

VIET COSTAS. CITIZENSHIP: UNDEFINED.
documentary of a 88 min. duration. ENGLISH subtitles
Titles in blue

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I arrived in Hanoi in the winter of 2007. One day, three months later, my secretary came and said to me:

[Alexis Hadzimichalis, former Ambassador of Greece in Hanoi](#)

“Mr. Nguyen Van Lap asks to see you.” On the day of the rendezvous an elderly gentleman came into my office and in impeccable Greek said to me “Hello, my ambassador, I am Costas Sarantidis. I am he.” “Who are you?” I asked. “Nguyen Van Lap.” And then I heard the amazing story which you are telling at this moment..

Careful. Take the stars one by one! Slowly, you’ll break them, you idiot. Do it gently. You, Greek bastard. OK. Now the next one. That star there. Higher, higher.

[VIET COSTAS : CITIZENSHIP UNDEFINED](#)

[by Yannis Tritsibidas](#)

Well, how full is that sack? Almost full, chief. Let me have a look. Sabotage! You couldn’t give a damn, could you? You asshole. You take me for a fool. It’s completely empty, Greek dog! Get to work, asshole. Work, work. Damned Crete!

My name is Costas Sarantidis. I was born in 1927 in Salonika. I grew up in Toumba, in the “wooden shanties”. My father was a refugee from Asia Minor - a typical workers’ family - he worked in machine shops. There were seven of us children, big family. Of my childhood I don’t remember anything pleasant. In any case those were hard years. Shortages, and more shortages. Until the German occupation period came and we left school, because the Germans confiscated the building. So as to be able to offer something to the family, because of its size, since our father didn’t earn enough, we worked in various little jobs: we sold sesame bars with a bag on our back, in the neighbourhoods. I was given the opportunity and I started to knock about here and there, until one day, in a black market transaction at Vardaris in Salonica - we were buying Nigritas’ tobacco from the farmers and selling it to the Germans to get cigarette paper

which at that time was in very short supply - unfortunately for me, we ran into a roadblock, they arrested us and they sent us opposite to Pavlou Mela - they had a big building, a waiting area for the German Work Battalions. The time came for them to transport us to Germany – I won't forget this, it was September 22, 1943, when we crossed the border into Yugoslavia. It was tough going because we were on foot, with the Germans accompanying us from one transfer point to the next, to be replaced by other Germans on bicycles. I was the youngest in this crowd, two or three hundred people, all going to work in Germany. On our way we faced great difficulties because as the Germans retreated, Tito's partisans were destroying the roads, cutting down trees to block the way. But because we were on foot we just walked past them. On the way I had the luck to meet a German motorised column going back with the wounded. They asked me for some water to drink and I served them with flasks, and finally they took me with them for 15 days of journeying, so I escaped the rest of the great march on foot and they left me in Zagreb at a German barracks. At Zagreb I made a friend, a Yugoslav, in the same situation as me. We met - he knew a little Greek - we fell in together and on our own we continued on our way to Germany. To get through Austria we had to travel by train. We climbed aboard the trains and wherever they went we went. But unfortunately we never managed to reach our destination because American planes were bombing and they cut the bridges. Every time the alarm sounded we got off the train to take cover and my Yugoslav friend and I were smart enough to get ourselves a suitcase, because we had nothing and these suitcases often provided us with food and other supplies, and in this way, backwards and forwards, wherever there was still a line open to traffic, we continued the journey. Finally we reached Vienna. In Vienna we didn't know where to go. We presented ourselves at a German office called "Unit location". They asked: "Where are you going? Who are you?", because we were dressed in German uniforms, you see. Finally they gave us documents to stay at a hotel, to sleep and eat. And in this way we continued travelling.

They spent the whole of 1944 on trains, dressed in German uniforms, pretending to be Germans.

I lived through the bombardment of Linz. It was heavily bombed. And in Vienna we had very heavy bombardments. Until the day came when the war ended and together with others we set off westwards. There were crowds of people, from prisons, all kinds of people: collaborators with the Germans, others from France, from Spain, they were all heading for Italy.

We passed through the big tunnel that links Austria to Italy. At the border we were arrested by the Americans. Those like me dressed like Germans, on one side, those wearing prison clothes on the other, separately. And they took us down to Trieste. They held us for a few days in Trieste and then it was on to Naples. From Naples we went to Rome. And we ended up in the Cinecitta. At the Cinecitta there were hundreds of people of different nationalities, waiting. Because we couldn't do anything else we went to the Greek embassy, but the embassy couldn't help to repatriate us, so we became desperate and began traipsing around, here and there, all the while wondering what was going to happen. And then suddenly there appeared a Greek legionnaire, still in uniform – his name is Stefanos Ganas – and we got to know each other. On the second day of our acquaintance he sold us on the idea that if we wanted we could follow him and join the French Foreign Legion, like him. We would have the time of our lives, this and that, various promises Africa, the jungle, Tarzan, and so on, things that we had heard about as small boys and didn't know what it was all about.

