

Thayer Consultancy
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Background Briefing:

Bui Tin's Three Careers: Soldier, Journalist, Exile

Carlyle A. Thayer

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We are working on a background story about the late colonel Bui Tin and Cambodia. As you may know, Bui Tin passed away last month in France. He was there at the Dien Bien Phu battlefield, the 1975 collapse of Saigon, and the 1979 occupation of Cambodia.

We request your insights into the following questions:

Q1. What do you know about Bui Tin and his publications?

ANSWER: I met Bui Tin on several occasions in Hanoi in the 1980s prior to trips to Cambodia. He was working for the Army newspaper, *Quân đội nhân dân* (People's Army). He briefed me on the situation in Kampuchea.

In the early 1990s I read his memoir in Vietnamese, *Hoa Xuyên Tuyết* (The Snow Flower). Later I was commissioned to write the introduction to Bui Tin's English language memoir, *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press and London: C. Hurst Publishers, 1995), also published as *From Cadre to Exile: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Journalist* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995).

My introduction was recently reprinted in the August 2018 edition of *Mekong Review*, <https://mekongreview.com/true-believer/>.

I also followed his writings and interviews after he moved to France in 1990.

I have not read his second book, *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press. 2002).

Q2. How would you describe his revolutionary and post-revolutionary life?

ANSWER: Bui Tin had three careers: the first was an officer in the Vietnam People's Army (1945-64), the second as a senior journalist for the army's newspaper, *Quân đội nhân dân* (1964-90), and the third as a political exile in France (1990-2018)

Bui Tin was a son of the Vietnamese revolution. He was a "true believer" who never wavered in supporting the struggle against foreign intervention and national reunification.

His great-grandfather, grandfather and father were mandarins. Bui Tin was brought up with a strong sense of ethics and morality, a duty to serve his country, and

humanistic values imparted by his mother. Bui Tin was more of a patriot than a Marxist-Leninist.

At 18 years of age he left home to participate in the August Revolution of 1945 and he stood in Ba Dinh Square to hear Ho Chi Minh declare Vietnam's independence from France. Bui Tin volunteered to serve in the army and was assigned to the first military class to be trained in Hanoi. He served in the army for nineteen years. He took part in the historic battle of Dien Bien Phu and was reportedly wounded. He held staff posts after Vietnam was partitioned in 1954 and was close to General Vo Nguyen Giap, minister of defence. In 1961 and 1964 he travelled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to report on the war in South Vietnam.

In October 1964, after nineteen years in the army, Bui Tin began a second career as a journalist with the Army newspaper, *Quân Đội Nhân Dân* with special responsibility for reporting on foreign affairs, defence and security issues. Bui Tin was given authority to visit and interrogate U.S. servicemen held as prisoners of war. After 1975 he became editor of the Sunday edition of *Quân Đội Nhân Dân chủ nhật*.

Bui Tin had the knack at being at the right place at the right time. On April 30, 1975 he was the senior officer at the Independence Palace in Saigon and accepted the surrender of South Vietnam. In late 1978 he accompanied the Vietnamese armoured spearhead into Cambodia and entered Phnom Penh with the mission of discovering what the Chinese might have left behind at their embassy.

Bui Tin's post-revolutionary career began in 1990 when he decided to leave Vietnam for exile France. Initially he was active in testifying before the U.S. Congress about the Missing in Action (MIA) and Prisoner of War (POW) controversy. He became a commentator on Vietnamese affairs in Vietnamese language broadcasts of the BBC and other international media outlets. Bui Tin was initially ostracized by anti-communist Vietnamese in Europe and America. Bui Tin sought to build bridges but he fell between the two stools of pro-Vietnam and anti-Vietnam groups in the overseas Vietnamese community.

Q3. How would you describe his roles in the Communist Party of Vietnam's route to power?

During his career in the military, Bui Tin became a loyal supporter of General Vo Nguyen Giap and observed first hand attempts by "professional revolutionaries" to deprecate Giap's mandarin background and bourgeois French education in the 1950s. Later, in the 1980s, when Giap was a popular choice to become party leader, Bui Tin witnessed a successful effort to sideline Giap.

As a journalist he was able to observe Vietnam's communist leadership at close hand at meetings in Hanoi, on various battlefields and on overseas trips abroad. It was clear that Bui Tin became alienated at the way some Vietnamese leaders wielded power.

After Vietnam's reunification in 1975 Bui Tin charged that some leaders had become "drunk with victory" and instead of promoting national reconciliation treated southerners as class enemies. He later accused party first secretary Le Duan and his ally, Politburo member Le Duc Tho, of being "red capitalists." He also accused these leaders of a "primitive and childish conception of class struggle" in their effort to eradicate capitalism in South Vietnam.

In the period after 1986, when Vietnam embarked on a reform program known as *đổi mới*, Bui Tin became an advocate of political reform. But the political upheaval in China that led to the massacre at Tienanmen, and the collapse of socialism in eastern Europe, led to a political crackdown in Vietnam and Bui Tin became a “major target.” He was subject to censorship and surveillance.

In 1990, when Bui Tin went into exile in France, he was fired from his job, expelled from the communist party and vilified in the press.

Q4. How important were his reports on Cambodia in documenting the pre-1979 Cambodian-Vietnamese armed conflict and in documenting the post-1979 Cambodia [that he later advocated the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia]?

ANSWER: As a journalist, Bui Tin witnessed first hand the results of Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese villages along the Cambodia border. Bui Tin supported intervention and over time he supported the decision by senior party and military figures to withdraw military forces from Cambodia in stages. In September 1989 all formed Vietnamese military units were withdrawn from Cambodia.

One of the most shocking examples of how Vietnam’s political system became degraded occurred in Cambodia, according to Bui Tin. Bui Tin initially supported the decision to intervene, having personally witnessed the atrocities committed by Pol Pot’s forces against Vietnamese villagers along the border. But, according to him, Vietnam’s leaders became stricken with the “disease of subjective arrogance”. They treated their Cambodian allies much like colonial subjects. Even worse, Vietnam’s privileged elite kept their sons out of combat and harm’s way. It was the children of Vietnam’s urban dispossessed and poor peasantry who bore the brunt of battle, malaria and the maiming caused by mines: 52,000 died and 200,000 were wounded. This revelation “astounded” Bui Tin and caused him to be “harassed by doubts.” His feelings were not assuaged when on returning to Hanoi he found how bleak was the plight of wounded war veterans. His sense of social justice was further affronted (this paragraph is taken from my introduction).

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