

# THE 1968 'HUE MASSACRE'

By D. Gareth Porter

Six years after the stunning communist Tet Offensive of 1968, one of the enduring myths of the Second Indochina War remains essentially unchallenged: the communist "massacre" at Hue. The official version of what happened in Hue has been that the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the North Vietnamese deliberately and systematically murdered not only responsible officials but religious figures, the educated elite and ordinary people, and that burial sites later found yielded some 3,000 bodies, the largest portion of the total of more than 4,700 victims of communist execution.

Although there is still much that is not known about what happened in Hue, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the story conveyed to the American public by South Vietnamese and American propaganda agencies bore little resemblance to the truth, but was, on the contrary, the result of a political warfare campaign by the Saigon government, embellished by the U.S. government and accepted uncritically by the U.S. press. A careful study of the official story of the Hue "massacre" on the one hand, and of the evidence from independent or anti-communist sources on the other, provides a revealing glimpse into efforts by the U.S. press to keep alive fears of a massive "bloodbath."<sup>1</sup> It is a myth which has served U.S. administration interests well in the past, and continues to influence public attitudes deeply today.

## THE TENTH POLITICAL WARFARE BATTALION'S ROLE

To unravel the official story of Hue, one must go back to the source of the original information which was conveyed to the American public about the episode.

The agency of the Saigon government given overall responsibility for compiling data on the alleged "massacre" and publicizing the information was neither the Ministry of Social Welfare and Refugees nor the Ministry of Health, as one might have expected, but the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). It is on the word of this body, whose specific mission is to discredit the National Liberation Front without regard to the truth, that the story of the "massacre" reported by the U.S. press in 1968 and 1969 was based. Neither the number of bodies found nor the causes of death were ever confirmed by independent sources. On the contrary, as we shall see, evidence from independent sources challenges the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion's version of the facts.

The official Saigon account of the alleged massacre surfaced on April 23, 1968 when the Political Warfare Battalion released a report that over one thousand people were executed by the communists in and around Hue. The battalion's report was repeated in detail by the United States Information Service but the U.S. media ignored it.<sup>2</sup> One week later the U.S. Mission released a report of its own which was essentially a restatement of the ARVN report. The U.S. Mission report was said to have been the result of an investigation "by

the United States and South Vietnamese authorities."<sup>3</sup> But the role of the U.S. advisers in the report appears to have been secondary; according to the Saigon government news agency, Vietnam Press, the report was based on data supplied by the National Police in Hue, U.S. advisers, interviews with South Vietnamese Information and Refugee officials and "records of the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion," which supplied the basic statistics on alleged executions.<sup>4</sup> Vietnam Press further reported that "an officer of the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion involved in investigating the executions estimated that almost half of the victims were found buried alive."

During the months of March and April, when the alleged victims of communist execution were being uncovered, the Saigon government did not allow any journalists to view the grave sites or bodies, despite the fact that many foreign journalists were in Hue at the time. Province chief Col. Pham Van Khoa announced at the end of February that 300 civilian government workers had been executed by the communists and had been found in common graves southeast of the city.<sup>5</sup> But no journalist was ever taken to see the alleged graves. In fact, French photographer Marc Riboud, who demanded several times to see the graves, was repeatedly refused permission. When he was finally taken in a helicopter to travel to the alleged site the pilot refused to land, claiming that the area was "insecure."<sup>6</sup> Riboud never saw the site, and when the official chronology of discoveries and map coordinates of the grave sites were finally released, there was no site resembling the one described by Col. Khoa.<sup>7</sup>

Stewart Harris of the London Times was in Hue to do a story on the alleged mass executions in

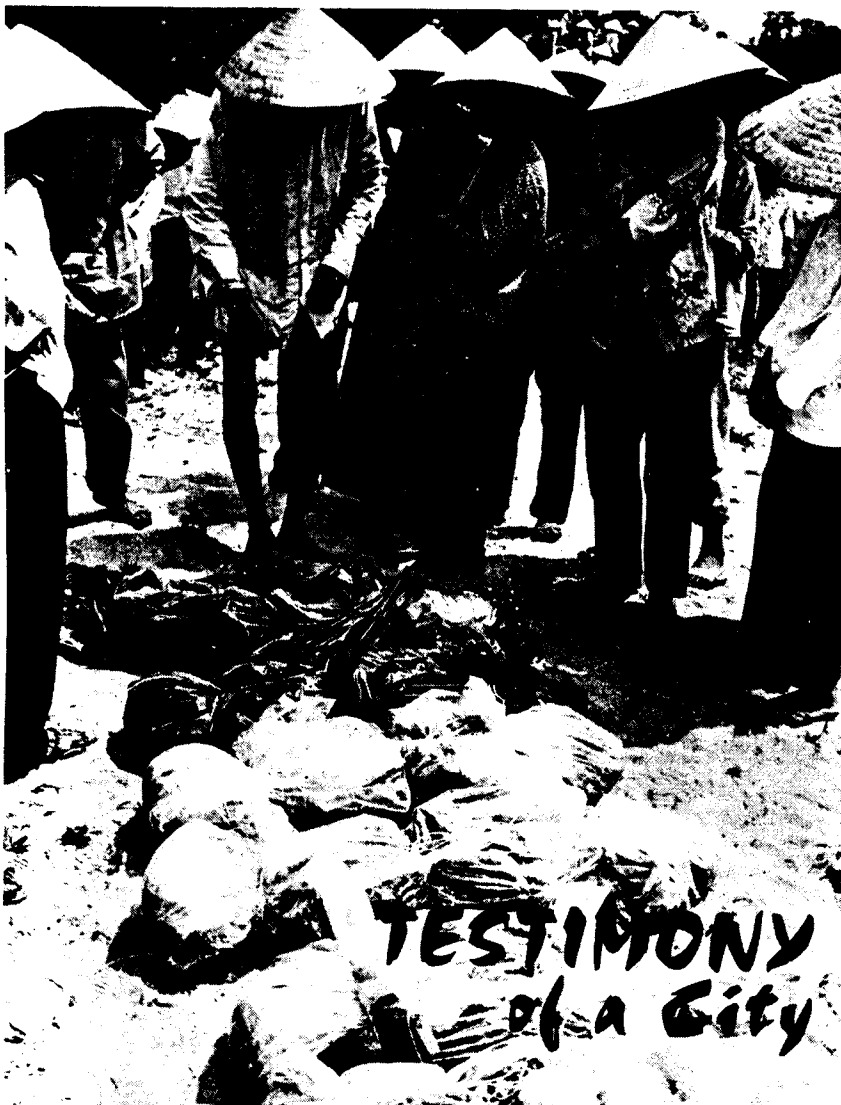
late March, just at the time when, according to the official chronology, some 400 bodies were being uncovered in the area of the imperial tombs south of Hue. But instead of taking him to that site, the American political warfare officer took Harris to a village where there were no mass graves, while the Vietnamese political warfare officer took him to a grave site in Gia Hoi district, where the bodies had long since been reburied.<sup>8</sup> So he had to depend on the word of the Vietnamese and American officials concerning what was to be found at the grave sites.

