

When heads rolled in Vietnam

By Richard Ehrlich

America supported South Vietnam when the regime guillotined prisoners from 1956 to 1960 and the gruesome contraption is now still on display, its heavy metal blade locked in position, ready to drop. Rusting in Ho Chi Minh City's humid, tropical air, the guillotine was imported to Vietnam by French colonialists in the early 20th century. Another guillotine, also abandoned by the defeated French, is in Vietnam's capital, Hanoi.

With hands tied behind their back, each victim was forced to stand, facing a wooden plank, and strapped against it. The plank was then turned horizontal to form a bench, thrusting the person's face down so their head could be slid through the guillotine's wooden, two-part, vertical "lunette" neck clamp. If not blindfolded, they could stare into a wooden "zinc head tub" bucket, or wicker basket, into which their head would soon drop. The bucket was shielded by a wooden screen to contain any splashing blood. The guillotine's looming 15-foot-tall (4.5-meter-tall) frame consists of two upright beams, about 15 inches (38 centimeters) apart.

To perform a beheading, an executioner stands next to the frame and releases a metal lever that allows a spring-pincer, at the top of the guillotine, to release the heavily weighted, slanted blade. In the blink of an eye, the 110-pound (50-kilogram), razor sharp, diagonal steel blade descends, with the speed of gravity, inside a seven-foot-long (two-meter-long) greased track. The detached head falls forward.

The blade simultaneously hits two shock-absorbing metal springs, embedded in each side at the base of the vertical frame, to protect the guillotine from the impact's force, resulting in a few post-chop bounces of the blade. The executioner could then choose to hold up the head by its hair, and show it to onlookers. The decapitated body would be rolled off the bench and into a long, rectangular, wicker or cane "body basket" situated alongside the guillotine. The basket was usually lined with flattened zinc, sprinkled with blood-absorbing sawdust, and capable of holding four bodies. A dangling rope, permanently looped over a brass pulley at the top of the guillotine's frame - and attached to the top of the blade - was then pulled, slowly hoisting the blade for the next kill. The guillotine is portable, designed to be disassembled.

Communist North Vietnam defeated the US and its ally South Vietnam 35 years ago, ending the disastrous "American War". That same year, in 1975, the newly unified country under communist rule set up a Museum of American War Crimes in this southern city, also known as Saigon. Captured weapons, documents, photographs and testimonies were put on display, alongside the guillotine. Even though Washington and Hanoi established diplomatic relations 15 years ago - and the building's name was softened to become The War Remnants Museum - the guillotine remains linked to America. A larger-than-life photograph of its last victim gazes from a wall.

A display sign in English titled "The Guillotine" describes its use in Vietnam: "It was brought by the French in Vietnam in the early 20th century and kept for use in the big jail on Lagrandiere Street, now Ly Tu Trong Street. "During the US war against Vietnam, the guillotine was transported to all of the provinces in South Vietnam to decapitate the Vietnam patriots. In 1960, the last man who was executed by guillotine was Mr Hoang Le Kha," the sign says.

According to the museum, he was born in 1917 and joined the anti-French "scout movement" in 1933. While rising through the Communist Party, he was arrested by the US-backed South Vietnamese in 1959 as a provincial party committee member, and sentenced to death by a military court set up by president Ngo Dinh Diem's Saigon regime. "He was the last to be executed by the guillotine on March 12, 1960 under the Law 10/59 of the Ngo Dinh Diem government," the museum says.

Earlier, when Paris ruled Hanoi, the French unleashed at least two guillotines and beheaded countless Vietnamese, including 13 anti-colonialists near Hanoi on the same day in 1930 after the rebels fought the French in several towns. The group's 12th man defiantly asked to be laid on his back so he could see the blade falling on his throat, according to a Vietnamese historian. France lost

its colonial war in 1954. The US quickly began aiding the newly divided nation's South Vietnam regime in 1954, and the guillotine was openly used by America's anti-communist Vietnamese allies until that final beheading in 1960. There is no public evidence of any direct involvement by Americans in the executions, but US advisers and the public knew of the guillotine's use in South Vietnam.

Diem was shot dead in a 1963 coup, along with his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who as Saigon's dreaded secret police chief arrested people destined for the guillotine. Both men were boosted by America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). "The CIA crafted a case officer-source relationship with Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, as early as 1952, a time when the French were still fighting for Indochina," according to the National Security Archive, an independent non-governmental research institute at George Washington University in Washington DC

In 1954, "during Diem's first year in office, with his survival very much in doubt, CIA was strikingly successful in helping him consolidate his government", according to a recently declassified "secret" report by the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence, titled, "CIA and The House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam 1954-63".

The American public also knew the guillotine was beheading people in South Vietnam. "The blade swished down and General Ba Cut's head rolled into one basket, his body into another," Time magazine reported in 1956, describing the execution of a rebel leader who fought for reunification. Time's story was headlined: "South Viet Nam: A Life of Violence."

In 1956, Diem refused to participate in a reunification election because the north's communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, was expected to win. Three years later, Diem enshrined his guillotine into law. "On May 6, 1959, Diem signed Law 10/59, which, in an ironic bow to the former French colonial masters, inaugurated the era of death by beheading," US president Richard Nixon's secretary of defense Robert McNamara later wrote. Beheadings were "for anyone convicted of crimes ranging from murder, to stealing farm implements and water buffalo" or belonging to "an organization" fighting the US-backed regime, McNamara noted.

Heads, sometimes with cigarettes jammed into the nostrils, were often stuck on spikes in public so people could see and take photographs, eyewitnesses said. Desperate to control South Vietnam, about 200,000 US troops splashed ashore in 1965, and the war continued for 10 years until North Vietnam won.

In 1789, to ease the suffering caused by executions, French physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin recommended rebuilding Europe's clumsier decapitation machines, which date to the 13th century. French media named the approved machine after Dr Guillotin. England, Scotland, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Algeria, Tunisia and other countries also wielded variations of the guillotine, though today it is no longer in use.