



PROVISIONAL ISSUES OF SOUTH VIETNAM (1963-1980)

PHILATELIC EVOLUTION AND USES



PURPOSE: A study of stamps issued by the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam from 1963-1976 and their period of use between 1975-1980.

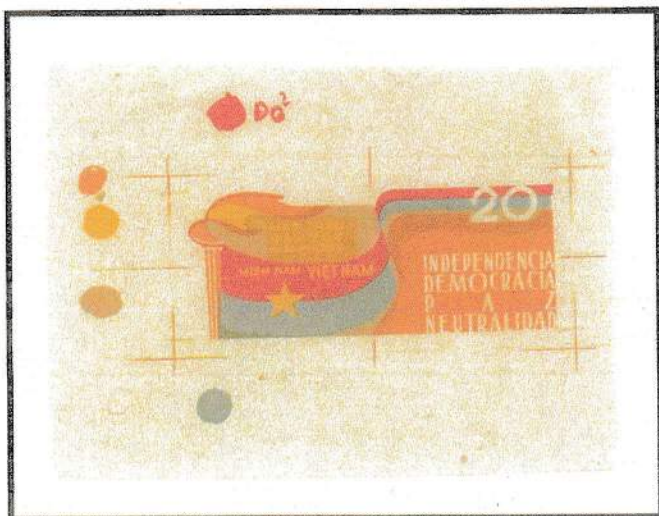
BACKGROUND:

- On 20 December 1960, Communists in South Vietnam formed the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF). Twenty-two stamps were issued from 1963 to 1969 to raise money and in anticipation of a postal service that never developed.
- On 6 June 1969, the NLF formed the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of the Republic of South Vietnam to administer areas under their control. From 1970 to 1976, the PRG issued 48 stamps to imply political legitimacy and recognition by other nation-states.
- With the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Republic of Vietnam on 30 April 1975, the PRG used its stamps to restore civilian postal services in the conquered South where mail was a primary means of communication.
- The greatest use of PRG stamps was from 1975 to 1977 although usage continued to 1980.

SCOPE: This exhibit contains all issues of the NLF and PRG along with pre-production material, archival proofs and production errors. Surcharges and fake overprints are also included. Postal use includes covers prepared immediately after "Liberation;" a wide variety of personal mail; and special commemorative/propaganda hand-stamps. Climate, animal life and a culture that considers it bad luck to retain old paper into the New Year affect the survivability of covers from this time period; the condition of covers in this exhibit is well above average. No other exhibit of this kind is known in the US.

IMPORTANCE:

- The NLF/PRG sought to project its image as the actual government of South Vietnam. Stamp issues promoted the legitimacy of an ultimately successful revolution and were later used to restore postal services in the "Republic of South Vietnam."
- From 1975 to 1976, the PRG was the *de jure* government of the conquered South. PRG issues valid emissions for a notionally "independent" state in "association" with North Vietnam.



Proof of First NLF issue,
Third Anniversary of the Founding of the NLF


GLOSSARY

1. *Mat Tran Dan Toc Gia'i Phong Mien Nam Viet Nam* = National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam [NLF]
2. *Cong Hoa Mien Nam Viet Nam* = Republic of South Vietnam [PRG]
3. *Viet Nam Dan Chu Cong Hoa* = Democratic Republic of Vietnam [North Vietnam]

EXHIBIT PLAN

1. National Liberation Front Issues
2. Provisional Revolutionary Government Issues
3. Epilogue

Key Items outlined in Red Bogus Items outlined in Green

 denotes PRG stamp on mixed franking cover with North Vietnam or unified Vietnam stamps.

Non-philatelic information in italics.

 denotes original research in blue



SYNOPSIS

PROVISIONAL ISSUES OF SOUTH VIETNAM (1963-1980)



Philatelic Evolution and Uses

Treatment: A study of stamps issued by the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of the Republic of South Vietnam from 1963–1976 and their period of use between 1975–1980 in the occupied South after the fall of the Saigon government on 30 April 1975. **This is not an exhibit of military mail during the Vietnam War; it is a study of how stamps originally issued for propaganda purposes and raising hard currency for funding the war were used to restore civilian postal services in the defeated South.** This exhibit contains all issues of the NLF and PRG along with pre-production artwork; essay, color trial and progressive proofs; and production errors. **[Each issue is identified by number; title; date of issue; and designer].** Surcharges and fake overprints are also included. Postal use includes a wide variety of personal mail (including one from a “re-education” camp); and special commemorative/propaganda hand-stamps. No other exhibit of this kind is known in the US. **[This exhibit has a new title. Also, the term “Provisional” in this exhibit has both a philatelic and a political meaning, applying to both stamps issued for a temporary purpose and use and to the Provisional Revolutionary Government which had a temporary existence that would be changed later].**

Importance: Postage stamps are symbols of state sovereignty and imply recognition by other countries (political legitimacy) and proof of governance and territorial control. As revolutionary organizations, the NLF and the PRG used stamps as one way to promote the image that they were the actual government of South Vietnam. NLF issues were intended to be used in areas “liberated” from the Saigon government although this never occurred. The PRG continued the practice of issuing stamps to confer legitimacy and imply political recognition by other nation-states.