Moreover, ARVN's Political Warfare Department issued contradictory reports on how many bodies were actually uncovered. At the Gia Hoi High School sites, for example, the official American report, based on information furnished by the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion, gave a total of 22 mass graves and 200 bodies, for an average of nine bodies per grave.<sup>9</sup> But when Stewart Har-

ris was taken to the site, he was told by his Vietnamese escort officer that each of the 22 graves held from three to seven bodies, which would have put the total somewhere between 66 and 150.<sup>10</sup> At about the same time, the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion published a pamphlet for Vietnamese consumption which said there were 14 graves at the high school instead of 22, which would have reduced the total still further.<sup>11</sup>

### A DOCTOR'S CONTRADICTION FINDINGS

The elusiveness of Saigon's figures is significant in view of the testimony of Alje Vennema, a doctor working for a Canadian medical team at Quang Ngai Hospital, who happened to be in the Hue province hospital during the Tet Offensive and who made his own investigation of the grave sites.<sup>12</sup> Vennema agreed that there were 14 graves at Gia Hoi High School but said there was a total



TWO TYPICAL PROPAGANDA LEAFLETS by the Saigon government about the 1968 "Communist massacre" in Hue. Leaflet at left was published by the Saigon Embassy in Washington, D.C. and the one on the right in Saigon by the Popular Mobilization and Chieu Hoi offices.

of only 20 bodies in those graves. Vennema also stated that the other two sites in Gia Hoi district of Hue held only 19 bodies rather than the 77 claimed by the government, and that those in the area of the imperial tombs southwest of Hue contained only 29 bodies rather than 201 as claimed in the official report.

According to Vennema, therefore, the total number of bodies at the four major sites discovered immediately after Tet was 68, instead of the officially claimed total of 477. Then, too, while he did not claim that none of these bodies was the victim of NLF execution, he said that the evidence indicated most of them were victims of fighting in the area, rather than of political killing. In the case of the sites in the imperial tombs area, he stated that most of the bodies were clothed in the threads of uniforms. He reported having talked with nearby villagers who said that from February 21 to 26 there had been heavy bombing, shelling and strafing in the immediate area. And, in contrast to government claims that many victims had been buried alive there, Vennema said all the bodies showed wounds.

The circumstances of the official version -- its political warfare origins, the refusal to allow confirmation by the press from first-hand observation, the questionable statistics -- and the conflicting testimony of a medical doctor who was present at the time all point to misrepresentation of the truth by the Saigon government in its April 1968 report. In fact, the evidence suggests that the Political Warfare Battalion may have in-

flated the number of actual executions by the NLF by a factor of ten or more.

## THE 1969 EXHUMATIONS

During 1969, as more bodies were uncovered in the villages surrounding Hue, another phase of the Saigon government campaign was launched by ARVN's political warfare officers. The first bodies were found southeast of Hue, where digging was carried out under the supervision of a "Committee for Search and Burial of Communist Victims" headed by the district chief, Major Trung. Again newsmen were not invited to watch the work while it was going on, but were later summoned by Major Trung and told that the Committee had found 135 bodies in Vinh Luu hamlet of Phu Da village and 230 bodies in seven graves at Phu Xuan village.<sup>13</sup>

What the district chief did not tell the reporters was that the entire area in which the grave sites were found southeast of Hue had been a battleground for many weeks early in 1968. The NLF continued to hold many of the hamlets even after being driven out of the city, and some hamlets remained in their hands for months, as American fighter-bombers carried out heavy strikes against them.

One of the four sites discovered in late March 1969, which allegedly contained 22 bodies, was between Phu My and Tuy Van villages.<sup>14</sup> Phu My village, only three miles east of Hue, was one of the villages occupied by communist troops during the offensive, when many young men of military age were drafted into the Liberation Army. According to a later interview with one of its inhabitants, American planes bombed the village repeatedly, destroying hundreds of homes and killing civilians.