LEGION IS OUR HOMELAND

But anyway, we accepted. People from all the countries of the world: fugitives, political, penal .. who had problems in their life, it was the only refuge: it could offer them a respite of five years. They required you to sign a five-year contract. What could we do? Between the devil and the deep blue sea. We said: "Let's go." We were young, that was how smart we were. Our new acquaintance didn't want to explain more, he had done his duty to the legion and recruited us. We went to the French Embassy and signed the papers without further ado, without questions or explanations, and the next day a car came and took us to Naples where was the French naval base. Three days later we boarded a ship and they took us to Algeria. We arrived in Algeria precisely on 15th August 1945. They put us up temporarily and we went to the Sidi Bel Abbès. Now there were four of us Greeks in the same battalion but in different companies. They didn't have us all together. When we had passed the medical, the intelligence and the examinations, the manoeuvres began. Manoeuvres in the sand, in the desert, were something frightful, barbarous. On the one hand you are burnt by the sun, on the other scorched by the sand below. At night, it is cold, you have to cover yourself with two woollen blankets. While in the daytime you could boil an egg on the sand. And when we went out into the villages all hell broke loose. The looting! Fortunately at that time the legionaries weren't as brazen as they had

been in the previous period before the war, because the war intervened and also the Algeria had its own resistance movement, so the legionaries had become a little more moderate. But they were still getting up to their tricks. In the Legion we had the recreation department also: the organized brothels, the BMC "bordels militaires de compagnie" in French. This was a mobile outfit that went around the various units in Africa. And about the tariff : the legionaries had a coupon from the company for one use, one visit. Or they gave us a coupon for five visits, for a week, or a month. And each of us used it however he wanted. Some, who were hungrier, after two or three days had used them all up. After that it was for cash. The local women were one coupon; the white women were two coupons for one visit. There was a qualitative difference, as it were. Anyone who could succeed in escaping would have had to have been a wizard. To start with they shaved our heads. Wherever we went it would be obvious. Our identity was to be legionaries. Secondly if they caught a legionary escaping inside Algeria, they sent him to the prison of Colomb-Béchar. This prison had a two-to-three-metre high wall built around it and two gates. When you went through one of the gates you saw written in French: "*Tu entres comme un lion.*" You come in like a lion. And the exit gate, when you were lucky enough to be released, said: "*Tu sors comme un mouton.*" You go out like a sheep. In the prison the legionaries were forbidden to wear clothes. They were naked. When a prisoner met an officer there were two things he had to do: with his left hand hide his genitals and then turn his head to the right, not towards the officer, and salute him. The Legion was comprised of eighty percent Germans. What were the French to do with the prisoners of the Second World War? Keep feeding them for nothing? What they thought of, the most convenient for them, was to send them to the Legion. In my unit, in my platoon, there were thirty-three people. Twenty-nine of them were Germans. There was one Greek, one Spaniard, an Italian and a Hungarian. There was a lot of hazing. One kind was called "tombeau", the grave. We dug a ditch about forty centimeters deep, ground glass from bottles and spread it in a layer by layer. The soldier being punished had to lie on them and they put over his head an awning of canvas, so that the sun would pass through and roast him and he wouldn't be able to move his body because of all the glass. It was a barbarous practice which continued until the day I left. There was one that was called "corvée des étoiles": star chore. How did it go? They give you a sack and you hold it in your hand. You stand to attention, with your legs stiff, as much as you can, and with your right hand you pretend that you are catching a star

and put it in the sack and you do this, and do this. My staff sergeant Reichster was an asshole from the Nazi youth of Germany. He had fought in Crete. He had his wounds so he hated Greeks and Cretans. And he tried in every way to give me a hard time to make my life a misery. We knew where we were going: the Far East. Nothing specific: the Far East generally. And when at the appropriate time the trucks came with the big sacks, they gave us uniforms, which were of the English army, because that suited them. We were entering the Trojan horse! To go where we had to go, and where they couldn't go as Frenchmen. They put us in the Trojan horse with English uniforms and English equipment, arms, everything English. So they gathered us together and took us to Algeria, in a big steamship – it was called Cameroon – that was waiting for us. They put us on this ship. We stopped at Bizerta for fuel and then continued to Port Said. We three Greeks were always in contact because we were in the same battalion. The opportunity came when we were in the canal, in Port Said, we saw some Greek steamships docked there, and it occurred to us that they might be able to help. Because on the way we had decided to escape. I don't know how, that night when everything was ready, at the very last moment we heard gunfire. So we went back down and got into our bunks and waited. The next day we found out that four Germans had got in first. They jumped ship at Suez. This is why we had heard the shots. So we left them behind. When we got to Aden, crossing the Red Sea – Aden is on the left – they were waiting for us. The English had arrested them, and they sent them straight to Aden and they sent them down to the engines to endure the ordeal of stoking. We stopped off at Bombay and finally arrived in Saigon. Anyway, they applauded us, they bought us drinks. Slogan after slogan. They gave us notes, to get in contact with them. And they shouted: *"Vive la legion (Long live the legion), which liberated France from the Germans!"* But the Legion was Germans. 90%. Give us a break! What a disgrace. That's why from this point on all this went to the heads of the German legionaries and they behaved atrociously, in the name of the French Republic. We stayed there, with the French army, for four months, in Indochina. We weren't involved in many battles because the war was still in a very early stage in the South. The insurgency wasn't strong or well-organized. We just went on patrols: we burnt and destroyed to show that we were tough, that we – and nobody else – were the boss. Ravaging, massacring, burning. Everyone did whatever he felt like. Wherever they went, any girl they found...they took it in turns. And as in my case, at the last minute, when I just had to desert, when I couldn't

