

Migration of the “Boat People”

Name

Date

In 1954, the nation of Vietnam was divided into two distinct zones along the 17th parallel. A communist party governed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and a more democratic party governed the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The Vietnam War started in 1957, when the communist Viet Cong rebelled against the South Vietnamese government.

The Vietnam War became a proxy war of the Cold War. The United States supported the government of South Vietnam, and sent in the first American ground troops in 1965. Ten years later, South Vietnam's capital, Saigon, fell to North Vietnamese forces. The fall of Saigon (later renamed Ho Chi Minh City) triggered waves of migration out of Vietnam.

Political oppression, poverty, and continued war were the main reasons Vietnamese fled their country. The desire to leave was especially great for Vietnamese who had fought for the South, worked with the United States, or held positions in the South Vietnamese government.

Political oppression came in the form of “re-education” camps. South Vietnamese leaders were often sentenced to attend these camps. Re-education camps were political prisons where inmates were indoctrinated to the ideology of their new government. One million Vietnamese were sent to re-education camps. Torture was not unusual, and thousands of Vietnamese tried to escape.

Political and economic oppression were imposed on Vietnam's ethnic minorities. In 1978, the government created laws that targeted people of Chinese descent living in Vietnam. The new laws made it possible for the government to seize Chinese-owned businesses. Vietnamese citizens with Chinese ancestry worked to leave their country to seek greater economic and social freedom.

Finally, although the nation reunified, war continued. In 1979, Vietnam took up arms against the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, which had been invading Vietnamese villages along the border. Thousands of rural Vietnamese fled the conflict.

Few Vietnamese could cross their borders to neighboring countries. Vietnam is bordered by only three countries: Cambodia, China, and Laos. Vietnam was at war with Cambodia—and Cambodia was supported by China. Laos had a communist government that was similar to, and supported by, the government of Vietnam.

The only real option for Vietnamese people determined to flee was the South China Sea. By 1978, more than 500,000 Vietnamese tried to leave their country in small, unseaworthy boats. Some boats were so small they carried a single family. Others held hundreds of refugees. These Vietnamese migrants were named “boat people” because of their method of escape.

Because the boats were leaky, unseaworthy, and overcrowded, boat people were not able to travel far. Many navigated the Gulf of Thailand (to the southwest) and the South China Sea (to the east) to four destinations: Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Hong Kong. Some boat people made it as far as Japan and Australia. The journeys were extremely dangerous. Many people had no knowledge of sailing.

The boats often sank in fierce storms or were blown off course. Many boats ran out of

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food and water. The boats, filled with inexperienced sailors and loaded with refugees' valuable possessions, became targets for pirates. Thai pirates would raid the boats and frequently sink them, keeping the booty and killing all on board. Scholars estimate anywhere from 10 to 50 percent of refugees did not survive the trip.

Many Vietnamese spent years in refugee camps in Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The camps drew tens of thousands of boat people, too many to hold. The last camp, Galang Refugee Camp in Indonesia, did not close until 1996.

Many nations were wary of accepting boat people. Refugees were poor, and many governments worried that refugees could not contribute to the economy. They feared the refugees would tax the education and health care systems of their new countries.

In 1979, the plight of the boat people made international news when the United Nations called a conference to address the situation. The U.N. persuaded the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and France to allow more Vietnamese refugees into their countries. The Vietnamese government was urged to make social and political improvements so its citizens wouldn't feel pressured to leave.

In the United States, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, allowing Vietnamese refugees to come directly to America if they had family in the U.S. About 725,000 Vietnamese settled in the U.S. after the war. By 2000, there were more than a million people of Vietnamese ancestry living in the United States—11 percent of all Asian Americans. Most Vietnamese refugees settled in California, Illinois, New Jersey, and New York.

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