The three other burial sites uncovered in late March and early April, containing 357 bodies according to the Pentagon's chronology of discoveries, were located in Phu Xuan village and a short distance down the road in Phu Da village.<sup>15</sup> Again, Phu Xuan, 13 miles east of Hue, had been the scene of fierce fighting, including the heavy use of American air power, in the weeks after the offensive. In one all-day battle in which American air strikes were called in, some 250 communist soldiers were killed, according to an interview with the Phu Xuan village chief published in the Political Warfare Department's own newspaper, Tien Tuyen.<sup>16</sup>

The Saigon assertion that the bodies found were victims of communist execution were not convincing even to officials of the Saigon government. The Minister of Health, Tran Luu Y, after visiting the burial sites in April 1969, frankly informed the Thua Thien deputy province chief of his opinion that the bodies could be those of NLF soldiers killed in battle.<sup>17</sup> The Political War-



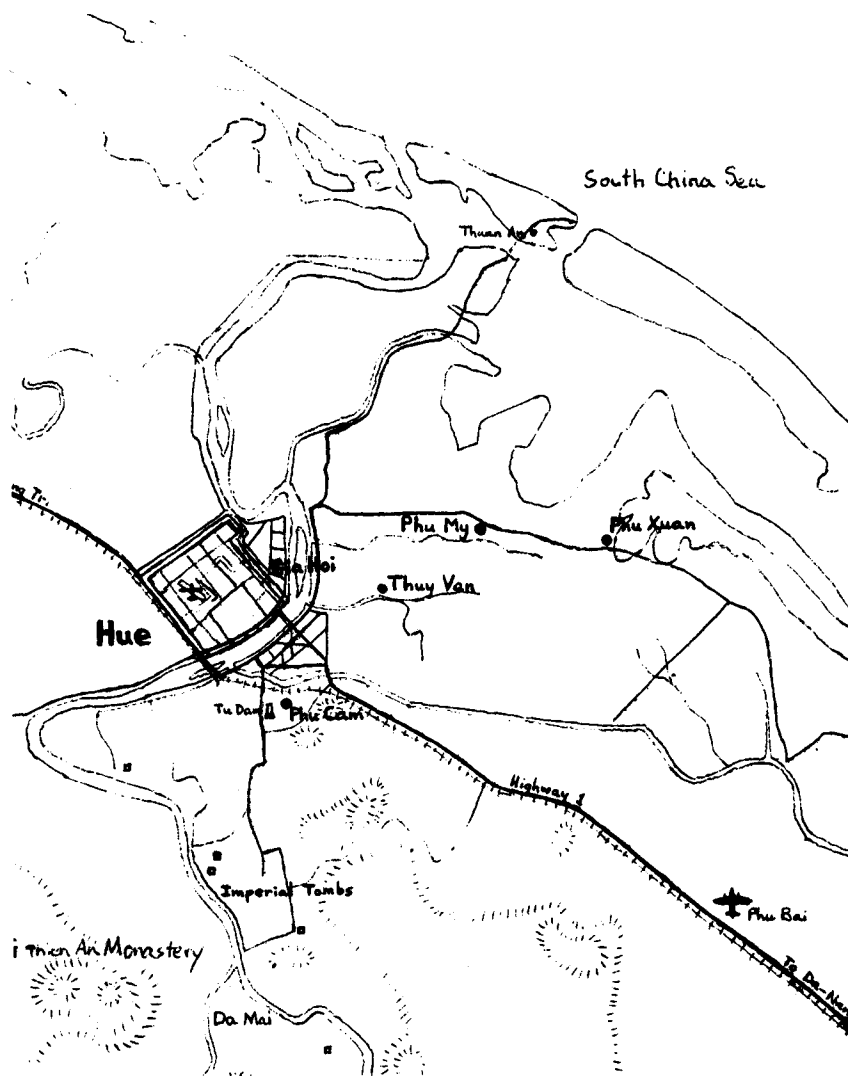
fare Department's newspaper promptly denounced the minister for this skepticism.<sup>18</sup>

What little information was made available about the bodies discovered certainly supported the suspicion that very few were actually victims of communist execution. For one thing, Major Trung's own report on the bodies found in his district claimed only nine civil servants and 14 soldiers of the Saigon army out of a total of 365.<sup>19</sup> It was well known that a considerable number of the bodies were those of women and children. An American officer in Hue admitted to a Washington Post reporter at a mass funeral for the dead, "Some may have just gotten caught up [in the fighting]."<sup>20</sup> It would be surprising indeed if the NLF had not buried many women and children killed by air strikes or artillery fire in the hamlets which they controlled near Hue.

Another major discovery of bodies at Da Mai Creek, a heavily wooded area ten miles south of Hue, in September 1969 remains shrouded in vagueness and contradictions. Even the number of bodies found remains something of a mystery. The official Pentagon account of the discovery shows that the number was approximately 250.<sup>21</sup> But when Douglas Pike, the U.S. Information Agency's Vietnam specialist, reported the find a few months later, the figure had grown to 428.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the one "defector" produced by Saigon to testify on this alleged communist massacre told two very different and contradictory stories about the episode. In an interview arranged by the Saigon government for the Baltimore Sun late in 1969, the "defector" testified that a communist district chief who had been his friend had told him that nearly 600 people from Phu Cam and Tu Dam were turned over to pro-communist hill tribesmen to be murdered. The reason, he explained to the Sun, was that they had been "traitors to the revolution."<sup>23</sup> But this same man, in an interview with the correspondent of Tien Tuyen a few days later said he had been told by the same district chief that 500 "tyrants" were being taken to the mountains, not to be killed but to be "reformed."<sup>24</sup>

Again, there is a major and direct conflict between Pike and the official Pentagon version on who the victims were and where they came from. Pike's version is that they were a group captured in a church in the Catholic district of Phu Cam in Hue on February 5, 1968 and marched five miles south, where 20 of them were executed by a people's court and then turned over to a local communist unit, which took them three and a half more miles away from Hue before being murdered.<sup>25</sup>



But the Defense Department account shows that the group of civilians taken from the church in Phu Cam numbered only 80 to 100 people, not 400 as Pike suggests.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, an account originally published in the semi-official Viet-Nam Magazine and reprinted by the Saigon Embassy in Washington, asserts that all except the 20 people executed by the people's court were allowed to return to Hue with the warning that the NLF would some day return to Hue, and that the people should behave accordingly.<sup>27</sup>

These contradictions are important, given Pike's effort to argue that the skeletons at Da Mai had to be the victims of communist murder because they were a group which had been taken from Hue as prisoners. In fact, there is evidence that most of the people who left Phu Cam with the communists were not prisoners at all, but were pressed into service as stretcher-bearers, ammunition carriers, or even as soldiers for the NLF. As Agence France Presse reported from Hue during the battle for the city, a number of young men, especially from the Phu Cam area, received guns or were used as stretcher-bearers to transport wounded soldiers toward the mountain camps.<sup>29</sup>

Again, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that the 250 skeletons found at Da Mai

Creek (not 400 as claimed by Pike) were also killed in battle or by American B-52 strikes. The Viet-Nam Magazine article notes in passing that the site was "in the vicinity where the communists fought their last big unit battle with the allies (April 30 to May 2, 1968)"<sup>30</sup> -- a fact of which readers of the American press were never informed. The People's Liberation Armed Forces have always made a point of carrying as many of their war dead as possible from the battlefield to be buried, in order to deny their enemy tactical intelligence on casualties.