take it any more and nothing was going to stop me, before my eyes, on the last day I was in the Legion, the whole platoon took it in turns to rape a fourteen or fifteen-year-old girl. During this period, in 1946, the resistance movement was very weak. It had a presence only outside the big cities in mountain areas that were more suitable. Mostly we were doing was tricks so that the officers could get promotion. One officer entered into an understanding with another: *"You will take your platoon to position five and I will go on the other side to position ten and at a certain point - a safe place, of course - we will join battle."* We didn't know that the other unit was conspiring with our own officer. So he said "Fire!". Fire from here, fire from there, and at the end, all sweetness and light. But the next day the press dispatch came out and *said "such-and-such a platoon engaged the Vietminh, with x number killed, y number of weapons confiscated."* All fairy tales. And so the officers took the opportunity to win some decoration, some promotion. There was a hell of a lot of that kind of fabrication. March came and a truce was called. Ho Chi Minh was in France ... and they made an agreement for the insurgency to have the opportunity to come down into the cities as our equals. And we went out unarmed. We had every hope, and we were happy, that the war was going to end.

Ho Chi Minh and General Giap

And at that time in North Vietnam there was Chiang Kai-Chek, the Chinese, because at that time they were an allied army. But Ho Chi Minh knew that Chiang Kai-Chek wasn't going to leave, he was going to collaborate with the French, so that Vietnamese would have two enemies: the French and the Chinese. And at the Geneva negotiations Ho Chi Minh acted very intelligently, saying: "OK, we will cede the northern part to the French", so that the Chinese leave. His purpose was to make the Chinese leave, knowing the French intentions. And the French blundered, they thought that now the Chinese were leaving they could come and start a pincer movement, in the South and the North. But in the North, now that the French were taking over, the insurrection grew.

"The whole country demonstrating its solidarity with the struggle in the south."

So in 1946, in November, war is declared in all of Indochina. My lieutenant, Christiani, went on a mission and when he returned from Saigon three or four days later, he brought a girl with him. When I saw her I liked her. She was a pretty girl, so I started to make advances. One

day she left me a message that she would be alone that evening. The lieutenant was going to the town for some meeting. The message was in French. That night I decided to go to the officer's room. And I happened to discover that she was searching in the files. She didn't say anything. She just said: "If you want, search me." I didn't dare to search her. She said, "All this time you have wanted me. Why don't you touch me now?" And at that point she opened up and spoke in French. I say: "OK. Leave the documents as they are. And when you need them I'll give you any documents you want. Let's not take the risk of the officer coming back and seeing you rummaging in the papers and being suspicious." Her name was Lily. And it turned out that she was indeed an agent. And together we began to plan how I could escape - I had already explained it to her that I wanted to leave. And we worked out with my Spanish comrade Merino our scheme, and everything was ready. And then on a patrol we arrested a Vietnamese citizen who had a lot of money on him and the officer was much impressed with all these thousands of piastres, a considerable amount. He wanted an excuse to take it so he arrested him and then handed him over to me to guard him. At the same time, because I had previously clashed with his German officer - there had been friction between us and he had had me in his sights for a long time, now he had been given the opportunity to make me responsible for guarding not only him but also the prisoners of war. There were a lot of prisoners. They had taken them to do heavy chores; rather than having to pay they kept the money for themselves. So he had the opportunity if someone escaped to nab me and send me to the disciplinary company. But now I knew what I wanted. I had found out who and what the Vietminh were, so everything was ready for me to take the risk. But now for me to convince the Vietnamese POW I had to show my hand. So I said to him straight: "I want to go to the Vietminh. Can you help me?" At first he was hesitant. He thought I was some kind of bait. But from the tortures he had suffered from all those days, the beatings and so on, he saw that I had stood by him, and every time I brought him to the hut, I took care of him. He began slowly to acquire some confidence in me and he said to me one day: "Yes, if you bring me to the mountains I will give you twice as much." "Wrong," I said. "I don't go the mountains for the money. I will go to the mountains, to the guerrillas, because I want to go. I've got no business here killing the Vietnamese. If you are fighting now for your country, my ancestors were fighting before for my country against the Germans and before that. And I want to do that." So we reached an understanding, all of us and I made an agreement with Merino too. At midnight we opened

