

Books:



SOUTH VIETNAM: ON THE ROAD TO VICTORY. *South Vietnam: Liberation Publishing House.* 223 pp.

Reviewed by Don Duncan

C I HAVE BEFORE ME on my desk a most amazing book. The title hardly prepared me for the contents. The gold lettering is impressed on a banana-colored hard cover and is finished off with burgundy binding. The pages between the covers, no less handsome, are of high quality stock and display over 200 color and black-and-white photographs. Many of the pictures have never before been seen in this country. Interesting but hardly amazing. The flyleaf tells the story—Liberation Publishing House, South Vietnam, October, 1965. The book was published in English by the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) in what they refer to as liberated areas in South Vietnam and printed on captured American made presses.

Many of the pictures are reprints of photographs taken by American photographers but most are the work of NLF cameramen. Text has been kept to a minimum—fortunately—the pictures give the message.

Particularly poignant is a picture of a Viet Minh soldier taking tearful farewell of his family in South Vietnam in 1954, to comply with the Geneva Agreements. When the U.S. interference in 1956 made separation more than temporary, we can only suppose that the soldier returned to his family in the south, thereby becoming an "infiltrator."

Those who refuse to accept the fact that we are fighting *people* in Vietnam—Vietnamese people—will quickly dismiss such scenes as an obvious propaganda gambit. Of course it's propaganda, but should it be dismissed any faster than our own publications

that depict the enemy as barbaric "yellow dwarfs" (President Johnson) who spend all their waking hours exhausting themselves dragging pregnant women into village squares to slit bellies and drink blood? How many of us think of "Charlie" as a family man with personal problems? How many of us think of these "illegitimate bands of wandering minstrels" (Vice-President Humphrey) as men and women who cry and go to school and laugh and feed their pigs? Propaganda or not, I think we should see another side of the "enemy," or is it easier for the proponents of our war in Vietnam to think of people in terms of mathematics—kill ratios?

Having once determined the source of the book one might well expect it to be crammed with horror pictures of atrocities; but such is not the case. The few shown are scenes recorded by our own photographers which only makes them more eloquent.

Those interested in the tactics of guerrilla warfare will find pictures of homemade flat-bottomed boats in the Plain of Reeds being used as assault craft. Each craft holds three or four people and is usually powered by a woman wielding a pole. The pictures were taken during an actual assault, showing the geysers of water from artillery shells. Also shown are a jungle "look-out" and preparation of *punji* (spike) traps and spiked deadfalls.

American apologists for our war in Vietnam have long made an issue of these *punji* traps and have condemned the Viet Cong for using such barbarous instruments (as opposed to civilized methods of warfare such as napalm and indiscriminate B-52 saturation bombings). Condemnation of the NLF for using *punjis* has always been a mystery to me inasmuch as most U.S. Special Forces camps utilize these sharpened stakes as part of their defenses, often in a moat surrounding the area. One of the pictures in the book shows a government post surrounded by *punji* stakes as thick as porcupine quills.

Students of this type of warfare will also be interested in pictures of the NLF during marches, showing how they make jungle bridges and makeshift stairs on steep jungle slopes to facilitate travel and the transport of supplies. Pictures of NLF soldiers show quite a mixture of weapons: French rifles that

reach to a Vietnamese man's armpit; Swedish 'K's (submachine guns); Lee-Enfield bolt action rifles; American M-1's. In one color plate of NLF soldiers standing on a downed helicopter, the man in the foreground is holding one of our new Colt Armelite AR-15's (M-16 rifle). Although the text fails to point it out, the most universal weapon of the enemy soldiers is quite obviously the U.S. carbine. The favorite is the U.S. 30 caliber A6 machinegun.

C GRAMMATICALLY NO FAULT can be found with this book and sophisticated techniques of printing have been used under what could only be adverse conditions. The National Liberation Front has used psychology and propaganda with great skill and effect for a number of years with their own people. I have the feeling that in producing a book for a Western target audience the editors looked to sympathetic writers in the West for guidance in determining what would appeal to such an audience. The result is the use of the exaggerated rhetoric of a Herbert Aptheker (*Mission to Hanoi*) and a Wilfred Burchett (*Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War*) with all the hack lines and clichés so offensive to serious Western eyes and ears.

The publishers of this book, like the two Western authors, were in a unique position to report events which would otherwise remain unreported, but unfortunately they failed. The book is already so pictorially dramatic and powerful that any attempt at exaggeration or explanation along the lines of political prejudice could only and does only diminish the effect.