In short, the inconsistencies and other weaknesses of the various official documents, the lack of confirming evidence, and the evidence contradicting the official explanation all suggest that the overwhelming majority of the bodies discovered in 1969 were in fact the victims of American air power and of the ground fighting that raged in the hamlets, rather than of MLF execution.

## DOUGLAS PIKE: MEDIA MANIPULATOR PAR EXCELLENCE

It was in large part due to the work of one man that the Hue "massacre" received significant press coverage and wide comment in 1969 and 1970. That man was the U.S. Information Agency's Douglas Pike. It was Pike who visited South Vietnam in November 1969, apparently at the suggestion of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, to prepare a report on Hue.<sup>31</sup>

During the last two weeks of November, Pike inspired, either directly or indirectly, several different newspaper articles on both Hue and the "bloodbath" theme in general. Pike himself briefed several reporters on his version of the communist occupation of Hue and at the same time circulated a translation of a captured communist document which he had found in the files and which he argued was an open admission of the mass murder of innocent civilians during the occupation of Hue.

The document was the subject of several stories in the American press. The Washington Post, for example, carried the Associated Press article on the document with the headline, "Reds Killed 2,900 in Hue during Tet, according to Seized Enemy Document."<sup>32</sup> The Christian Science Monitor correspondent's article, under the headline, "Communists Admit Murder," began, "The Communist massacre in Hue in early 1968 represented the culmination of careful planning."<sup>33</sup> Both articles quoted as proof of the "admission" the following sentence from the translation: "We eliminated 1,892 administrative personnel, 39 policemen, 790 tyrants, 6 captains, 2 first lieutenants, 20 second lieutenants and many non-commissioned officers."

No reporter questioned the authenticity of the document or the accuracy of the translation they were given. Yet the original Vietnamese document, a copy of which I obtained from the U.S. Command in Vietnam in September 1972, shows that the anonymous author did not say what the press and public were led to believe he said.<sup>34</sup> In the original Vietnamese, the sentence quoted above does not support the official U.S. line that the communists admitted murdering more than 2,600 civilians in Hue. To begin with, the context in which this sentence was written was not a discussion of punishing those who were considered criminals or "enemies," but an overall account of the offensive in destroying the army and administration in Thua Thien. Two paragraphs earlier, the document refers to the establishment of a "political force whose mission was to propagandize and appeal for enemy soldiers to surrender with their weapons." It recalls that self-defense forces were so frightened when the Front's forces attacked that they tried to cross the river, with the result that 21 of them drowned. The section dealing with Phu Vang district notes the strength of the opposing forces and the locus of the attack, claiming the seizure of 12 trucks to transport food and 60 rolls of cloth for flags.

It is the next sentence which says, "We eliminated 1,892 administrative personnel" in the official translation. But the word diệt, translated as "eliminate" here, must be understood to mean "destroy" or "neutralize" in a military sense, rather than to "kill" or "liquidate," as Pike and the press reports claimed. As used in communist military communiques, the term had previously been used to include killed, wounded or captured among enemy forces. For example, the Third Special Communique of the People's Liberation Armed Forces, issued at the end of the Tet Offensive, said, "We have destroyed [diệt] a large part of the enemy's force; according to initial statis-



tics, we have killed, wounded and captured more than 90,000 enemy...."<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that dieu does not mean to "kill" in any ordinary Vietnamese usage, and that the official translation is highly irregular.

Moreover, the word te, translated as "administrative personnel" in the version circulated to newsmen, actually has the broader meaning, according to a standard North Vietnamese dictionary, of "puppet personnel," including both civil-

Yet another element of the press offensive inspired by Pike's presence in Saigon was the testimony of a "rallier," or defector, from the NLF on the bloodbath issue. The technique of displaying such defectors before press conferences had been used on many occasions by Saigon's Political Warfare Department in order to make a political point which could not otherwise be convincingly documented. Although the most experienced reporters in Saigon were always skeptical of statements made by defectors put on display by Saigon, there were always journalists who were fascinated by the idea of interviewing genuine ex-communists. Thus, it was arranged for Le Xuan Chuyen, who claimed to have been a lieutenant colonel in the Vietnam People's Army before defecting in August 1966, to be interviewed by Washington Daily News and Los Angeles Times correspondents in order to publicize his views on communist plans for a postwar bloodbath. Chuyen estimated that a communist "blood debt" list included some five million South Vietnamese, of whom some 500,000 would be killed.<sup>42</sup>

A brief note on Chuyen's background helps to put this testimony in proper perspective. Even in his initial interrogation, this self-proclaimed "lieutenant colonel" (a rank his interrogators were inclined to question) exhibited a notable sense of political opportunism.<sup>43</sup> He lost no time in praising Thieu and Ky as leaders who were "daring, patriotic and have a strong sense of nationalism," and he volunteered his desire to work for the Americans or the Saigon government even before he was asked.<sup>44</sup> Within a few months, Chuyen was nominated to be director of the government's Chieu Hoi Center for Saigon -- a position which was never mentioned in news accounts of his statement on alleged communist policies.