the door, we took a Bren machine gun, two crates with hand grenades and a box of bullets. And one by one, one by one, we passed between the mines. Because I myself had mined the schoolyard, together with the others. The German had deliberately got me to do it, so that if anything happened I could be eliminated. But I was a wake-up to him. Near the toilet, it was smelly, he hadn't gone there to check, I had left a gap and that was where we got through. But soon the twenty five who escaped with me scattered and everyone went their own way to their village. We reached the jungle and it was night. What can we do, where can we go? The three of us: Merinos, myself and Bien, as he was called. With the machine gun, the two weapons, and the Sten. In the jungle it was night, where could you walk? Stumbling here, stumbling there. The problem was not with me, not with Merinos. The problem was with the other, the injured man. His eyes were swollen from the beating. Progress was slow. We spent the night curled up in some bushes. The next morning the man said: "I am going to leave you. I'll find the path and find our friends. Don't dare to move from here, because if all three of us go together on the road, somebody seeing us might think that I am a traitor working with the French and we will be in trouble." OK. We trusted him. He left and we stayed in the jungle for two nights. We waited and waited anxiously. Finally I said to Merinos: "if he doesn't come, we'll carry out our plan". We drew a map on the ground: where we were, where the road must be, approximately, take the road, go to the sea of Yangtsang, find a boat, who knows. But we were wrong. The next day Bien in fact came with four or five soldiers. They greeted us. They took our weapons and we set off and after about four hours came to a clearing and there was a barracks there, the so-called Unit Number One. They welcomed us there, we slaughtered a calf, which for them was a great ceremony, not so much for us as for the machine gun! They looked at it and their tears fell on it and they said: "How much we have wanted to have one of those, and now we have one. And a lot of bullets also". And we had the meal, and a good time was had by all. Fine. We rested the first day. But the second day they put us to the test, the truth test, as it were. The alarm sounded and a soldier came with a weapon. He took us and we hid in the jungle. Merinos and I, as Europeans, usually spoke rather loudly. The soldier said to us: "Shhh. Don't talk, the French could come this way." Hearing these words, I thought we must be somewhere near the French and I said: "If the French come, you will kill me. Bang for me, bang for my friend. And you must escape. Go wherever you like." That's what I said to him, that's what I had in my mind. And suddenly the alarm stopped. Of course he

went and told the officer about my behavior and the officer in charge – his name was Wingsan - realizing that our behavior with the soldier had been very good, he came and asked us to excuse him. From this moment of the excuses we were enrolled in the ranks of the guerrilla army, the Vietnamese army, the so-called Vietminh of that period. And a ceremony took place where they gave me the name of Nguyen Van Lap and to my friend Merinos the name of Nguyen Van Vi. And when the whole battalion gathered together to greet us, we were very surprised to see there were only three Mousquetaire” weapons, the French ones, short and long-barreled, and the officers had a revolver on their hip. The Vietnamese strategy at that time was “*strike, grab and run*”, so that we could get as many weapons as possible. And that proved to be possible. From nothing we reached the point where whatever the French had, we would soon have it too. They had brought Vickers. We got hold of them. They had brought cannons. We got hold of them too. In other words we got our equipment from the French themselves because up until 1950 the borders of Vietnam with China were closed. It wasn't possible to have help from abroad, coming over the borders because to the north there was Chiang Kai Chek. All this period we were fighting, we were winning, acquiring the weapons. The more we won, the more weapons we acquired. After 1950, and particularly after 1952 when the borders opened, then we had help from the Soviet Union, from the former Eastern countries, not only equipment, not only supplies, not only medicines, not only clothing: we had a huge amount of assistance, and it gave us an advantage on the northern front and particularly at Dien Bien Phu. It was from there that the "Molotova" tracks also came transporting soldiers and equipment, cannons, tanks, whatever was needed, and the result was the surprise at Dien Bien Phu, which was a catastrophe for the French, with three generals taken prisoner. Unprecedented in history.

In the Indochina war the French lost 35,000 dead, with 50,000 wounded. The Vietnamese losses were much higher.

“The French invasion of the valley of Dien Bien Phu brought great pain and suffering. Today the residents gratefully welcome their sons who made so many sacrifices to liberate Dien Bien Phu. Not only our compatriots there but all the people of the Far East proclaim their joy with the slogan Vietnam – Ho Chi Minh - Dien Bien Phu. President Ho Chi Minh said that Dien Bien Phu is a link in the historical chain that connects with colonialism and at the same time a giant leap for the contemporary liberation movement. With the consummation of the victory, Vietnam

leaves behind the unhappiness experienced not only by itself but also by the people of France overcoming the past, which must never be repeated” The French saw what they saw and were obliged to sign an unconditional surrender, to leave within two years, with general elections then being held. But unfortunately the Americans were there even before the French left, under various camouflages, as advisors, as this, as that. They kicked out the French a little before the specified time, and embarked on the second round. And General de Gaulle had told them: “ *I couldn’t succeed after so many years. Do you think you newcomers are going to?* “And they didn’t succeed. General Giap was invincible: he exterminated them all, one by one. “*Our forces needed time to withdraw the cannons and until then we had to join forces with those of Dien Bien Phu establishing an army more powerful than had ever existed before. We had to believe ourselves 100% certain of victory, ending up with the rule that to fight for a swift victory, is not effective. “*

[Costas with General Giap in 1998.](#)

This year he is 100 years old. May he live to one thousand!

