

Vietnam and Israel: The Search for Independence

By TRAN DAN

HO CHI MINH, the founding leader of the modern Vietnamese independence movement, and David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding leader, met over 60 years ago as the two men sought to address the League of Nations in support of Woodrow Wilson's 14-point program — including the right of all peoples to self-determination. Since then the two countries, while drifting into opposite camps, have pursued their goals with a resoluteness bordering on obsession. They have declared their independence and fought to gain their rightful places in the great family of nations.

Yet today a somber sky overhangs Indochina and the Middle East, casting ominous shadows over their destinies. The tower of respect that the world has reserved for Israel and Vietnam, and for which they have paid staggering prices, is showing deep cracks. The independence for which they have so fiercely fought, the social transformations that they have so assiduously pursued, are being threatened from both inside and outside. Most seriously, the supreme internal unity that has cemented so

many David-vs.-Goliath-type victories is showing signs of dilution. At the risk of being dramatic I shall say that the paths the Vietnamese and Israelis have trodden are lined with similar roses, rigged with similar traps. Yet burning jungles and shifting sands are unable to stamp out the two peoples' indomitable spirits.

Many other Third World nations have fought for and defended their independence as fiercely as Vietnam and Israel — India, Cuba, Algeria, Yugoslavia, among others — but Vietnam and Israel share two common traits. First, their struggles have been *prolonged*, against overwhelming odds. Since its founding in 1948, Israel has fought a total of six wars, first against the British colonialists, later against its Arab neighbors. Vietnam, for its part, has fought to a standstill four superpowers: Japan, France, the U.S. and China.

Second, both nations face today a dilemma striking at the roots of their existence: from "freedom fighters" to "invaders," from "underdogs" to "oppressors," how far will they go in order to secure their independence? How can Vietnam militarily occupy Laos and Kampuchea and champion the cause of national liberation? How can Israel occupy Lebanon, allow the massacre at Shatilla and Sabra to occur, arm rightwing dictatorships, and claim moral righteousness?

For the Jewish people in diaspora, the concept of independence was a long-dormant concept. Not until the

TRAN DAN, a new contributor, is an engineer and writer living in St. Paul, Minn. He has worked with the Association of Vietnamese Patriots in the U.S., the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam, and various U.S.-Vietnam friendship groups. The views expressed here, he wants it known, are solely his.

Russian pogroms of 1881 and 1882 did men like Leo Pinsker and Theodor Herzl begin to envision a Jewish homeland. Haim Weizmann, testifying in front of the Lord Peel Commission in 1937, described the hopelessness of the diaspora, while David Ben-Gurion exhorted: "It is a homeland we seek, where we may cast off the curse of exile, attach ourselves to the soil and renew our native life." Many Jewish leaders, however, fearing that the homeland was an impossible dream pursued with hopeless *chutzpa*, rejected the idea. It was therefore no small accomplishment that Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence in 1948 with the words, "We shall maintain our bonds with the great world, bonds but not bondage in any forms."

For the Vietnamese, history has been a constant struggle to defend what Marshall Ly Thuong Kiet declared in the 11th century Declaration of Independence: "The Kingdom of the South belongs to the King of the South [as opposed to the Empire of the North, or China]/This is the eternal truth/Beware foreign invaders/Ignominious defeat you are bound to meet!" Ho Chi Minh could thus reiterate, as a matter of natural rights, this declaration of Vietnamese independence in 1945: "Mountains may erode, rivers may dry up/But the Vietnamese are masters of their land/This is the unerring truth."

Nationhood as the antidote to exile; self-determination as the antidote to oppression; I am not exaggerating when I say that for the Vietnamese living under colonialism, pogroms and racist persecutions were as fierce as for the Jews in the diaspora. Phan Boi Chau wrote *Blood Letter from Abroad* and Ho Chi Minh wrote *Colonialism on Trial* to expose the true face of the colonialists' "mission." Two

million Vietnamese died of starvation when the Japanese World War II occupation forces took away Vietnam's rice to feed themselves. Tens of thousands more died on rubber plantations, in coal mines, or in foreign wars. The Vietnamese were regarded as an inferior race by the French and the Japanese.

So Israel and Vietnam went to war to win their independence, guided by the belief in their own people and the belief that, as small peoples in the Conflict of Giants, they had to chart extremely cautious courses. Despite factionalism within the world Zionist movement, Ben-Gurion built the powerful Labor movement and the Hagana, or Jewish Self-Defense Forces, and made them the foundation of the modern State of Israel. He took a stand against terrorism, denouncing it as completely alien to Jewish tradition. The State of Israel, he said, "will be judged not by its riches or military power, nor by its technical skills, but by its moral worth and human values." He and Dr. Haim Weizmann both sought dialogue with the Arab Palestinians and Israel's Arab neighbors. As another sign of pragmatism, Ben-Gurion overrode rightwing opposition to accept Germany's war reparations in 1950, a crucial contribution to the infant state's finances.

In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh set out to weld communism to patriotism. Frequent were his exhortations for his people to "follow the example set by our forefathers . . . when our country was reeling under the Mongolian invasion." Under his leadership, class struggle did not take precedence over the struggle for independence; the Confucian and other humanist traditions were not condemned outright, and a synthesis was sought between what Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien calls "tradition and revolution."

