

Censorship, Hanoi style

BY THOMAS A. BASS

Five years ago I began an experiment — not of my own devising — to study censorship in Vietnam. In 2009, I signed a contract to publish one of my books in Hanoi. Called “The Spy Who Loved Us,” the book tells the story of Pham Xuan An, Vietnam’s most celebrated journalist during the Vietnam War. (He ended his career as bureau chief for Time magazine in Saigon.) Only after the war did we learn that An had received a dozen military medals as a communist spy and served as North Vietnam’s deadliest secret weapon.

One might think that a book about a “Hero of the People’s Armed Forces” would be published in Vietnam without difficulty, but nothing is published in Vietnam without being censored. For five years, I watched people nip and tuck my book. When a translation was finally published in 2014, I flew to Hanoi to meet my censors — at least the half-dozen who would talk to me. These were the good guys, the brave ones, who were willing to acknowledge the situation. Behind them stood the faceless phalanx that operates throughout Vietnamese society.

My censors, several of whom doubled as my editors and publishers, apologized for what they had to do. They hoped things would improve in the future, but as Vietnam and China throw an increasing number of journalists, bloggers and other writers in prison, the tide is flowing in the opposite direction. This is why I decided to commission an accurate translation of my book and publish side-by-side editions of both the censored and uncensored versions. These texts were released online in November, with the international or-

of 1946, when Ho Chi Minh paid a large bribe to the Chinese to get them to retreat from north Vietnam; the failed land reform campaigns of the 1950s; the exodus of the “boat people” after 1975; the 1978 war in Cambodia; the 1979 border war against China. The nam tien, the historic southward march of the Viets, in which they worked their way down the Annamite Cordillera, occupying territory formerly held by Montagnards, Chams, Khmers and other “minority peoples,” was cut. An’s last wishes, that he be cremated and his ashes scattered in the Dong Nai River, disappeared. They were replaced by a scene describing his state funeral, with the eulogy delivered by the head of military intelligence.

There is also a long list of “errors” in the Hanoi translation, words that my Vietnamese editors have either genuinely or purposefully misunderstood, such as “ghost writer,” “betrayal,” “bribery,” “treachery,” “terrorism,” “torture,” “front organizations,” “ethnic minorities” and “reeducation camps.” The French are not allowed to have taught the Vietnamese anything. Nor are the Americans. Vietnam has never produced refugees; it only generates settlers. References to communism as a “failed god” were cut. An’s description of himself as having an American brain grafted onto a Vietnamese body was cut. In fact, all of his jokes were cut, not to mention his analysis of how the communists replaced Ngo Dinh Diem’s police state with a police state of their own. By the end of my book, entire pages of notes and sources had disappeared.

In fact, the most insidious changes occur at the level of language. An was born outside Saigon. He was a southerner. But the language of the south and

ganization Index on Censorship releasing more material this week.

What did the censors cut from my book? Pham Xuan An is not allowed to "love" the United States or the time he spent studying journalism in California. He is allowed only to "understand" the United States. Removed were the names of exiled Vietnamese and their comments. Also removed was any criticism of China or mention of bribery, corruption or malfeasance on the part of public officials. Even Vo Nguyen Giap, the great general who led Vietnam to victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, was cut from the narrative, having fallen from favor before his death in 2013.

Known events were excised from Vietnamese history: the Gold Campaign

other cultural terms were pruned from the text, replaced by the language of the northerners who overran Saigon in 1975. Censorship involves political control and the assertion of power, but in this case it also involves control of memory, history and language.

I am not claiming any special hardship by noting these facts. Vietnamese authors driven into silence and exile have suffered far more grievously. I am merely highlighting the realities of a regime intent on defending its prerogatives. In Vietnam, both the past and the way you talk about it are the property of the state.

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