Although purported to be issued by the NLF in the South, with the exception of one set printed by photogravure in Moscow (and some lithograph reprints), **all NLF/PRG issues were lithograph-printed** by the State Printing Works in Hanoi and sold only by book and stationery shops and the state export agency. They **were not sold in North Vietnamese post offices as they were invalid for use in North Vietnam.** The sudden collapse of the Republic of Vietnam on 30 April 1975 forced PRG authorities to urgently restore postal services in a defeated country where mail was the primary means of long-distance communication. Over-printing stamps of the conquered South was briefly considered but not implemented; neither could stamps of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) initially be used because of currency differences. The only solution was to use the stamps of the PRG.

From May 1975 to June 1976, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam was the *de jure* government of the conquered South and **PRG issues were postally valid for a notionally “independent” nation-state in “association” with North Vietnam.** Their heaviest period of use was 1975–77 although legitimate use could be found as late as 1980.

Finally, **these stamps preserve a philatelic heritage of revolution because the NLF/PRG is being edited out of the national narrative of the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam.**

Philatelic/Subject Knowledge: My initial study of these items in the late 1970s/early 1980s was limited to what was in the Stanley Gibbons catalogue and journals of the *Society for Indo-China Philately*. However, this material was mostly descriptive in nature as the first comprehensive English-language analysis of the postal use of these issues did not appear until 2002. Publication of my “how to” article in the October 2018 issue of *The Philatelic Exhibitor* led to contact with the noted Vietnamese philatelist Ta Phi Long, who has done ground-breaking research into NLF/PRG postal history. **Study of new material, which expanded the exhibit from 2 frames to 6, identified Soviet reprints of early NLF issues heretofore reported but not seen and the hidden role played by the North Vietnamese “Office of Unification” in the design and production of NLF stamps.** This philatelic and subject knowledge culminated in a presentation entitled “The

Challenges of Exhibiting Viet Cong Material” at the APS 2021 national stamp show in Chicago, IL [slides can be found on the *Society for Indo-China Philately* Home Page under “Presentations”] and assisting the editors to finally include NLF/PRG issues in the Vietnam section of the *2022 Scott Catalogue, Volume 6*.

Personal Study and Research: Using Ta Phi Long’s detailed book, I “reverse engineered” postal rates on covers in my collection to validate legitimate postal use. Although the early NLF “civilian” postal system was, in fact, a propaganda fiction, the PRG quickly made the transition to a full-up postal system after 30 April 1975 and one cannot help but be impressed by the speed of mail delivery so soon after the end of the war. Vietnamese postal workers were also very careful in noting the correct weight and postage on out-going mail as well as noticing underpayment and assessing postage due; this practice allows one to readily identify contrived covers although, given stamp shortages, changing rates and unsettled political and social conditions, some short-paid and bogus surcharges did pass through the mail system. **PRG stamp values were not selected to deliberately meet a specific class or type of service;** rather, values were such that any combination could be used to meet any weight and service requirements. Although philatelic covers were created during this period of use, it is easy to determine if a cover went through the mail (i.e., back-stamps; date of usage; rate) as opposed to “hand-backs” or philatelic souvenirs. Once currency exchange rates between North and South Vietnam were regularized, mixed franking with stamps of the PRG, the DRV and the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam occurred, especially after 1977. (A small NLF flag  identifies the PRG stamp(s) on mixed franking covers). During the continued military conflict between 1973 to 1975, **covers dating before 30 April 1975 were either philatelically inspired (use of NLF/PRG issues on military mail from the North) or back-dated favor cancels that lack routing and arrival cancels as evidence of postal use.** NLF and North Vietnamese soldiers were also “encouraged” after the signing of the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords to mail letters in occupied Quang Tri Province, especially when foreign officials or journalists were present, but surviving covers all used North Vietnamese definitive or military stamps. Finally, for decades these issues were affected by the belief, based upon a misreading of the 1964, 1969 and 1974 Conventions, that the UPU had determined that these stamps were “invalid emissions.” This was not true as my contact with the UPU revealed no circulars or bulletins were ever issued regarding the validity of NLF/PRG emissions.

Scarcity: Given the climate of Vietnam, most collectors within the country preferred used stamps or stamps without gum (not a problem with NLF/PRG issues as they were all issued un-gummed). Postal history, however, was not as popular for cultural and economic reasons. Before the Lunar New Year, every household got rid of old paper as it was considered bad luck to retain old paper into the New Year (only important documents were kept). In rural and poor urban areas, mail was used as note paper, toilet paper or to start kitchen fires. In addition to climate, animal life (especially mice and insects) was also deleterious to postal history. The condition of covers in this exhibit is well above average. Pre-production art work is usually limited to 1 exemplar per stamp. **Vietnam Post was contacted for volume of mail handled for 1975-77 to determine scarcity but this information is not publicly available or was never collected.**

References: [In order of importance]

Toops, Emory Earl. “Regime Change in Vietnam: Issues of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and Restoration of Postal Services in the Defeated South.” *Twelfth Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposium*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian National Postal Museum, 8-9 December 2022. [**David Straight Award winner**; Available from the APRL at: stamps.org/postal-history-symposium].

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Cartafalsa, Joseph J. and John P. Carroll, Jr. "An Introduction to the Viet Cong & Mien Nam Stamps of Vietnam." *The Congress Book 2002. Sixty-Eighth American Philatelic Congress*. Atlantic City, NJ: APS StampShow 2002, August 16, 2002, pages 83-110. [*The first comprehensive study in English of the purported "Viet Cong" stamps; First Day Covers; cancellations; postal use before and after the collapse of the Saigon government on 30 April 1975; and important notes on condition. Available from the APRL*].

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