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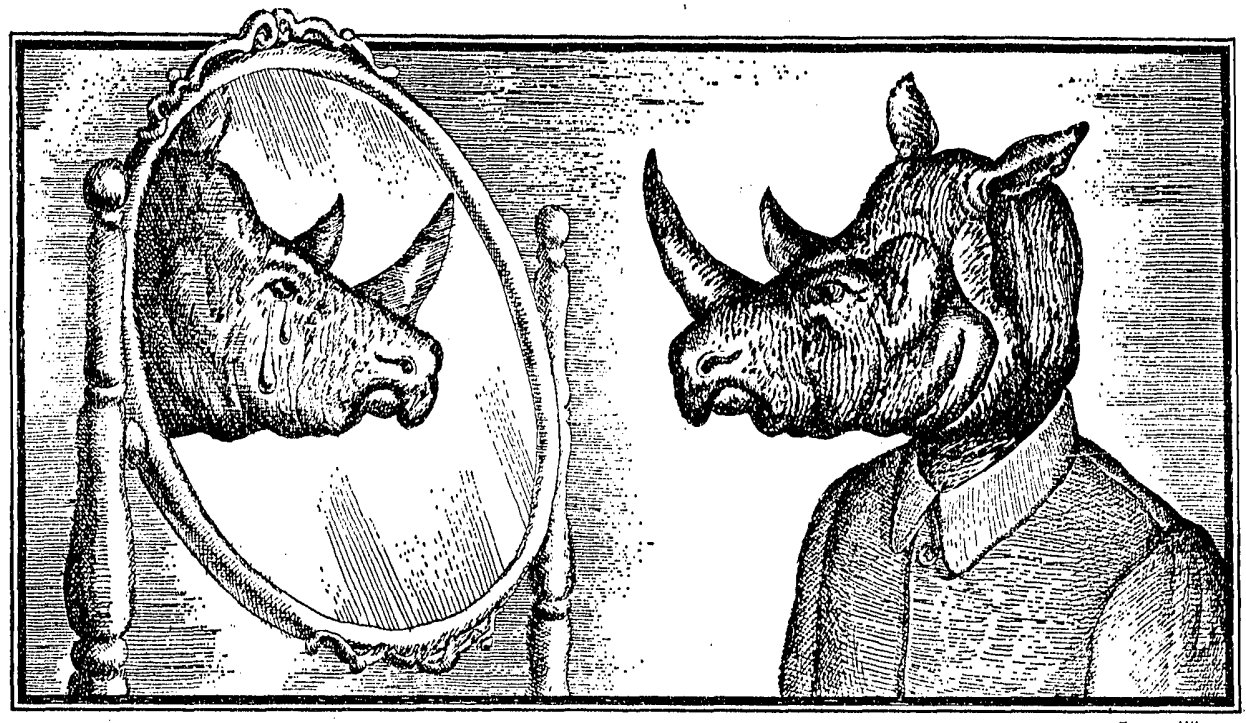

Eugene Mihaesco

STANFORD, Calif.—Administration spokesmen have argued that the United States cannot unilaterally withdraw from Vietnam without inviting a vast bloodbath. In support of this thesis, they assert that following the Communist takeover in North Vietnam in 1954 a massacre occurred resulting in the killing of more than 50,000 people and the indirect deaths of hundreds of thousands more. Critics of the Administration have recently charged that no bloodbath took place in the North—that President Nixon's apparent concern is founded on a myth.

I have been to Vietnam three times, twice working for the North Vietnamese Affairs Division of a branch of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. My duties included following the North Vietnamese radio and press, studying captured documents and interviewing important North Vietnamese and Vietcong defectors. Having a personal interest in the early days of the Communist regime in North Vietnam, I discussed the "bloodbath" with many defectors from various areas of North Vietnam who had been present during the period in question. It should be noted that several of these individuals had been Communist party members and active participants in the so-called "bloodbath"—either as specially trained cadres or as "people's court" judges.

On the basis of these interviews and other evidence accumulated during the past eight years, I am convinced that there was in fact a large-scale purge of opposition elements following the Communist takeover in North Vietnam, and that its magnitude was sufficient to warrant the label "bloodbath." The purge took the form of a "land reform." However, it was clear to most observers that an incorrect political standpoint was as likely as economic prosperity to bring a death sentence.

It is difficult to determine the actual human cost of the "land reform" because no official figures are available and those witnesses who have escaped the Communist North seldom are knowledgeable about events ouside of their own village or province. It is known that the party established a quota of at least five "landlords" for execution in each village.

To Van Xiem, a Communist party member since 1950 who served on the planning committee in Thaibinh Province, reports 31 executions out of 5,000 residents in Congtru village. These figures suggest one execution for every 160 to 170 people, which projected nationwide would suggest approximately 100,000 executions throughout North Vietnam. Actually, for reasons which are too complicated to detail here, the number of executions was probably smaller than that. Most Vietnam scholars, including Hoang Van Chi and the late Bernard Fall, accept the figure of 50,000 executions.

The "people's court" executions, however, accounted for only a small part of the total victims of the "land reform." Far more numerous were the "class enemies" who committed suicide rather than face Communist justice, and the wives and children of "landlords" who died of starvation under the "isolation policy."

The most thorough study of the "land reform" to date is Hoang Van Chi's excellent book, "From Colonialism to Communism," which concludes that the total victims of the purge numbered nearly 500,000. I have found nothing in my own research to dispute this estimate, and I am quite sure that the victims numbered in six digits.

All of the defectors are in agreement that a Communist "land reform" in South Vietnam would dwarf the bloodbath which occurred in the North. Captured Vietcong documents and statements by high-ranking defectors indicate that the Vietcong have between three and five million names on "blood debt" lists for punishment in the future. Two leading British authorities —P. J. Honey and Sir Robert Thompson—have estimated that a Vietcong bloodbath would result in over one million deaths. Unfortunately, the results of my own research support such an ominous conclusion.

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