



Hue Prepared for a Holiday, Then the War Came

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Many civilians were driven from their homes during street fighting in the ancient city of Hue in February 1968. Bettmann/Getty Images

During the early days of January 1968, the 150,000 residents of Hue, like all Vietnamese, began preparations for their biggest event of the year, the three-day lunar new year festival of Tet. Markets were filled with once-a-year treats. Men decorated gardens with flowers and bonsai. Women gathered ingredients for holiday dishes and styled fresh designs for their ao dai tunic dresses. Vendors packed the streets in the hope of making extra money before the holiday arrived.

Life in the city looked settled and as quiet as could be. Beneath the surface, though, Hue was beginning to boil.

The seat of modern Vietnam's founding dynasty, the [Nguyen](#), Hue was regarded by all as the national center of culture, religion and education. The imperial Citadel, the elaborate tombs of the emperors and turn-of-the-century French architecture created a tranquil and nostalgic appeal, even as American civilian complexes sprouted in a district across the Perfume River. With all of its persistent and strict norms and customs, imperial tradition and cultural heritage, Hue in the 1960s was the most characteristically Vietnamese city.

But Hue was not stuck in the past. The University of Hue and the intellectual communities that gathered around it within a few years of its founding in 1957 became agents of social change rather than simply institutionalizing loyalty to the national government. The Buddhist mobilization of 1963 against the anti-Buddhist policies of the South Vietnamese government was ignited in Hue. Discontent and urban movements against the government and the perception of American intervention in Vietnamese affairs resulted in increasing turmoil: In January 1965 protesters set the American cultural center on fire. Instability and protests roiled the city again in spring 1966.

By 1967, Hue was a center of urban opposition to successive South Vietnamese administrations, the graceful, tranquil city shaken by demonstrations, self-immolations, hunger strikes and other expressions of struggle against the government.

With no American military base in town and no army-to-army battle before 1968, the city did not feel the war as immediately as the surrounding countryside. Samuel Thomsen, the American consul from 1964 to 1966, would bicycle around Hue with his wife and daughter and "see dive bombers dropping their payloads in the far west towards the mountains." The continuing flow of war victims arriving at the National Hospital of Hue, the sounds of helicopters and distant artillery resounding night after night, all intensified the concerns of the people.

Still, the metamorphoses that were underway manifested themselves subtly, shaping the daily rhythms of human activity at home and in the workplace. The social atmosphere was now sown with frustration, skepticism and ambivalence, intermingled with growing anxieties over the war and uncertainty regarding the future of the nation.

"I've been here five years, and the situation has never been this bad," a university student told *The Washington Post* in April 1967.

The deteriorating situation in Hue's environs added to the city's tensions. Local officials in outlying districts increasingly chose to spend nights in town, returning to their villages each morning. Rural populations moved toward the city to escape growing violence. Middle-class families in Hue, particularly those of government officials, headed south to Danang or Saigon, which seemed safer.

In May, a nighttime attack on the Huong Giang Hotel on Hue's main thoroughfare aggravated the fear of terrorism. Rumors increased anxieties. One story had the government yielding South Vietnam's two northernmost provinces to Hanoi as part of a deal, putting Hue on the new front line.

By late 1967, Communist infiltrators had developed networks of agents and sympathizers within the city. No one knew exactly how many of Hue's people were part of these networks; members worked independently and met their direct contacts only by appointment. And few people had information on what would happen to the town during the Tet holiday. Plans for the coming attacks were being made in Hanoi and carefully communicated to forward North Vietnamese units gathering in the mountains north and west of the city.

Among the sympathizers who had been radicalized by the urban movements was Ho Tan Phan, whose father and grandfather had been killed fighting the French. He had become a respected high school teacher with strong anti-foreign instincts. In 1965 he began work as a liaison to Communist forces, moving easily among the town's communities of students, teachers and merchants. In the months before Tet, he was ordered to map out the locations of Hue's rice stores and pharmacies, at the same time sending medical supplies and transistor radios to his comrades in the hills. Meanwhile, the reverse flow of weapons from his comrades found its way into town.

But by the final days before the holiday, Hue's populace had set its anxieties aside, temporarily disregarding ominous signs to embrace the arrival of a new and hopefully better year. Train and bus stations were packed with passengers carting fresh flowers and festival cakes and candies made of glutinous rice, beans and ginger or lotus seeds, all wrapped in banana leaves or colorful translucent plastic wrap. With the annual Tet cease-fire, about half of South Vietnamese military personnel were off duty, their families welcoming them home for a time, at least, fathers and sons, brothers and nephews and uncles.

Among these hurried travelers was Tran Thi Thu Van, who had left her husband and children in Saigon to rush home for her father's funeral on the eve of the lunar new year, Jan. 29, 1968. Seeing out the old year with death and mourning, Ms. Thu Van and her family adorned their heads with traditional white crepe mourning bands.

There were warnings of a surprise attack, but it was expected to be just the usual small guerrilla force striking quickly in the night and disappearing before dawn. The Year of the Earthen Monkey was ushered in with the customary "giao thua" family altar rites at midnight on the new day of Jan. 30, 1968; those with Communist sympathies tuned their radios north to hear Ho Chi Minh reading his annual "Spring Poem." First Day passed with food and family and visits to friends and temples, and card games at night. Rich, poor, Buddhist, Christian – all believed the events of First Day foreshadowed the year to come, so they were grateful when the day passed in peace.

That night, Ho Tan Phan attended a meeting at a comrade's house; back home by 11, he turned on his radio and, in his room full of books, waited for what he knew was coming as the day turned.

Shortly after midnight on Jan. 31, 1968, waves of Communist troops converged from multiple locations around Hue. Around 2:30 a.m. automatic weapons and artillery rained hellfire on the town. South Vietnamese soldiers visiting home recognized the sound of Soviet B-40 rockets and the clack-clack of AK-47s, all of them so close.

Ms. Thu Van woke up in her family's ancestor-worshipping house. "I do not know when was the first gunfire," she says. "In the middle of the night I was suddenly awake with explosions shredding my fragmentary dream. As soon as I rolled off of the wooden plank bed, my ears were ringing with the sounds of guns firing from all directions. What was this?"

After the initial moments of surprise, it was quickly understood that this was something unforeseen. The attackers shouted out commands in the rough tones of North Vietnamese. The Tet offensive had begun, in Hue and throughout South Vietnam. Before the day was far gone, the city had become one of the war's deadliest fronts and, after 25 days of struggle, would become the offensive's longest, bloodiest battle.

The abundance of food prepared for feasting allowed the people of Hue to feed themselves through four weeks of siege. But thousands, mainly civilians, were killed, and the great pride of the Viet empire – the royal Citadel – was in ruins.

The city of kings had become a city of ghosts, its bloody metamorphosis immortalized forever by Tran Thi Thu Van, using her pen name, Nha Ca, in her novel "Mourning Headband for Hue" and in a pair of songs composed by Hue's native son Trinh Cong Son, "Sing Upon the Corpses" and "A Song for the Corpses," whose haunting words and melodies ring even today like wind over bones:

Corpses lie all around here, in this cold rain/Next to corpses of the old and weak, corpses of the still innocent

