Module 3
The Vietnamese Refugee Exodus

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Supporting Questions

What were the conditions that led the Vietnamese to flee their country?

What was life like for Vietnamese in refugee camps?

How did the United States and other asylum countries receive Vietnamese refugees?

1. Has leaving Vietnam as refugees impacted what it means to be Vietnamese American?

Vietnamese arrivals in the United States occurred much later than that of other Asian communities in the timeline of Asian immigration history. Its causes can be tied to the notion that “we are here because you were there.”[1] This idea foregrounds how US militarism in Southeast Asia led to the large-scale exodus of Vietnamese refugees from the 1970s and onward. This module provides an overview of the experiences of Vietnamese refugees, from the first group of evacuees in 1975 to subsequent major groups of refugees from 1978 through the 1990s.

We will read firsthand accounts of Vietnamese refugees who left at different time periods and by a variety of means, including as land refugees and boat refugees. This also includes refugees who were ethnically Chinese and discriminated against by the government in Vietnam. We will learn from refugee camp experiences, drawing on examples in the United States, as well as other “first asylum” nations in Southeast Asia, where refugees typically first

landed.

Additionally, the module will provide some context for the resettlement process, including the US dispersal policy that attempted to spread Vietnamese refugees across America—the United States Refugee Act of 1980, and the Orderly Departure Program. Among those who should not be overlooked are Amerasians, children born to Vietnamese mothers and American fathers, who faced discrimination under the Vietnamese government post-reunification of North and South Vietnam. The module will provide insight into Amerasian experiences, and encourage learners to think about the embodied experiences of war.

2. The First Wave of Refugees

A vast majority of Vietnamese Americans arrived in the United States as refugees escaping a country devastated by war. Their departure from Vietnam was marked by political turbulence, and their arrival in America was highly visible in the news media and academic scholarship. Before 1975, Vietnamese people living in the United States were students, professionals, and war brides. In the 1950s, their numbers were in the hundreds. However, in the 1960s until 1974, the population of Vietnamese Americans grew to about fifteen thousand.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnamese refugees were controversial figures in the US national debate. A Gallup Poll taken in May 1975 showed that 54 percent of Americans were opposed to admitting Vietnamese refugees (36 percent in favor, and 12 percent undecided). Despite the negative popular opinion, the Ford administration supported the arrival of Vietnamese refugees and passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act, establishing a program of domestic resettlement assistance for refugees fleeing Cambodia and Vietnam.

In addition to entering the United States on the heels of a highly unpopular war, Vietnamese refugees would also contend with the country's centuries-old legacy of anti-Asian discrimination, borne out by policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the violation of Japanese American civil liberties through their mass incarceration during World War II.

In the weeks leading up to South Vietnam's collapse on April 30, 1975, the world witnessed

the mass evacuation of approximately 130,000 refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia to the United States. The US State Department responded to this refugee crisis with several maneuvers, including Operations Frequent Wind, New Life, Babylift, and New Arrivals.

Those escaping Southeast Asia at that time were mainly military personnel or civilians with connections to South Vietnam or US governments. In Operation Frequent Wind, the United States deployed military helicopters to evacuate American personnel, their dependents, and Vietnamese affiliates from Saigon.

Scholars have characterized this first wave of Vietnamese refugees as members of South Vietnam's urban elite—they were highly educated, knew some English language, and had a certain amount of resources to begin new lives. Yet, regardless of their socioeconomic profile, this group faced uncertain futures and daunting challenges due to the unexpected and abrupt nature of their departures. Often, families were separated in the chaos of evacuation.

Operation New Life evacuated refugees to centers in the Pacific including Guam, Hawai'i, the Philippines, Thailand, and Wake Island in the spring and summer of 1975. Once there, refugees were medically screened, interviewed, and then transported to the United States or other resettlement countries. Occurring simultaneously with New Life was Operation Babylift, an effort by the Ford administration to evacuate children out of Vietnam before the Fall of Saigon. Many of the infants and children airlifted were fathered by American military personnel or were vulnerable children in South Vietnam orphanages.

The first Operation Babylift mission took place on April 4, 1975, but the cargo plane, C5A Galaxy, exploded moments after takeoff, resulting in 138 casualties including children and their escorts. By the end of Operation Babylift on April 26, 1975, more than 3,300 children had been evacuated from South Vietnam.

Babylift was an extremely controversial maneuver because not all of the children who left were orphans, so many critics questioned if evacuation and adoption outside their home country would be in the children's best interest.

After the evacuation phase, Operation New Arrivals facilitated Vietnamese refugees' transition

from temporary holding sites throughout the Pacific to their admittance into American society through four entry points: Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania.

Camp Pendleton was the first military base set up to receive Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. In a short time period, "tent cities" and makeshift housing on these bases accommodated over one hundred thousand refugees. A retrospective news feature on the 1975 cohort of refugees in the Los Angeles Times by reporter Anh Do, captured the sentiments of those who passed through Camp Pendleton: "Inside the tent city, the lost and the bewildered roamed, one of them describing their arrival 'like coming to the promised land — just that we didn't know what was promised or where we would land.'"[2]

Quynh-Trang Nguyen was a teenager in 1975 when she and her family stayed in Camp Pendleton, awaiting their new lives. In an oral history interview conducted in 2012, she shared her memories of that experience:

> It was very strange. We had fun, but it was scary because we didn't know what was going on, especially, you know, at the age of 13. I didn't know whether I would get to go to school, where my friends were, what kind of new friends I would encounter. I was very worried and scared, but yet somehow I felt okay because I was with my parents and with my two siblings, so together we were still a family so that gave me a bit of comfort. The living conditions in Camp Pendleton wasn't that great. We had to use portable toilets. It was really cold at night and we didn't have enough warm clothes. We had to live in the tent. It was like military tents, so that was not very comfortable.[3]

Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees remained in these centers for a few months until they were sponsored by one of ten voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) working in collaboration with the federal government. These agencies included Church World Service, International Rescue Committee, and Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services.

