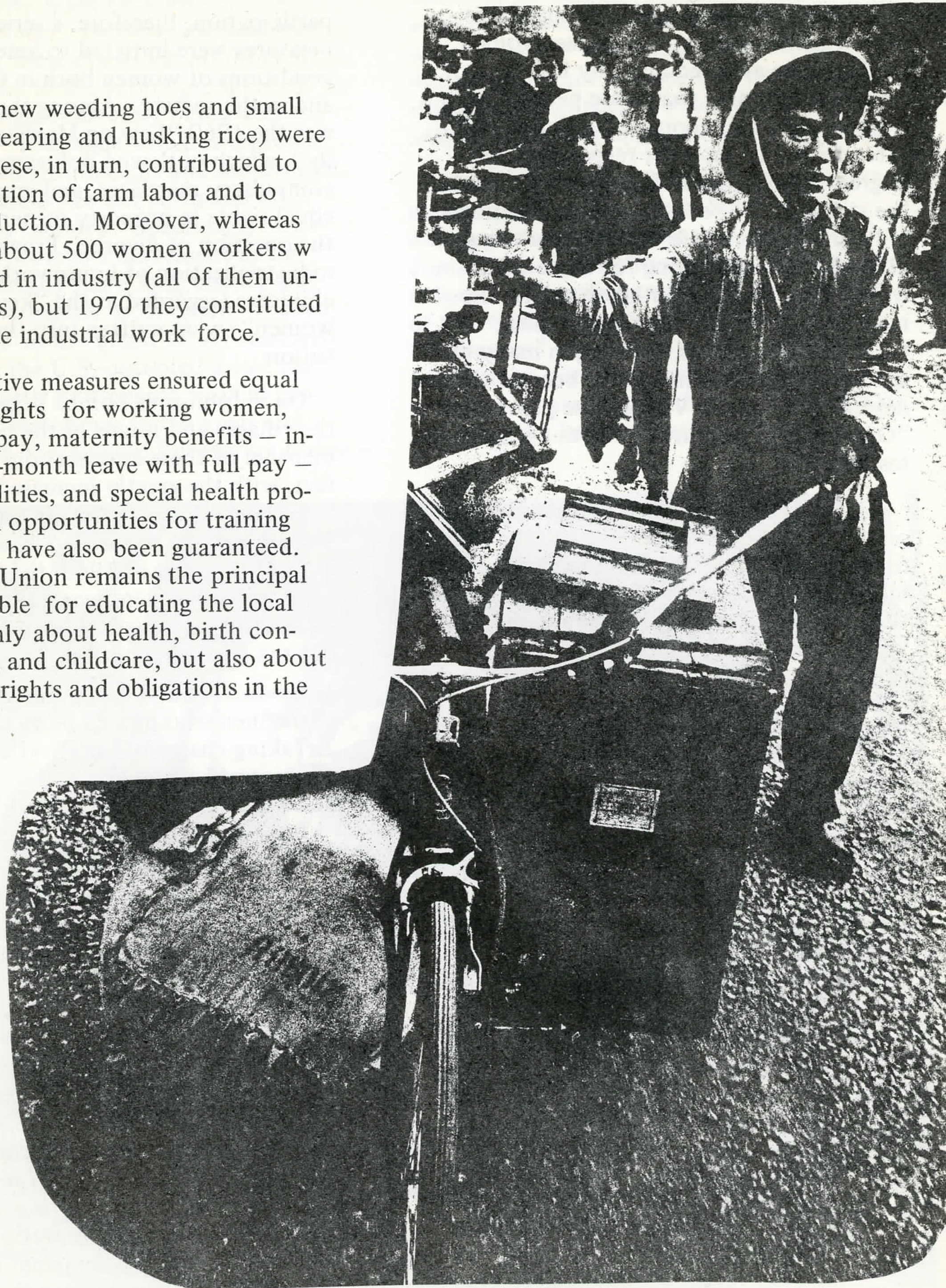
Once Johnson's bombs began falling on the villages and towns of the north, the momentum of these advances did not slow. In fact, with the greatly increased demands on "manpower" due to the air war, changes in women's status proceeded even more rapidly. In the spring of 1965, the "Three Responsibilities" movement was initiated to mobilize north Vietnamese women for carrying out the following duties:

1. Production and other tasks, in place of the men who have gone to the front.
2. Taking charge of family affairs in the absence of husband or son.
3. Giving assistance to the fighters at the front and undertaking, if necessary, combat duties.