Ho Chi Minh was also facing huge odds when he declared Vietnam independent. Not only did he successfully balance Soviet and Chinese aid, he also sought support from a sympathetic Roosevelt. And later Ho Chi Minh united almost the whole world on Vietnam's side in the war of independence against the U.S.

Still, the two peoples hardly can be said to be "born fighters." In both cultures, the military profession is traditionally esteemed less than scholarship. When the first French salvo sowed death among the Vietnamese, the poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu cried out: "Poor souls, more accustomed to hoes and plows than guns and spears . . ." Similarly, Menahem Begin wrote that with the Irgun, "A new species of human being was born, a specimen completely unknown to the world for over 1,800 years, the fighting Jew." Farmers of paddies and farmers of desert are what the Vietnamese and Israelis would rather be.

They were given little choice. Occupying strategic positions on the map of the world — Israel at the juncture of the African continent and the Middle East, Vietnam at the doorstep of Southeast Asia — the two countries have traditionally been stumbling blocks for the expansion of greater powers in the region. In a modern world polarized by the superpowers, the middle course adopted by some small nations in foreign policy becomes increasingly volatile. Modern wars, both military and economic, that small nations must wage on their soils weaken them and drive them into the embrace of one or the other of the superpowers.

Not only were the wars that Vietnam and Israel have fought incomparably ferocious, they were also of an on-off nature, kept in that state by the superpowers. For example, on the eve of Dien Bien Phu, the Vietnam-

ese were prevented from savoring the fruit of total independence not only by the U.S., but also by their allies, the Soviet Union and China. Similarly, during the Yom Kippur War, with the Sixth Egyptian Army encircled, the Israelis were forced to the negotiating table not only by the Soviet Union, but also by the U.S. and the Western European countries, which were mindful of an Arab oil embargo.

Faced with numerous and resourceful enemies, Israel and Vietnam are slowly compromising their independence for the sake of greater security, so indispensable to economic recovery. Just as Israel in 1981 was lobbying to acquire a formal American presence on Israeli soil, so is Vietnam letting the Soviet Union use the Cam Ranh Bay Base for transits and repair. Still, neither country can be said to be a mere puppet of its powerful ally. In 1977 the Vietnamese army crossed the Kampuchean border to put an end to the Khmer Rouge regime, possibly without consulting the USSR. In 1981 the Israeli air force struck at the nuclear facility deep in Iraq, possibly without consulting the U.S. Tensions between the U.S. and Israel over the invasion of Lebanon have also revealed a complex pattern in relations between the small country and its superpower ally.

On the economic front, both Israel and Vietnam are on the line. Despite \$2 billion in annual American aid, Israel suffers an aggravated inflationary trend pegged at 135% in 1982. Vietnam, despite \$2 billion in annual aid from the Soviet Union, may be counted as the socialist country that, along with Poland, has the most troubled economy. Plagued with incessant wars and economic woes, both Israel and Vietnam are also suffering a rate of emigration detrimental to their development.

Last but not least is the problem of self-esteem. Gone are the days of exuberance and high hopes over the promises of the two revolutions. The Vietnam of today is not the Vietnam at peace that Ho Chi Minh envisioned: "ten thousand times more beautiful, ten thousand times more dignified." Nor is Israel today the Jewish homeland from which the Jews, in the words of Weizmann, can "help build a better, juster, kindlier world." Many Vietnamese object to the inflexible economic policies of their government and to the drain of the military occupation of Kampuchea. Many Israelis object to their government's policy towards Palestinian rights, the military occupation of the West Bank, the annexation of the Golan Heights, and the rise of materialism. Dissension over means and methods, to be sure, is not unhealthy within a nation, but dissension over principles can tear a nation apart. Invincible on the battlefield, Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap and Israeli general Moshe Dayan were devout students of history — Giap a professor of history, Dayan an archaeologist. Both affirmed that without a united house, the enemy need not even strike to topple the nation.

Ideological or religious fanaticism will not bring the two peoples to a solution of their problems. Unity and dedication, the cement of independence, come only through what Ho Chi Minh called "*chinh nghia*" — the "just cause" — and what David Ben-Gurion called "inner strength." Both cultures display a vigorous spirit of synthesis, most necessary for cultural survival. Vietnam has accepted diverse currents of thought — Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, from China and India — but has infused in them a distinct Vietnamese character such that 1,000 years of Chinese occupation failed to destroy the Vietnamese

identity. Judaism has Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and international elements in it, yet displays a uniqueness so profound that it has sustained Jewish identity in the diaspora for two thousand years.

Now is no time for us to lose sight of this precious side of our traditions. We must not allow the hostile environment to distort our natural response, but must tackle the outside hostility with the "judo principle" of turning aggressive force against itself. Most importantly, we must dare to think about inner progress, dare to think creatively about independence and interdependence. Because we have been victims, we are in the best positions to understand other people's national aspirations.

The superpowers are allergic to small nations' independence. Yet a relative independence may be achieved if the small nations first strengthen their own houses, strive for a coherent moral and material foundation. I have hope. As the Vietnamese say: "During the first years of the Resistance War, no one had any idea of how to win the war. Now we do." Likewise, "during the first years of peace no one has any idea of how to win the peace. But we will." Despite the temporary setbacks on the road to peace, I believe both peoples, imbued with creative, dynamic traditions, will find inner and outer peace — the true, lasting independence. ■

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