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Vietnamese immigration to the United States is a relatively recent occurrence when considered within the scope of Asian immigration. Vietnamese immigration to the United States occurred in the latter half of the 20th century and continues steadily today. A vast majority of Vietnamese Americans arrived as refugees, thus their departure from Vietnam was marked with political turbulence, and their arrival in America was highly scrutinized in the news media and academic scholarship. Before 1975, Vietnamese living in the United States were students, professionals, and war brides. In the 1950s, their numbers were in the low hundreds. However, in the 1960s until 1974, the population of Vietnamese Americans swelled to about 15,000. It was during those war years that the small population of Vietnamese Americans participated in the antiwar movement in American colleges and universities. This group remains an understudied population in Vietnamese American history.

The First Wave

In 1975, South Vietnam collapsed, signaling the official end of the Vietnam–American War that had waged on for more than two decades. After years of financial backing and military intervention, the United States withdrew its support of South Vietnam in 1973. Subsequently, North Vietnamese communist forces quickly advanced, taking control of major cities outside of Saigon such as Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh. In the weeks surrounding April 30, 1975, the world witnessed the mass evacuation of approximately 125,000 refugees from Vietnam to the United States. Those escaping the country at that time were mainly military personnel or civilians with connections to the former South Vietnam or U.S. governments. In what was called Operation Frequent Wind, the United States deployed military helicopters to evacuate American personnel, their dependents, and their Vietnamese affiliates from Saigon. Sociologists have characterized this first wave of Vietnamese refugees as South Vietnam's urban elite, with higher levels of education, some knowledge of the English language, and a certain amount of social capital to begin their lives anew. Yet, regardless of their sociological 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.

The U.S. State Department responded to this refugee crisis with several maneuvers. Operation New Life evacuated refugees to centers in the Pacific including Guam, Hawaiʻi, 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 airlift 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 orphanages in South Vietnam. The first Operation Babylift mission on April 4, 1975, on 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 children who left were orphans, and many critics questioned if evacuation and adoption by outside their country would be in their best interest.

After the evacuation phase, Operation New Arrivals facilitated Vietnamese refugees' transition from the Pacific staging areas 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 base that opened up to receive Vietnamese refugees. In a short time period, tent cities on these U.S. military bases emerged to accommodate the hundreds of thousands of refugees. Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees remained in these centers for a few months until they were sponsored by one of 10 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. In order to lessen the social and economic impact of Vietnamese refugees on any given region of the country, the U.S. government created the Refugee Dispersion Policy. This policy aimed to relocate Vietnamese refugees rapidly in order for them to become self-sufficient, ease the impact of a large number of new arrivals who may be competitors for scarce jobs in a down economy, allow for more opportunities for sponsorships, and to circumvent the formation of ethnic enclaves.

The VOLAGs were responsible for matching refugees with local sponsors (usually churches or individuals). The sponsoring organization or individual was responsible for providing refugees with basis needs—food, clothing, and shelter. Additionally, most sponsors assisted by providing employment assistance, registering children for schools, and acclimatizing 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.

Moreover, Vietnamese refugees were controversial figures in the U.S. national debate in the 1970s and 1980s. A Gallup Poll taken in May 1975 showed that 54 percent of Americans were opposed to admitting Vietnamese refugees (36 percent were in favor, and 12 percent were undecided). Despite the negative popular opinion, the Ford administration supported the arrival of Vietnamese refugees and passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, establishing a program of domestic resettlement assistance for refugees who fled from Cambodia and Vietnam. Vietnamese refugees entered the United States on the heels of a highly unpopular war and with a centuries-old legacy of anti-Asian discrimination, borne out by policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the violation of Japanese Americans' civil liberties through their mass incarceration during World War II.

The Second Wave

The late 1970s saw a second surge of migration of Vietnamese out of the homeland due to a number of push factors. This period, often referred to as the second wave, lasted until the mid-1980s. The second wave began as a result of the new Vietnam communist regime's enactment of 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 U.S. affiliates, the seizure of land and property of former South Vietnam regime personnel, and closing of businesses of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs.

The new socialist government implemented new economic zones that forcibly relocated citizens from urban to uncultivated or devastated rural areas. Reeducation camps are often described by survivors as hard labor camps or prison where one was sent for an indefinite time period. Some were released in a few months, while others were imprisoned for years or decades. Still others perished in these camps due to the harsh living conditions and scarcity of food. 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, their opportunities for advancement in the new society greatly diminished.

These dire political and economic conditions pushed more than 2 million Vietnamese out of the country after 1975. In the years following the fall of Saigon, many refugees left Vietnam clandestinely in unseaworthy and overcrowded boats. This group of refugees became known as the boat people. Most of the boat people 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 boat passages from Vietnam were often risky and dangerous, with an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 deaths at sea. Those who fled the country were committing what the Vietnam government considered illegal acts, and if caught, they were jailed and interrogated. An underground industry of boat builders, escape organizers, and identification forgers emerged under these circumstances.