The US government created a refugee dispersal policy that spread Vietnamese refugees across the country with the rationale that they would "assimilate" to America quickly. The goal was also to ease the impact of a large number of new arrivals who may be competitors

for scarce jobs in a down economy, to allow for more sponsorship opportunities, and to circumvent the formation of ethnic enclaves.

The VOLAGs matched refugees with local sponsors (usually churches or individuals). The sponsors then became responsible for providing refugees with basic needs, including food, clothing, and shelter. Additionally, most sponsors assisted refugees in finding employment, registering their children for schools, and acclimating to American society.

The experience refugees had with their sponsors varied from close and compassionate care to exploitation of labor and sexual abuse. In the hurried implementation of refugee aid, there was a general lack of oversight for many local organizations. As new immigrants who were precariously situated as beneficiaries of American aid, Vietnamese refugees were often defenseless against abuses of power by individuals or institutions. However, most persisted in building new lives and new communities despite the traumas of displacement and loss.

3. The Second Wave: Boat People and Life in Refugee Camps

The late 1970s saw another surge of departures of Vietnamese out of their homeland. Much of these departures resulted from the new Communist regime's policies to govern the economic, political, and agricultural life of the reunified country. Among those policies were the forced reeducation, torture, or killings of former South Vietnamese military personnel and US affiliates; seizure of land and property; and closure of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs. The Communist regime also implemented new economic zones that forced citizens from urban regions to uncultivated or devastated rural areas.

The reeducation camps are often described by survivors as hard labor camps or prisons where they were sent for an indefinite time period. Some were released in a few months, while others were imprisoned for years or decades. Others perished in these camps due to their harsh conditions and food scarcity. Families of reeducation camp prisoners often found themselves closely monitored by the new regime, and the children of former South Vietnamese government officials faced discrimination in schools, with their opportunities for

advancement in the new society greatly diminished.

These dire political and economic conditions pushed more than two million Vietnamese people out of the country after 1975. In the years following the Fall of Saigon, many refugees left Vietnam secretly in unseaworthy and overcrowded boats. This group of refugees became known as the boat people. Most refugees fled to asylum camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, or Hong Kong and awaited approval by foreign countries, namely the United States, Australia, France, and Canada. The journeys from Vietnam were often risky and dangerous, with an estimated two hundred thousand to four hundred thousand deaths at sea. Refugees who fled the country were committing what the Vietnam government considered illegal acts, and if caught, were jailed and interrogated. An underground industry of boat builders, escape organizers, and identification forgers emerged under these circumstances.

In 1978, Vietnam battled its two neighbors, Cambodia and China. These conflicts resulted in the displacement of more refugees. Further contributing to the factors in a region devastated by decades of war, the Communist regime discriminated against the largest ethnic minority population, the Chinese Vietnamese.

Many had already begun repatriating back to China after 1975, but in 1978, they were allowed to depart Vietnam aboard large vessels that could accommodate thousands at a time. Many Chinese Vietnamese left during that time under the supervision of the Vietnam government, and the mass exodus fueled negative international media coverage of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam—the new official name of the country.

Refugees leaving in this second period spent anywhere from months to years in asylum camps awaiting admittance to a resettlement country. The camps in Southeast Asia varied between moderately comfortable quarters to enclosed, barbed-wired camps resembling prisons. Living conditions deteriorated as camps became increasingly crowded in the 1980s. Life in refugee camps was spent in line for food rations and preparing for a new life in the United States or elsewhere. Aid workers assisted refugees by facilitating socialization courses, teaching English, or helping fill out paperwork. Refugees also underwent medical examinations and rigorous interviews as part of the asylum process to determine eligibility for

family reunification, sponsorship, or status as a political refugee.

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Việt Thanh Nguyễn explained why it is important to make the distinction between refugees' experiences and immigrant ones: "Even at this moment in history, where the xenophobic attitudes that have always been present are reaching another peak, even people who don't like immigrants nevertheless believe in that immigrant idea. But refugees are different. Refugees are unwanted where they come from. They're unwanted where they go to. They're a different legal category. They're a different category of feeling in terms of how the refugees experience themselves."[4]

The "category of feeling" may include despair, grief, debt, gratitude, resentment, hope, and persistence, among other contradictions that refugees experience. What work still remains for us to create a more inclusive world where refugees might find recognition, support, and belonging?

Endnotes

[1] This aphorism is attributed to the late antiracist scholar, Ambalavaner Sivanandan (known as Siva). He was referring to postcolonial migration and used this phrase to critique imperialism.

[2] Anh Do, "Vietnamese refugees began new lives in Camp Pendleton's 1975 'tent city'," Los Angeles Times, April 30, 2015, https://graphics.latimes.com/tent-city/.

[3] Quynh-Trang Nguyen, interviewed by Brandon Nguyen, February 21, 2012, Viet Stories; Vietnamese American Oral History Project, University of California, Irvine Southeast Asian Archive, https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/81235/d84g2r/.

[4] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "'Call Me a Refugee, Not an Immigrant': Viet Thanh Nguyen," interview by Jon Wiener, The Nation, June 11, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/call-refugee-not-immigrant-viet-thanh-nguyen/.