[Eretria, Euboea.](#)

This is my daughter’s land. Her name is Eleftheria (freedom) , her Vietnamese name is Tu Yo. I come often here, to see my grandchildren. And here my poultry: my geese, my rabbits. Which remind me of the time when I was in Vietnam and I had some chickens there too. But since we are talking about chickens, in Vietnam every family had to have chickens, a pig, because food provisioning was under control. Every household had to have a pig, not to slaughter it for food, but to show that they had another to replace it immediately, so that production could continue. The life of the guerrilla fighter in Vietnam at my time , in -46, -47, -48, particularly the first three years, was very harsh. Firstly, as regards food, we had an 800-gram daily ration. Greens – if we could buy them, fine. If we were in the jungle, we tried to find them, the so called Zotobai, which was the sole source of food for the whole army. If we went on organized operations, in the evening before the cook boiled the rice and moulded it into balls, as we do with dough when we are making bread. We rolled them with a napkin and hung from the belt. Usually when we went on operations I ate them in advance so as to have eaten my fill with the thought that if the French killed me and opened my stomach they would see that I eaten well and have not gone hungry, and could not say: the bastard had starved to death. In the liberated zone the people offered to

us chicken or egg, sometimes a rich man was so kind as to slaughter a pig and treat us to a meal, because of our behavior, as every time we came to a village we would ask which families needed our help. There were poor families who didn't even have a buffalo. We went and dug and gathered manure. We did various jobs, and people appreciated this and they gave us some salt, a salted fish, anything that could improve our menu. Usually the cooking was done in common. From ordinary soldier to officer, there was no difference. Everyone joined the queue. There were no marks of rank. There was respect. We didn't know whether a person was an officer but there was fraternal behavior. The officers behaved like brothers and not like officers. Every time we had to do something they always asked for our ideas. Whether it was a battle or manning a guard post, the soldiers always had the last word. It was never a question of them deciding and ordering "Do this" and that's the end of it. It was the soldier that had the last word. We can see in the history of Vietnam that it has always been the case, all the kings, all the military leaders, have based themselves on the people. And when you have confidence in the people, the people trust you. This nation was determined to win. Psychologically it was prepared. They had the slogan, as we Greeks have it: "Freedom or Death". Ho Chi Minh had been saying "5 years, 10 years, 15 years, there is no expiry date for this war." The expiry date was for the French. In Vietnam in order to economize on rice they had organized all the communities everywhere, in the liberated and occupied territory also, the "jar system": Before cooking every family would store up a handful of rice in the jar. This was available in case of need: If some group of fighters was passing by and were short of rice, they would give this rice to the army to eat. As for recreation, in the army we had a lot, particularly in guerrilla warfare. Because in the day, we would fight, we would read and study. But in the evening you couldn't remain idle. At that time in each group there was a mandolin. They didn't have bouzoukis like in Greece; they had mandolins. In each group there were two or three mandolins. Instead of having a gun on their shoulder they had a mandolin. And when we came to a stopping place, where we stopped for ten minutes, the boys would start playing the mandolin, singing a song, and boosting the morale in this ten-minute rest period. It was the same in the evenings. If we were in a village we would pass a very pleasant evening. The whole company was gathered with all these instruments. We invited the people to come and we enjoyed ourselves all together with songs and so on. As for the women, we had very fine girls in the army. Bravo girls. We respected them as our little sisters, depending on their age. The revolution had

banned vulgarity, i.e. prostitution. It didn't exist outside, and inside the army there was a serious attitude towards women. They cooked for us, they healed our wounds and so on, they were a consolation. In all the time I was in the war I never saw or heard anything strange. Only once, there were some rumors of some soldier somewhere trying to take advantage of a woman, and he was executed on the spot as a deterrent.

Quang Ngai railway station.

It was bombed here and the corpses were hanging from the trees. Either it was that tree, or that big one there. And along with my French friend Marie-Charles were digging with our hands to exhume the dead. At the beginning of the war period I was detached to the Military school. There I met a German who belonged to the regiment of Tellmann, the German communist who fought in the ranks of the democratic brigades in the Spanish civil war. He was an officer of the Vietnamese Popular Army. He supported me and I entered in the School of Officers. I stayed for quite a while there, until I took the decision to go to the front.

With veterans at Da Nang.

I went to the front at Da Nang, the so called Tourane previously. I fought in the Da Nang zone for the whole period of the nine years. I reached the rank of lieutenant. A lot of battles. I also worked in the propaganda service, towards the enemy, and I was also responsible for the mobile anti-aircraft unit. I was the first to shoot down a French plane, on 7th November 1947, taking the 3 French as prisoners of war: Immoral 650 was the type of plane. I made twice the journey of the "Ho Chi Minh path" from the south to the north, a journey that lasts three and a half months there and back, through the jungle and the mountains, up and down. We took the most distant paths to have 100% security and the journey was very difficult. We crossed the same river thirty-six times. It was like a snake. I suffered a lot because many of us were old. I was young, very young. To get the 40/50 year old men across, I had to cross the river many times, carrying them one after the other. The rivers are shallow but slippery. You slip and you can easily fall down. The stones are slimy. You had to really know how to cross. I withdrew again to organise the prisoner-of-war camp. We had prisoners of war, but they were scattered: one here, one there, a number in different provinces. Some of them worked with the farmers. One or two of them had married. I was called general supervisor of the prisoner of war camp, which was called a camp but wasn't a camp. We lived in huts. In every hut in the

village there were two or three prisoners. There was no barbed wire. We didn't have guards or a garrison because the point was to get the prisoners to understand that with us they were free. They could leave, but there would be no point to it. The barbed wire was just the people. I used to go down to the city. I got in touch with the administration there, for provisioning, for supplies. We tried to find medicines. We asked for help in various places. I had to order crutches for people who had been injured. I made this trip frequently. Every evening I went with them to the market because it was held at night. In the daytime you couldn't have market because of the bombing. And I went to help them to buy themselves whatever they needed. Their diet was about twice what was customary in Vietnam. That's what we were able to provide then, so that's what we gave them. At the same time they had some chickens from here and there. They grew a few things, some tomatoes and peppers, in the fields round about, and improved their lives in this way. This was the spot where we burnt all their old military clothes and gave them new ones so they could go for the French to be liberated.