Vietnamese refugees pass a small child over to crewmen of the amphibious cargo ship USS Durham during a refugee rescue operation on April 3, 1975, in the South China Sea. The weeks surrounding the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, saw the mass evacuation of approximately 125,000 refugees from Vietnam to the United States. In all, over 2 million Vietnamese left the country after 1975.

In 1978, Vietnam battled its two neighbors, Cambodia and China. These conflicts resulted in the displacement of more refugees. Further contributing to the push factors in a region devastated by decades of war, the socialist 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. Chinese Vietnamese left during that time under the supervision of the Vietnam government, and this mass exodus fueled the negative international media coverage of the new Vietnam.

Refugees leaving in this second period spent anywhere from months to years in asylum camps awaiting admittance to a resettlement country. Those camps in Southeast Asia varied between moderately comfortable quarters to enclosed, barbed-wired camps resembling detention centers. Camp conditions deteriorated as they became increasingly crowded in the 1980s. Life in refugee camps was spent in line for food rations and in preparation for a new life in the United States or elsewhere. Aid workers assisted refugees through socialization courses, teaching English, or helping fill out paperwork. An integral part of the process of refugee processing were the medical examinations and rigorous interview process to determine eligibility for family reunification, sponsorship, or status as a political refugee.

Policy

In response to the increased numbers of refugees, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which created the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program. The Refugee Act adopted the United Nations' definition of a refugee and created the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). It amended the Immigration and Nationality Act's provision on refugees by capping the number of refugee admissions at 50,000 per year, with exceptions for emergency cases. Furthermore, the act provided for a pathway to citizenship by permitting the adjustment of refugee status after one year to permanent resident. After another four years, one can apply for citizenship. Currently, Vietnamese Americans have among the highest rate of naturalization among immigrant groups.

In addition to the Refugee Act's provisions, related laws were passed to allow children of American

servicemen and former political prisoners to enter the United States. A related program instituted under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), called the Orderly Departure Program, from 1979 to 1994 facilitated the reunification of refugees with their families still back in the homeland. This program allowed Vietnamese immigrants to leave legally and through an "orderly" process.

On the domestic front, resettling refugees through their Dispersion Policy, the U.S. government failed to consider the unmet social, spiritual, and cultural needs of Vietnamese Americans. Thus, despite assertive efforts to scatter Vietnamese across America, by the 1990s, large numbers of Vietnamese migrated from their initial resettlement locations to reunite with family and friends in metropolitan areas that were beginning to establish Vietnamese American communities. Approximately 40 percent of all Vietnamese Americans live in Orange County, California—the largest concentration of overseas Vietnamese anywhere. They have formed a commercial district known as Little Saigon that was formally recognized in 1988 with its own freeway and street signs.

From 1975 until the mid-1990s, the U.S. government enforced sanctions toward Vietnam primarily through a trade embargo. Vietnam's economy suffered a slow recovery as a result. Under the Clinton administration in the early 1990s, the United States made a move toward repairing its relationship with Vietnam by lifting the trade embargo in 1994 and extending full diplomacy in 1995. As a result of normalization between the United States and Vietnam, the transnational exchanges between the diaspora and the homeland and high rates of poverty in Vietnam, it is reasonable to expect that Vietnamese immigration to the United States will continue steadily increasing, mainly through family reunification. Additionally, due to a variety of factors that limit marriage opportunities in the United States, Vietnamese American men have returned to Vietnam to marry, expanding the marriage market for Vietnamese Americans to a global scale. According to the 2010 census, there are currently more than 1.7 million Vietnamese Americans. They are the fourth-largest Asian immigrant group behind Chinese, Asian Indian, and Filipino. In recent years, a new trend has emerged called reverse migration, where diasporic populations return to their homelands to live and work. Vietnamese Americans are participating in this trend due in large part to the expanded economic opportunities in Vietnam post-normalization.

The history of the Vietnam–American War and the refugee exodus has resulted in Vietnamese American community formations that stand apart from other Asian American communities. In particular, Vietnamese American as a social identity has little connection with the legacy of the social movements of the 1960s that forged pan-Asian solidarity in American society. While also inheriting the legacy of anti-Asian hostility, Vietnamese Americans have more often been compared to Cuban Americans in their community formation and political inclinations. Given the outcome of the Vietnam–American War, anticommunism has been the dominant community politics for Vietnamese Americans. This political ideology has often erupted in violence and controversy in the last three decades of the 20th century. The anticommunism in this refugee community is one of the legacies of war, but as a second generation comes of age in America, it remains to be seen how refugee discourse will figure into the configuration of a Vietnamese American identity and community.

- immigration
- refugees
- Vietnamese Americans

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See Also:

- 1950 to 1978 Primary Documents
- 1979 to 1999 Primary Documents
- 2000 to 2013 Primary Documents
- Boat People
- Chinese-Vietnamese Americans
- Refugees
- Vietnam War
- Vietnamese Americans

Further Readings

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