In addition to stressing the need for women to assume responsibilities in their work, family, and defense, this movement sought to effect a true "occupational revolution" and a transformation of the old social order. The results of this far-reaching campaign have in many cases been impressive. By 1970, for example, women constituted 70% of the agricultural labor force. This involvement has had a number of beneficial effects on agricultural production, for in order to facilitate the women's work in the fields, various technological innovations (such as the "straight-rowing sampans" and the "straight transplanting yardsticks", simpli-

fied harrows, new weeding hoes and small machines for reaping and husking rice) were introduced; these, in turn, contributed to the rationalization of farm labor and to increased production. Moreover, whereas in 1954 only about 500 women workers w were employed in industry (all of them unskilled laborers), but 1970 they constituted over half of the industrial work force.

New legislative measures ensured equal benefits and rights for working women, such as equal pay, maternity benefits – including a four-month leave with full pay – child care facilities, and special health provisions. Equal opportunities for training and education have also been guaranteed. The Women's Union remains the principal body responsible for educating the local women not only about health, birth control, marriage, and childcare, but also about their political rights and obligations in the new order.



Perhaps even more significant have been the efforts to promote equal leadership opportunities: according to Gerard Cheliand, the author of The Peasants of North Vietnam, any local industrial unit or cooperative "in which women make up 40% of the labor force must have a woman on its management committee; when the figure reaches 50%, the assistant manager must be a women; 70% or more, and the manager must be a women". As early as 1966, the north Vietnamese writer Mai Anh reported that

> in seventeen provinces, 278 women, most of them in their early twenties, have been elected chairwomen of cooperatives, and 1,484 others, deputy-chairwomen. The number is growing of women who have become chairwomen of village committees, chiefs of sections, responsible cadres of sections.

In order to emphasize the significance of this report, she related the following story, told five years earlier in a song:

> A man who returned to his village after a long absence asked his wife who was the chairman of the village committee. She smiled but did not answer. "This is an important matter," said the man, "stop joking." And she told him, blushing, "I am the chairwomen." In those days this was rather an uncommon thing. But now, a woman will certainly not blush when saying that she is a chairwomen.

Nor have women limited their activities to production and administration. Many have served anti-aircraft batteries, and in the north one often hears stories about women who have replaced wounded gunners.

North Vietnamese women make no claims to have solved all the problems confronting their sex. In conversations with their western sisters, they have mentioned three areas where the "woman's revolution was not yet complete": self-image (many still feel inferior to men), participation in politics (they still make up clearly less than 50% of the political bodies, particularly at higher levels), and equality in the family. Yet whatever the reamining problems, People's War in the D.R.V. has clearly created enormous new opportunities for women to serve, to lead, and to contribute to both the national and the social revolutions while continuing to liberate themselves as women.

This is not to suggest that Vietnamese women have rejected everything in their past. While the modern north Vietnamese woman has struggled determinedly to overcome in a matter of decades the kinds of oppression her predecessors were forced to endure for centuries, she has inherited with pride the courage, perseverance, and strength of many of her earlier sisters. So too has she inherited their spirit – the kind of spirit expressed in a poem written by Trieu thi Trung (the modern namesake of three of Vietnam's most beloved heroines: the Trung sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, who fought off the Chinese overlords in 39 A.D.; and General Trieu Au, who accomplished a similar feat in the Seventh Century):

> My wish is to ride the tempest,
> Tame the waves,
> Kill the sharks,
> I want to drive the enemy
> away to save our people.
> I will not
> resign
> myself
> to
> the usual lot of
> women.

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Judging from their bitter struggles in the past, it is clear that the Vietnamese people as a whole share these vows and that they, like Trieu thi trung, are determined not to resign themselves to the "usual lot". Either they will achieve their independence and

live to see peace return once again to a unified Vietnam, or they will be destroyed. Their ultimate fate depends on many things. It depends on U.S. policy regarding the destruction of the country's system of dykes and/or the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. It depends on the Hanoi government's ability to continue to respond immediately and directly to the constantly escalating U.S. attacks, and on the capability of the Vietnamese people themselves to withstand physically the vicious bombings. But it also depends on you. The people of north Vietnam are not our enemies. We must not and cannot allow the U.S. government to continue its genocidal war against them in our name.

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