[Atrocities of the French period..](#)

[and of the American period.](#)

The Vietnamese soldiers who were prisoners of war to the French they perhaps had better food but they were in chains, hand and feet bound, their necks bound to boards, the head bound also, in cages for tigers, real torture. We often heard from them themselves, that they put the prisoners on a plane and interrogate them and if they saw that nothing came out from the interrogation, they threw them out of the plane. There were a whole lot of other tortures. In some prison in the south we heard and it was a fact - that they even poisoned them to get rid of them. And if we talk now about the prison of Con Dao, the island – just as in Greece we have Makronissos - only God knows what the Vietnamese suffered. In 1954 the war ended, with the Geneva agreements, and we handed over the prisoners of war. And this is when the period of agricultural reform begins. Its objective was very proper, good and positive for the poor peasants. It is just that it was carried out, perhaps, hastily, perhaps not having suitable personnel to implement it. And the pressure that was imposed – there must by hook or by crook be agricultural reform, to satisfy the farmers that had participated in the nine years of war, and it started being carried out in the Chinese manner. Either the Chinese influenced them or the Vietnamese imitated the Chinese methods. It was

an absolute failure. *"From the outset the Reform aroused general enthusiasm, which had no counterpart during all the period of the Resistance. A great power for strengthening the struggle on all fronts."* Mistakes were made. A lot of mistakes. There was violation of the so-called People's Justice. Because when we say People's Court, a democratic one, this means that the accused must at least have the right to defend himself. But they didn't allow the accused to defend himself. They were based only on the accusation of whoever thought he was loyal to the party of the people to denounce the criminal practices of the big landowner, for example. But the accused on his knees was not allowed to look at his prosecutor. He kept his head down and if he raised it up, they jumped on him: Head down! In the Air Force where I worked, they summoned me one day to defend myself. I say: What's it all about? The officer answers: "Your wife is reactionary." "I will be pleased to answer. Tell me, what did she do? He says "Your wife is such-and-such, and she is reactionary. In the X plantation she worked, this and this happened." "So what do you want from me?" Should I say 'No, you are wrong' ? I knew that if I insisted I would suffer the consequences too, because we knew between us a lot of similar instances, suicides etc. It was notorious inside the army. Now, what to do? I had to protect myself. Because if I said "No, you are wrong" I would be going contrary to the line. And when you go against the line of the party, you insist on your view and they insist on their, there will be consequences. They could say, "Yes, your wife says you are involved too." So I said: "If you think she is a reactionary, I cease to have any relation with her." When I said: "I cease to have any relation with her", everyone in the organization stood up and applauded saying: "Bravo for your revolutionary spirit !" In the period of resistance this wife of mine was in the People's Army. She served in the 803rd battalion, as I did. She was in the propaganda service. When Vietnam was divided in two she withdrew from the army and became head nurse in a commune. So during her entire life she was with the revolution. And her brother had been a member of the Party since 1930, the early period. So from her history, she didn't have any connection with the reaction. Now, I separated from my wife, formally. I was discharged from the army and I worked at the Ministry of Culture and Education as an interpreter for the Germans of Eastern Germany, because they established a big publishing house, the biggest in the Far East and there I met my new wife, this one here. She became pregnant. And at the same time there came the "rectification of errors". The general secretary of the party Truong Chinh was purged and the order came to "rectify the errors". My former wife

was released. She came to the Agriculture Ministry, and she said: "I want my husband back". The others requested compensation, because they lost their houses or whatever they lost, I don't know. But she lost her husband and wanted him back. What could they do? They summoned me and said: "You have to help to rectify the errors." "What errors?" I said. "Anyway what do you want from me?" Knowing that I had married again, they said: "The party allows you to take two wives." That was the last straw. I said: "I would like to have two hearts and a wife on each side and lie down and long live the feudal system ! I get up and leave, slamming the door. So they send a message to the publishing house where I work to expel me from the party, in my absence. Justification: " I had married without the permission of the organization". When I found this out I said: "Thus far and no further." And I began to change my attitude, not in any other respect, but I began to want to return to Greece. After that I left Hanoi and I worked in the mines, in Northern Vietnam, close to the border with China. That was where our second child, our daughter, was born. After that I went to another mine, again near the borders with China, where a third daughter was born, I came into contact with my family, and the arrangement got under way for them to send me my passport so that I could return. And thanks to the World Council of Churches in Geneva, which paid for the ticket for me and my family, in 1965 we returned to Greece. After that, things were difficult: first of all the language. I had completely forgotten Greek. I heard it and didn't understand. I read and couldn't work out what it meant, for I had been only as far as the fourth class of primary school. What a vocabulary can a child of 10 have? But even that I hadn't retained, not having used it. I struggled, took Greek citizenship. I was put on trial and acquitted, I acquired a driver's licence and worked as a driver for the (French) Pechiney mines in Greece for 18 years.