A second alleged high-ranking communist defector, Col. Tran Van Dac, was actually Planning Adviser to the General Directorate of Political Warfare of ARVN at the time and thus hardly a disinterested witness.<sup>46</sup> His 1969 statement that there were three million Vietnamese on the "blood debt" list continues to be relied on by U.S. administrative apologists, including Sir Robert Thompson and Pike himself.<sup>47</sup>

ian and military.<sup>36</sup> When the document does refer specifically to the Saigon government's administration, in fact, it uses a different term, nguy quyen. Both the context and the normal usage of the words in question, therefore, belie the meaning which Pike successfully urged on the press.

## PIKE'S 'ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE' DOCUMENT

If the misrepresentation of the document may be explained by a combination of bad translation and Pike's own zeal to find evidence to support the official argument, Pike himself must take sole responsibility for a second such case which occurred about the same time. Pike gave to selected reporters a list of 15 categories of what he called -- and were called in the press -- "enemies of the people," which were said to be targeted by the communists for liquidation. The list included two categories which suggested that the communists were out to kill Catholic leaders and landlords or capitalists in particular: "leading and key members of religious organizations still deeply superstitious" and "members of the exploiting class." The document was given prominence in articles in the Los Angeles Times and Washington Daily News on alleged communist plans for a "bloodbath," and was again mentioned in stories dealing with Pike's own pamphlet.<sup>37</sup>

But again, although the document may have been authentic, the construction put on it was clearly deceptive. First of all, the document itself said nothing about "enemies of the people"<sup>38</sup> -- a phrase introduced by Pike himself and repeated by the press as though it were in the original. And second, it did not say or imply that these 15 categories of people were to be punished, much less liquidated, as Pike suggested to reporters and later wrote in his own booklet on Hue.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, the document, which bore the title "Fifteen Criteria for Investigation," was simply one local cadre's notion of the kinds of people who should be carefully watched.<sup>40</sup> The categories of people who were marked for repression by the NLF were quite different from the ones on the list circulated by Pike, and included neither the "leading and key members of religious organizations" nor "members of the exploiting class." And Pike should have been well aware of this, since a separate document containing the categories of people to be punished was published by the U.S. Mission in October 1967.<sup>41</sup>

## FEED THEM A NUMBER . . .

The major accomplishment of Pike's work was to launch the official "estimate" of 4,756 as the number of civilians killed by the NLF in and around Hue. This was no small feat because, in arriving at that figure, Pike had to statistically conjure away thousands of civilian victims of

American air power in Hue. The undeniable fact was that American rockets and bombs, not communist assassination, caused the greatest carnage in Hue. The bloodshed and ruin shook even longtime supporters of the anti-communist effort. Robert Shaplen wrote at the time, "Nothing I saw during the Korean War, or in the Vietnam War so far has been as terrible, in terms of destruction and despair, as what I saw in Hue."<sup>48</sup> After the communist occupation had ended, Don Tate of Scripps-Howard Newspapers described bomb craters 40 feet wide and 20 feet deep staggered in the streets near the walls of the citadel and "bodies stacked into graves by fives -- one on top of another."<sup>49</sup> Nine thousand seven hundred and seventy-six of Hue's 17,134 houses were completely destroyed and 3,169 more officially classified as "seriously damaged." (In the rest of Thua Thien province another 8,000 homes were more than half destroyed.<sup>50</sup>) The initial South Vietnamese estimate of the number of civilians killed in the fighting of the bloody reconquest was 3,776.<sup>51</sup>

When ARVN's political warfare specialists went to work, however, this initial estimate, given in a March 1968 report of the office of the provincial chief of Social Services and Refugees, was somehow replaced by a new estimate of 944, published in the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion's booklet.<sup>52</sup> And this was all Douglas Pike needed to transform those thousands of civilian dead into victims of a "communist massacre."

In a chart which he calls a "recapitulation" of the dead and missing, Pike begins not by establishing the number of casualties from various causes, but with a total of 7,600, which he says is the Saigon government's "total estimated civilian casualties resulting from the Battle of Hue."<sup>53</sup> The original government estimate of civilian casualties, however, again supplied by the provincial Social Services Office, was just over 6,700 -- not 7,600 -- and it was based on the estimate of 3,776 civilians killed in the battle of Hue.<sup>54</sup> Instead of using the Social Services Office's figure, Pike employs the Political Warfare Battalion's 944 figure. Subtracting that number and another 1,900 hospitalized with war wounds, Pike gets the figure of 4,756, which he suggests is the total number of victims of communist massacre, including the 1,945 "unaccounted for" in this strange method of accounting. In short, the whole statistical exercise had the sole purpose of arriving at a fraudulent figure of 4,756 victims of a "massacre."

### PIKE REWRITES POLICY FOR NLF

The substance of Pike's own analysis is what he calls a "hypothesis" concerning the policy of the NLF leadership in Hue during the occupation of the city. The gist of the "hypothesis" is as follows: NLF policy went through three distinct phases, corresponding to different phases of the occupation: in the first few days, the NLF ex-



pected to be in control only temporarily and its mission was not to establish its own government but to destroy the Saigon administrative structure. During this period, NLF cadres with blacklists executed not only civil servants and military officers but religious and social leaders as well. Then, after the third or fourth day, the communist leadership decided they could hold the city permanently, whereupon they launched a "period of social reconstruction," in Pike's words, and sought to kill all who were not proletarian in ideology and class background, in particular Buddhist, Catholic and intellectual leaders. Finally, as they prepared to leave the city late in February, they killed anyone who would be able to identify their cadres in the city.<sup>55</sup>

While Pike refers vaguely to various pieces of evidence which he claims support this hypothesis, he offers none of it in his published work. In any case, all the evidence available at present contradicts Pike's hypothesis from beginning to end. To begin with, captured NLF documents indicate that the Front had the mission not only of destroying the Saigon administration but of establishing a revolutionary government in Hue and planned to hold the city for as long as possible. In fact, the very document which Pike used to establish the communist admission of responsibility

for mass murder of civilians specified that the Liberation Forces had the "mission of occupying Hue as long as possible so that a revolutionary administration could be established."<sup>56</sup>