Under one of the pictures, depicting a scene of the Nha Trang airfield on June 28, 1965, is a caption which states that 21 planes were destroyed and 300 troops put out of action. I happen to have been on the airfield and at the time of the attack there were not 21 planes to be destroyed. If there had been 300 casualties, virtually every second man would have been dead or wounded. At the time, Nha Trang was considered one of the most secure areas in the country. The airfield is also the home and headquarters for the U.S. Army Special Forces ("The Green Berets"). There were few planes on the field at the time of the attack because

Captain Thorne (Captain Kornie in Robin Moore's *Green Berets*) had found out about the attack and the whole military compound was alerted and planes dispersed. Patrols were sent out to the flat open terrain siding on the airfield. The location also houses a large mercenary Strike Force and is the headquarters area for the Vietnamese Special Forces. The VC maneuvered against an alerted camp, across an open area, between patrols, set up and fired their mortars, caused damage and escaped without being caught. The facts of the attack are more shattering than the invented statistics.

The captions also report 155 deaths at the Brink Hotel on December 24, 1964; 107 deaths at Qui Nhan on February 10, 1965; 293 Americans killed at Bien Hoa October 31, 1964; 207 Americans killed at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon on March 10, 1965. All of these attacks were on American installations in secure areas and each required great daring and audacity. Thousands of others familiar with one or more of these incidents, knowing the real figures, will dismiss the book and its contents on the basis of these claims. They will overlook the fact that the attacks not only occurred, but were recorded and documented—and handsomely—in this unusual book.



PLAYER PIANO by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
New York: Rinehart and Winston. 295 pp. \$4.95.

Reviewed by J. J. Clyde Jr.

A MISSHAPEN THOUGH WE SEEM, we quickly recognize ourselves in Kurt Vonnegut's cybernated world of tomorrow, a grotesque of our own times like the reflection from some trick carny mirror that gives us back our distorted, yet painfully familiar,

image. If it's meant to be funny, why does it hurt so much when we laugh?

But we can't cry, either. In Vonnegut's fully automated world our every physical need is taken care of from the cradle to the grave. Machines, the brainchildren of a managerial elite chosen for its technical competence by intelligence and aptitude tests (shades of the current draft deferment examination!), do the work and give the orders. Our job, whether we boondoggle in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (the Reeks and Wrecks) or drill with wooden guns in the army, is really to be good consumers. He also serves who only spends and wastes. All we lack is the human sense of usefulness and purpose. And the possibility of protesting against our condition. Even death has become indistinguishable from life save as the terminal phase of uselessness—the wearing out of a standardized, replaceable part.

On the surface, at least, totalitarianism need not be terroristic. It may assume the guise of manipulation, validating its consensus of engineered consent by elaborate "scientific" opinion surveys and by elections offering only illusory choices in the manner of rigged plebiscites. But such a society remains totalitarian nevertheless if it does not allow for what Herbert Marcuse calls The Great Refusal: the protest against that which is.

And this is what *Player Piano*, Vonnegut's first novel, happily reissued this spring, is all about. The scientist-engineer-technician managers smother dissent with bribes of security, or institutionalize it in the cloying embrace of a sham libertarianism. The velvet gloves come off when these elliptical means fail. Hard-core dissenters are called saboteurs and, if they persist in their waywardness, are destroyed. Dissent is okay only if it is *à la mode*: no Great Refusals allowed. No wonder, in reading *Player Piano*, we experienced a *déjà vu*. We know about our own "communists" and "traitors," and we recall civil rights demonstrations like the March on Washington in 1963, all decked out in the anaesthetic ceremonial trappings of democracy while the castration is being performed.

The novel traces the growing disenchantment of Paul Proteus, one of the managers, with the prevalent notion among members of his class that all

machines equate with progress and are good *per se*. With all other means of protest pre-empted he joins a revolt that, in the climax of *Player Piano*, is doomed to fail. Worse than that, the revolutionists, long denied any other safety valve, indiscriminately destroy "the flush toilets with the automatic lathe controls," the good with the bad. And there are indications that they might even recreate the old nightmare of machine-worship in the time to come. Human beings, after all, are flawed and can be foolish things, particularly if they are not allowed to rock the boat. Chances are, in that case, they will capsize it. The leaders of the revolt, before surrendering to overwhelming force, raise a whiskey bottle and drink "to the record!"—to the record, that is, that they have at least registered their Great Refusal in the only way left to do so; to the record that says that their failure must stand as a reminder that there is one necessity from which there can never be any prospect of freedom. "This isn't the end. Nothing ever is, nothing ever will be—not even Judgment Day," one of them says.

Fourteen years into the future (and into our often dismaying present) from the date of its original publication, *Player Piano* remains a classic of its genre, and merits a place on the bookshelf next to *Brave New World* and *1984*. In its eerie foreshadowing of the times to come that already seem upon us in so many ways, Vonnegut's novel is not so far-fetched after all. Nor are his warnings about the mixed blessings of technological triumphs. One of his managers tells us "...the men at the head of civilization demonstrate in private that they are ten-year-olds at heart, that they haven't the vaguest notion of what they are doing to the world." If war is too important to entrust to the generals, the future of man is much too precious to be left at the disposal of scientists, engineers and technicians. In their preoccupation with processes rather than goals there is little evidence suggesting that such specialists realize any better than the man on the street the social hazards of their new technologies.

J. J. Clyde Jr., reporter and teacher, is currently writing short stories and completing a novel.