CITIZENSHIP : UNDEFINED

Luckily the Pechiney's Personnel Director was a former legionary officer, a Frenchman, of course. There was a Greek man there too from the French foreign legion, an ex-officer also, his name was Manoussaridis. We got to know each other and our clan of legionaries was joyfully reunited. I worked there for 18 years. I retired from Pechiney's on the pension. The children went on to higher studies, with sacrifices of course. I'm very proud of the children, and of my wife. She is a worthy person, like all the women of Vietnam. They are very admirable. They are eighty percent of the power of the country. Apart from being wives, apart

from being mothers, they are the basis of production. All of us were in the army, but the women had a gun in one hand, a hoe in the other. Very admirable. Vietnamese history includes very many heroic queens and in Vietnam they praise their kings because all of the kings of Vietnam since the beginning of time, were patriots. Very much patriots. And to this day they pay homage to them, they favour them. Apart from the last one, Bao Dai. There was also an organization: the Soldier's Mother. The army had issued an order that every soldier had a right to two mothers. The soldier's mother, including in my case, had the duty, when the soldier comes home, from the campaign, to look after us, to give us whatever was available or they could give us, because most of them were poor. But just the love that they gave us – we felt that we had a mother at our side – encouraged us, refreshed us psychologically, gave us courage, with the feeling that we had someone at our side in a moment of need. I had a mother who was very poor, but when she took me in her arms she cried and I felt as if she was my real mother who had given birth to me. It was because of that mother that I survived. If I hadn't had her I would have died. She treated me with more kindness than a real mother. I will never forget her. I happened to act in a film, based on a true story, not a fiction one. This event really happened, in the South. And we put it into a film to encourage the soldiers to see that one can fight against tanks. I played three roles in that film: the driver, the gunner and the officer. Because I was the only white man and in an emergency, as it were, it isn't necessary to have talent, you just play, it is always easy to play the bad guy.

Vietnamese cinema was mostly militant documentaries. The film processing often took place in jungle conditions, with the film being developed in earthen jars. The images from the past that you see in the film are direct reportage, are very often re-stagings of the battles and the guerilla fighting, patriotic films with a story line, propaganda films, presentations of the political line, of the leadership, of the international solidarity.

In 1969 President Ho Chi Minh ("the bearer of light") commonly known as "Uncle Ho" died.

It was he who in 1945 imposed the independence of Vietnam (DOC LAP).

Fellow citizens from all over the country. *“All people are born equal and free and have the right to live accordingly. Nobody can be permitted to violate the freedom and equality of others. But on the contrary everyone has the right to live as a free man and expect happiness.”* This was mentioned in the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, that all the peoples of the world are entitled to freedom and equality, living in peace and happiness and enjoying all human rights.” *“We the entire people swear to support the government of the Republic of Vietnam, to support President Ho Chi Minh and we swear together with the government in favor of the full independence of the country, fighting against every conspiracy against independence and if the French return to occupy us again, we swear not to become soldiers of the French, not to work for them and collaborate with them.”*

The war with the USA continued for another five years after his death in 1969.

60,000 Americans died in the Vietnam War, one million Vietnamese fighters and four million civilians. There were many times this number of wounded, crippled and victims of chemical warfare.

(Savopoulos' song:) *“In Vietnam they burned the rice
In Saigon you couldn't live, there is not enough air
for you to live. Now, hidden in the river, you breathe”*

The Vietnamese are a people who know how to fight, know how to punish, but also know how to forgive. This is in their nature. As in the wartime period with the Vietnamese prisoners of war for whom I had responsibility, in our barracks. We gave them lessons, and some indications, some explanations, to help them understand: what the fatherland is and how it is acquired, what the occupation was, how they had chosen the wrong course. Because they too said they were for the fatherland. If they realized their errors, we let them go to fight with their brothers and sisters against the French, during the wartime period. After the war many of them, collaborators both with the French and with the Americans, after their defeat, left for America, for abroad. There they spread a number of misrepresentations. The Vietnamese government made it clear to them that the war was over and anyone who wanted to come back could come back as a friend. This was not just for the Vietnamese but for the French and Americans too. And we saw that a lot

of French people came back, but as friends. A lot of Americans came back, but as friends.

[“May President Ho Chi Minh always be with us.”](#)

From the day that I came back to Greece in 1965 my thoughts were on Vietnam. And I said to myself: “In what way can I continue to help that people?” I continued listening to the news, because the war was not over.

[Costas Sarantidis: “In the Prisoner-of-War Camp”](#)

The bombing continued and I tried in a number of different ways to write, for example, poems in Vietnamese, and send them to the newspaper of the People’s Army. Until ...

[After the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 the North and the guerrillas gained the upper hand. Saigon was occupied in 1975, with the Americans and many South Vietnamese retreating in disarray. In 1976 North and South Vietnam were reunited in a single unitary state.](#)

In my memory I always have the children who fell victim to dioxin. I had the good fortune to visit them a couple of times in Da Nang. If you see them it breaks your heart. And I decided with some of my memoirs to make a small book and sell it, and all the profits from the book would go to the children who suffer from dioxin poisoning. Dioxin is an orange powder that the Americans sprayed, monstrously, on all the jungle, with a view to destroying the plants, the trees, to expose the Vietminh. It was a poison, it fell onto the greens, it fell into the water. We, in the jungle, ate greens. The children didn’t know what it was and they ate it. Even today, third generation, children like that are still being born. The total number of victims of dioxins is 4,800,000.