As for the "blacklists" for execution, Pike's claim that the list was extensive and included lower-ranking officials and non-governmental figures is contradicted by none other than Hue's chief of secret police, Le Ngan, whose own name was on the list. In 1968, soon after the reoccupation of the city, Le Ngan told former International Voluntary Services worker Len Ackland, who had worked in Hue before the offensive, that the only names on the blacklist for Gia Hoi district were those of the officers of the secret police apparatus for the district.<sup>57</sup>

Other lists were of those selected not for summary execution but for capture on the one hand and for reeducation in place on the other. Those who were to be captured -- although not necessarily executed, according to a document called "Plan for an Offensive and General Uprising of Mui A" given to me by the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office in June 1971 -- were limited to a relatively small number of Vietnamese and American officials.<sup>58</sup> The document says, "With regard to the province chief, deputy province chief, officers from the rank of major up, American intelligence officers and chiefs of services, if things go to our advantage, at 12 o'clock on the day some of them are arrested, they must quickly persuade others not to hide and compel them to surrender . . . and then we must take them out of the city." The captives were to remain in prison outside the city, according to the plan, until their dossiers could be studied and a determination made on their individual cases. It emphasized that none of these higher U.S. or Vietnamese officials in Hue was to be killed unless the fighting in the first hours was unsuccessful and there was no way to conduct them out of the city -- a circumstance which obviously did not arise.

The document further exempted lower-ranking officials from capture or retribution: "With regard to those ordinary civil servants working for the enemy because of their livelihood and who do not oppose the revolution, educate them and quickly give them responsibility to continue working to serve the revolution."

There was a third category of individual, those who were neither high-ranking officials nor ordinary civil servants but officials who had at one time or another been involved actively in the government's paramilitary apparatus. While these individuals were not to be given jobs, the evidence indicates that they were to be "reeducated" rather than executed as long as the NLF was assured of control of the city. They were ordered in the first days of the occupation to report to their local committees but were then allowed to return home.<sup>59</sup>

This does not mean that there were no execu-

tions in Hue during the initial period of the occupation. Len Ackland and Washington Post correspondent Don Oberdorfer have documented cases of individuals who were executed when they tried to hide from the Front or resisted the new government in some other way.<sup>60</sup> But these harsh measures, which may in many cases have reflected individual actions by soldiers or cadres rather than a policy decision by the Front (as when a person was shot resisting arrest), were distinct from the mass retribution for official position or political attitude claimed by Douglas Pike. And the number of executions was relatively small, according to Hue residents interviewed by Ackland.

## CLERGY AND INTELLECTUALS EXECUTING THEMSELVES

Pike's argument that there was a period of "social reconstruction" marked by a purge of religious figures and intellectuals is contradicted not only by the logic of NLF political strategy in Hue but by the documentary evidence as well. As Pike himself pointed out in his book War, Peace and the Viet Cong, published in 1969, the revolutionary government in Hue during the occupation comprised a number of leaders of the 1966 Struggle Movement against the Ky government -- precisely the Buddhist and intellectual leaders he later claimed the NLF wished to systematically eliminate in 1968.<sup>61</sup> These were not proletarian revolutionaries eager to take vengeance on the Buddhist hierarchy and the educated elite, as Pike intimates, but representatives of those groups in Hue who had actively opposed the Thieu-Ky government and the American military occupation. It was on these strata that the NLF had based its political strategy of the broadest possible united front in Hue.

Thus, the chairman of the Revolutionary Committee in Hue was Le Van Hao, the well-known Hue University ethnologist who had earlier edited the Struggle Movement's publication Vietnam, Vietnam. A deputy chairman was the senior Buddhist monk in





Central Vietnam, Thich Don Hau. Other 1966 Struggle Movement leaders who returned as members of the Revolutionary Committee included Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, formerly a teacher at Quoc Hoc High School, who became secretary general of the new committee; Nguyen Dac Xuan, who had been dispatched by the Struggle Movement in Hue to organize "student commandos" in Danang in 1966; and Ton That Duong Ky, a Hue University professor.

These veterans of the Buddhist protest of 1966 were joined in the revolutionary regime by other well-known figures from educational institutions in Hue, such as Mrs. Nguyen Dinh Chi, former principal of the respectable Dong Khanh Girls' School, who was a deputy chairwoman of the "Alliance" group formed later in 1968. Ton That Duong Thien, a teacher at Nguyen Du High School, directed operations in Gia Hoi district, and many others from the Hue educated elite accepted positions of responsibility in the revolutionary administration.<sup>62</sup>

The "Plan for an Offensive" also confirms that the political strategy of the Front was to rely on Buddhist clergy and laity for support in Hue. In a section dealing specifically with religious groups, the document says, "We must seek by every means to struggle to unite with and win over the Buddhist masses and monks and nuns."

As for the Catholics of Hue, the evidence from both communist documents and eyewitness testimony shows that the NLF's policy was not directed against the Catholic Church. The captured "Plan

for an Offensive" does refer to "isolating reactionaries who exploit Catholicism in Phu Cam." In Vietnamese communist terminology, however, "isolation" means to act to cut off the influence of the individual in question in community affairs. It does not mean execution or even imprisonment necessarily, contrary to what the American political warfare specialists may argue.

The document specifies that only those priests who were found to "hide the enemy" were subject to any form of punishment, and the specific treatment was to depend on the degree to which the individual had opposed the revolution in the past.

