Southeast Asian Background

On April 30, 1975, the fall of Saigon marked the end of the Vietnam War, with the communist government of North Vietnam taking over anti-communist South Vietnam, and unifying the country into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Having played a major role in the war, the U.S. government coordinated many operations to evacuate any South Vietnamese who were against North Vietnam. The U.S.’ massive bombing raids that aimed to destroy any source of supplies and weapons from North Vietnam to supporters living in the south caused widespread devastation all throughout Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The destruction by bombs and chemical weapons left many wounded, traumatized, and homeless. Many Southeast Asians had fought alongside the U.S. military during the war and were in danger of retaliation by the new communist governments established in their home countries. The risk of being persecuted by these new governments was also the case for former high-level officials and others deemed the enemy by new leaders.

This resulted in a large-scale migration of nearly 130,000 Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (including the Hmong people, an ethnic group of people without their own country) to the United States. On May 23, 1975, President Gerald Ford signed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act into law, which categorized Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and the Hmong people as refugees to be resettled in the U.S.

Immediately following the war, thousands of people were not able to be evacuated by the U.S. because of limited resources and space, and were forced to fend for themselves. They filled boats and freighters beyond capacity, and have been referred to as the “boat people,” The refugees endured many hardships and dangers as they moved to temporary camps in other Southeast Asian countries, and many eventually made it to the U.S. Hundreds of thousands of people perished at sea. Through the resettlement program, Southeast Asian refugees were mainly relocated to poor urban areas of the U.S., where many felt isolated and were in shock. They faced widespread racism due to some Americans’ resentment and fear of refugees not being able to assimilate to the American way of life. Despite this and being traumatized from the war, they began raising families and forming communities.

Many Vietnamese refugees who grew up in the U.S. wanted to change the narrative in which the story of the Vietnam War was told. Professor and author Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote the novel The Sympathizer as a way to show a Vietnamese perspective of the war. Similarly, filmmaker Ham Tran created the film, Journey From the Fall for the same purpose and learned more about the myriad of refugee experiences by listening to the refugees he cast in the film. He wanted to capture the truth as much as possible by having those who lived through these situations play the characters of the film rather than actors.

Several laws were implemented in subsequent years to assist with the resettling of southeast Asian refugees impacted by the Vietnam War. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act, which established the Office of Refugee Resettlement to help refugees resettle in the U.S. effectively and to become economically self-sufficient. In 1988, the American Homecoming Act allowed 23,000 mixed-blood Vietnamese children of American fathers, and 67,000 of their immediate relatives, to immigrate to the U.S. and also qualify for refugee benefits. Through the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000, Hmong and Laotian veterans that served for the U.S. during the Vietnam War received American citizenship. By 2010, 1.2 million southeast Asians fled to the United States.