[Da Nang – Welfare Centre for mildly affected dioxin victims](#)

Even today when I dream, I dream of Vietnam. I can’t remember for example anything from my childhood years in Toumba (Salonica) when we went and stole a mulberry or an apricot. The memories don’t come. But from Vietnam yes. Every day I am dreaming of what happened there. The years far in the past, the difficult years.

[Quang Ngai region in central Vietnam.](#)

Eight years barefoot, amid the thorns and the stones. But we survived. Two of her children have been sacrificed for their country.

Major Lan Van Minh, of the same regimental unit as Costa.

During the long wars against the French and the Americans many friends from foreign countries came to give us their support, so that we could resist the French colonizers and the American invaders. But there has not been anywhere else apart from in our regiment, the 803rd, another internationalist fighter like Nguyen Van Lap-Costas Sarantidis, such an example of supreme internationalist spirit.

Major Vo Van Minh

“Where do I start to tell what he went through? Back then, in 1948 when he wanted to drink a cup of coffee, I said to him: “OK but we have to go several kilometers from here to find coffee.” The difficulty was how we could walk on the stones, barefoot. Walking was very difficult. And looking at him I felt both pain and love to think that just for a coffee he would set out on such a difficult march. That made me sorry for him and I loved him all the more. Because up until then he had been in the French army, with all the comforts. Now he was coming over to the Vietminh, to go barefoot ?

I am Greek and I love peace. My country up to now has not had colonies like France, Germany, Spain, etc. On the contrary, we experienced 400 years of slavery under the Turks. In our spirit there is a love of freedom and we are always willing to help anybody for that, as was done for us by Lord Byron, who helped the Greeks in their revolution. And even today, when I think about what I saw in Vietnam and what I went through, together with them, sometimes I wonder: “Is it true, Costas? Could you perhaps be dreaming?”

In 2008 accompanying the Greek President on his visit to Vietnam.

2005 in Caracas, for the 60th anniversary of Vietnamese independence.

Presidential Palace, Hanoi.

With the President of Vietnam Nguyen Minh Triet.

“It is the third time that I have the honour to meet together with you”
“Not the third; the fourth.”

(Vietnam TV:)“We continue our news with the subject of Costas Sarantidis, or in Vietnam Nguyen Van Lap, the Greek former legionary who joined the forces of the Vietminh and participated in the resistance against the French and the Americans. The President of Vietnam, Nguyen Minh Triet awarded him the Medal of Friendship the Medal of Friendship and granted him honorary Vietnamese citizenship. He wrote a book entitled “Why I joined the Vietminh” which is on sale for the purpose of raising money for the child-victims of dioxin in Da Nang, and so made a present of 2,700 euros.

Veterans’ Celebration

..On the day of the rendezvous an elderly gentleman came into my office and in impeccable Greek said to me “Hello, my ambassador, I am Costas Sarantidis. I am he.” “Who are you?” I asked. “Nguyen Van Lap.” And then I heard the amazing story which you are telling at this moment. So as to explain to me that he was the same person, he showed me, in an album,

Alexis Hadzimichalis, former Ambassador of Greece in Hanoi

that was a little the worse for wear, two or three photographs of General Giap in his youth, Ho Chi Minh and other great Vietnamese revolutionaries and he also showed me a young man in uniform saying: “This is me.” I very quickly realized that he was the only connecting link that we had had for many years between the two countries, without knowing it. Van Lap helped me first of all to fulfil a personal dream I had had, which was to meet General Giap. General Giap knew a great deal about Greece and spoke to me for a long time about how the Military Academy told them about the Trojan War and how Odysseus managed, with the help of the Trojan Horse, to gain entry into Troy and conquer the city. I should also say about Van Lap that all these years when there was no Vietnamese Embassy in Greece, Van Lap played a bridging role between the two countries given that, having returned to Greece in 1965, he himself, unofficially, was the unpaid General Consul for Vietnam in Greece. Naturally that life cost me, the whole adventure of Vietnam, 20 years there, plus 40 here in Greece, 60 in total. Nobody can know his destiny. If I hadn’t gone into the Legion, if I hadn’t gone to Vietnam, if I hadn’t deserted, what would have become of me? What ditch would I have fallen into? Who knows where I would have ended up. So my conscience is clear. I am proud of what I have done for Vietnam and what I continue to do, with my whole heart, because they are a people who

deserve it. They treated me with solidarity, with trust and with love. And I too love them, I respect them and I esteem them. In my life I was dragged from one side of the world to the other, always led by my instinct, and I repeat that, my instinct. I will never betray it and I have not betrayed it up until now. What is that instinct? I can't tell. But on every occasion it says something to me. And that something is what I pick up immediately. And I carry it out, in every detail. I regret nothing. If by any chance in my next life a similar situation should arise, I would do the same again.

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music fragments from: Mon légionnaire - Edith Piaf, La petite tonkinoise - Maurice Chevalier, Vietnam ye ye -
love - Amadou et Mariam, Suoi Dan Trung - Tran Dang/Hong Phuc, Canh chim tu do - Tran Vuong, Khuc hat ru - X
ho rieng - Hong Thai, Cuối cùng cho m̄t tình yêu - Son/Khuc

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