In Gia Hoi district, which the NLF controlled for 26 days, one Catholic priest told Len Ackland that not one of his parishioners was harmed by the Front.<sup>63</sup> The only two Catholic figures identified by the Saigon regime as having been killed by the NLF are two French Benedictine priests, Father Guy and Father Urbain. It was reported by sources from the Thien An Monastery, however, that NLF forces occupied the monastery for several days when Father Guy and Father Urbain were still present and that neither they nor any other priests were harmed. The two were reported by Agence France Presse to have fled from heavy American bombing of the monastery on February 25 -- two days after the NLF forces had withdrawn.<sup>64</sup> The spot where their bodies were found was in the area in which Dr. Vennema says villagers reported heavy American bombing at the time the two priests are said to have been killed.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the official Saigon government account is again marred by a major contradiction. The Political Warfare Battalion pamphlet claims that both Father Urbain and Father Guy were arrested and forced to remove their tunics before being taken to the area of the Dong Khanh tombs, where they were killed and buried. But the priest who recovered the body of Father Urbain is quoted in the same pamphlet as saying that he recognized it from the laundry number on his tunic!

Douglas Pike's notion of an NLF plan to purge Vietnamese society through mass executions is so bizarre and unrelated to the reality of NLF policy that it tells us more about Pike's own mind than it does about the movement he claims to be describing. Likewise, his suggestion that the Front tried to eliminate anyone who knew the identity of previously underground cadres in Hue appears to be based more on Pike's conception of how the Mafia operates than on any understanding of how the NLF operates. Obviously, cadres whose identities were well-known could not have remained in the city when the NLF evacuated it. Others, who did not reveal themselves even after the NLF takeover of Hue, no doubt remained behind.<sup>67</sup>

Pike apparently made no effort to inquire into what in fact did happen in the later period of the communist occupation. Saigon officials in Hue



A BUDDHIST ELDER lights incense before the remains of more than 200 people killed near Da Mai Creek, the scene of fierce fighting and B-52 bombing. The U.S. and Saigon governments attributed all the deaths to communist execution.

told Len Ackland in 1968 that those who were killed by the NLF when it prepared to leave the city in the face of Saigon and U.S. military pressure were officials and anti-communist political party leaders who had earlier been on the list for reeducation.<sup>68</sup> At that point, the NLF was faced with the choice of leaving those individuals to carry on their war against it, or eliminating them while the NLF was still in control of the city, or taking them out of the city for reeducation. There is no doubt that some of those previously marked for reeducation were executed during the latter part of the occupation, although the number appears to have been many times less than the Saigon government and Douglas Pike claim. Others who had been marked for reeducation were taken out of the city toward the mountains for that purpose. The charge that these prisoners were systematically killed is supported neither by evidence nor by logic.

Pike's "hypothesis," therefore, must be judged unworthy of serious consideration. It represents ill-informed speculation undisciplined by attention to the available documentary evidence, much less to the revolutionary strategy and tactics about which Pike claims to be an expert. Yet Pike's pamphlet must be considered a political warfare success, for his interpretation of events in Hue remains the dominant one for journalists and public figures.

## CONCLUSION

The issue which historians must weigh in the NLF occupation of Hue is not whether executions took place but whether they were indiscriminate or the result of a prearranged "purge" of whole strata of society, as charged by political warfare specialists of the Saigon and U.S. governments. Equally important is the question of whether it was the NLF or U.S. bombing and artillery which caused the deaths of several thousand Hue civilians during the battle for the city.

The available evidence -- not from NLF sources but from official U.S. and Saigon documents and from independent observers -- indicates that the official story of an indiscriminate slaughter of those who were considered to be unsympathetic to the NLF is a complete fabrication. Not only is the number of bodies uncovered in and around Hue open to question, but more important, the cause of death appears to have been shifted from the fighting itself to NLF execution. And the most detailed and "authoritative" account of the alleged executions put together by either government does not stand up under examination.

Understanding the techniques of distortion and misrepresentation practiced by Saigon and U.S. propagandists in making a political warfare cam-

paign out of the tragedy of Hue is as important today as it was when U.S. troops were still at war in Vietnam. It goes to the heart of the problem of facing the truth about the Vietnamese revolution and the American effort to repress it by force. The screen of falsehood which has been erected around the Tet Offensive in Hue was and is but another defense mechanism for the U.S. government and much of the American public as well to avoid dealing honestly with the real character of the struggle there.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. For a study of the earlier underpinnings of this strategy, see D. Gareth Porter, "Bloodbath: Myth or Reality?" *Indochina Chronicle* No. 19, September 15, 1973.
2. Joseph Dees, "Survivors Relate Communist Mass Murders of 1,000 in Hue," IPS (USIS) dispatch, April 23, 1968.
3. *New York Times*, May 1, 1968; *Washington Post*, May 1, 1968.
4. *Vietnam Press*, May 1, 1968. The UPI story on the report indicated that it was based solely on information supplied by the police, failing to mention the role of the Political Warfare Battalion. *Washington Post*, May 1, 1968. The *New York Times* did not mention the source of the information. It is safe to say, therefore, that no American newspaper reader learned that the ARVN Tenth Political Warfare Battalion played the key role in compiling the report.
5. *New York Times*, February 29, 1968.
6. *Le Monde*, April 13, 1968.
7. "Chronology of Graves Discovered, Vicinity of Hue (Civilian Deaths in Tet 1968)," obtained from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, February 1970.
8. *New York Times*, March 28, 1968.
9. "Chronology of Graves Discovered."
10. *New York Times*, March 28, 1968.
11. Vu Cuong Sat cua Viet Cong tai Co Do Hue (Communist Murder in Hue), Tenth Political Warfare Battalion of ARVN, 1968, p. 13.
12. Alje Vennema, "The Tragedy of Hue," unpublished manuscript, 1968, pp. 19-23.
13. "Chronology of Graves Discovered," site 22.
14. "Villagers Returning to Hue," UPI, in San



Francisco Chronicle, December 8, 1968; "South Vietnamese Farmer Stoically Works Fields, Washington Post, January 4, 1970.

15. "Chronology of Graves Discovered," sites 21, 13 and 14.

16. Tien Tuyen, January 27, 1969.

17. Tien Tuyen, May 3, 1969.

18. Ibid.

19. Vietnam Press, April 12, 1969.

20. Washington Post, May 5, 1969.

21. "Chronology of Graves Discovered," site 25.

22. Douglas Pike, *The Viet-Cong Strategy of Terror* (Saigon: U.S. Mission, Vietnam, 1970), p. 29.

23. Baltimore Sun, October 12, 1969.

24. Tien Tuyen, October 17, 1969.

25. Pike, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

26. "Chronology of Graves Discovered."

27. Embassy of Viet-Nam, Washington, D.C., Viet-

nam Bulletin, Viet-Nam Information Series, No. 28, April, 1970, p. 6.

28. Agence France-Pressé dispatch, February 15, 1968, in *L'Heure Décisive* (Paris: Dossiers AFP-Laffont, 1968), p. 153.

29. Ibid.

30. Vietnam Bulletin, *loc. cit.*

31. This is what Pike told Benedict Stavis of Cornell University in an interview on September 10, 1973. Letter from Stavis to the author, September 10, 1973.

32. Washington Post, November 25, 1969.

33. Christian Science Monitor, December 1, 1969.

34. "Tien Chien Thang Hue tu Ngay 31.1, 23.3" (Information on the Victory in Hue from January 31 to March 23), xerox copy obtained from the Combined Documents Exploitation Center, Saigon.

# 350 Hue VC Victims Given Mass Funeral

By Robert G. Kaiser  
Washington Post Foreign Service

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HEADLINE AND ARTICLE from May 5, 1969 *Washington Post* are representative of the American press' uncritical acceptance of U.S. and Saigon propaganda offices' statements. In this particular case the reporter flatly stated that all the bodies found were "victims of the worst Communist atrocity of the war" without giving any source or evidence for the statement.

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The document, it should be noted, is far from being a high-level report or analysis of the Tet Offensive in Hue. It is handwritten, sketchy, and clearly done at the local level for local consumption.

35. *Nhan Dan*, February 28, 1968.

36. *Tu Dien Tieng Viet* (Vietnamese Language Dictionary) (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc, 1967), p. 927.

37. *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1969; *Washington Daily News*, November 25, 1969.

38. Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 16; news articles cited above.

39. The paragraph immediately preceding Pike's mention of the document refers to a whole class of villagers being "wiped out," *op. cit.*

40. "15 Tieu Chuan Cuu Tap" (Fifteen Criteria for Investigation), xerox copy obtained from U.S. Embassy, Saigon. This document is reproduced in *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes*, Document No. 97, August 1971, Part II.

41. "Repressing Counterrevolutionaries: The Viet Cong System of Punishment," *Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes*, Document No. 5, October 1967.

42. *Washington Daily News*, November 25, 1969. Chuyen gave the figure of three million in the *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1969.

43. In the report on the interrogation of Chuyen, the interrogator pointedly put question marks after the rank and past assignments in the VPA claimed by Chuyen. U.S. State Department, *Captur-*

*ed Documents and Interrogation Reports* (1968), item no. 55, "Interrogation of Le Xuan Chuyen." 44. *Ibid.*

45. Speech by Tran Van Do, Troi Nam, No. 3, 1967, p. 13.

46. Vo Van Chan, *The Policy of Greater Unity of the People* (Saigon: Minister of Chieu Hoi, Republic of Vietnam, 1971), p. 19.

47. See Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 18; Sir Robert Thompson, "Communist Atrocities in Vietnam," *New York Times*, June 15, 1972.

48. "Letter from Vietnam," *The New Yorker*, March 23, 1968.

49. *Washington Daily News*, March 1, 1968.

50. "Status of Refugees," official report by Office of Refugees, U.S. Agency for International Development, May 2, 1968.

51. *Saigon Post*, March 17, 1968.

52. *VC Carnage in Hue, Tenth Political Warfare Battalion*, 1968, p. 8.

53. Pike, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

54. *Saigon Post*, March 17, 1968.

55. Pike, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-39.

56. "Information on the Victory in Hue."

57. Len Ackland and D. Gareth Porter, "The Bloodbath Argument," *Christian Century*, November 5, 1969. Reprinted in Paul Menzel, ed., *Moral Argument and the War in Vietnam* (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1971), pp. 141-46.

58. "Ban Ke Hoach Con Kich va Khoi Nghia cua Mu A" (Plan for an Offensive and General Uprising of Mu A), xerox copy obtained from Office of Special Projects, JUSPAO, Saigon, June 1971.

59. Len Ackland, "Resist and They Die," unpublished manuscript, 1968, pp. 5-6.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-19; *Washington Post*, December 7, 1969; and Don Oberdorfer, *Tet* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), pp. 216-53.

61. Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969).

62. Ackland, *op. cit.*, p. 8; *Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 1968; Vennema, *op. cit.*, p. 10; notes from interviews in Hue by Francois Sully of *Newsweek*, March, 1968.

63. Ackland and Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

64. Agence France-Presse dispatch, March 3, 1968, in *Vietnam Press Special Reports*, March 5, 1968.

65. Vennema, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

66. *Vu Cuong Sat cua Viet Cong tai Co Do Hue*, pp. 2, 18-21.

67. The Chinese communists faced a similar situation in 1947, when they occupied a county seat and their shadow government and officials surfaced for the first time. David Galula tells of asking the political commissar what would happen when the Red Army had to leave the town. "They will leave, too, and resume their clandestine work," he replied. "Are you not afraid that they will lose their value now that they have revealed themselves?" Galula asked. The commissar said, "We have secret agents in this town who did not come out when we took it. We don't even know who they are. They will still be here when we go." Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 56-57.

# Indochina Chronicle

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HUE, 1968. The Saigon government initially estimated that over 3,700 civilians had died in the fierce ground fighting, air attacks and artillery fire that raged around them. Saigon and American propagandists later decided to reclassify most of those deaths, along with persons unaccounted for, as victims of communist execution. And thus the "Hue massacre" was born.

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