

When Germany Started Caring about Boat People (September 1, 2015)

Abstract

Over 40,000 “Boat People”—so called because they sought to escape persecution and oppression in Vietnam by sea—found a new home in West Germany. As a result of the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese government intensified repression and persecution of minorities and political opponents starting in 1975. Particularly affected was the Chinese minority (“Hoa”), who were systematically persecuted and expelled by the government in the course of the escalating conflict with China. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people fled Vietnam, often across the open South China Sea toward Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, where they were housed on dilapidated freighters or in overcrowded camps. UNHCR estimates that at least 200,000 to 400,000 people died while fleeing. In view of this dramatic situation, a broad relief movement developed in the Federal Republic. The Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, Ernst Albrecht, decided to take in the first 1,000 refugees in Lower Saxony. This 2015 article looks back at the political decisions involved and portrays the lives of some Vietnamese refugees in Germany.

The suffering of the “Boat People” prompted not only German government agencies to help: in 1979, for example, Rupert and Christel Neudeck, together with prominent supporters such as Heinrich Böll, chartered the freighter “Cap Anamur” to provide immediate help for refugees. Forty years later, people are still drowning at sea: since 2014 alone, between 15,000 and 20,000 people have lost their lives fleeing across the Mediterranean.

Source

At the end of the seventies millions of people fled from the communist Viet Cong out into the open sea. But nobody wanted them. It was a German politician who ended the suffering for many.

It was at the end of May 1979 when Tu Dung Dang went to the coast with his parents. At the time, Dang was twelve years old and lived in Vietnam. “We traveled on a tributary that went to the sea,” he recounts. “There I already saw that three large ships or boats were anchored there. They were rather large for a refugee ship.”

Dang’s boat was large enough for 300 people. They set sail with twice that many. His parents had only enough money to pay for the escape of one of their children. They themselves stayed behind. Dang was at sea for seven days; for seven days he and the others feared for their lives. They encountered pirates and barely escaped a storm. Another boat capsized and Dang saw hundreds of his compatriots drown miserably. “That is the kind of experience that I would say I will never forget for my whole life.”

Thirty-six years later Tu Dung Dang is one of around 35,000 Vietnamese boat people who found refuge in the Federal Republic. As with the reception of refugees today, their admission back then was controversial. As with the refugees today, they were victims of right-wing extremist violence. And their integration, too, was difficult in the beginning. Today the Vietnamese are officials, physicians, engineers, and IT experts. How did their integration succeed in the end? They say themselves that it was primarily the great welcoming culture of the Germans and the waiver of the asylum procedure.

Around 1.5 million people escaped by boat from Vietnam's victorious communist Viet Cong and their re-education camps. Around 250,000 lost their lives at sea. Dang's boat made it out of the Mekong Delta to Indonesia, where he survived as a small boy in a refugee camp by working as a street vendor. On board the German rescue ship "Cap Anamur" he finally arrived in Germany and has never forgotten the day of his arrival in Berlin. "And as I left the plane there," he recounts, "I was embraced by a very, very corpulent woman doctor, and so tightly that I, well, just about couldn't breathe. That was the warmest embrace that I have ever had in my life. That showed that we were welcome."

Von der Leyen's father acted decisively

At this point, the vast majority of the German population was actually in favor of taking in the Vietnamese. However, the Germans had previously long been less than willing to help. The leftist student movement in particular was against refugees from pro-American South Vietnam. The heads of the federal states were also still reluctant long after 1979, saying that they did not have enough housing, and integration was complicated and expensive. In the end, it was the Minister President of Lower Saxony, Ernst Albrecht (CDU), who changed the mood in 1978.

Albrecht, the father of Defense Minister Ursula von Leyen (CDU), had seen the pictures of the freighter "Hai Hong" on television. Terrible pictures, like those from Austria today. Human traffickers had taken 2,500 boat people on board. But no country wanted to take them. For two months, the ship moved from port to port. The images of people suffering from hunger and thirst reached Germany on the German daily primetime TV news broadcast "Tagesschau" and evoked horror.

Albrecht took in several hundred of the Hai Hong passengers, and the history of the boat people in Germany then took its course. Just a few months later, the journalist Rupert Neudeck and his wife Christel founded the organization "Cap Anamur German Emergency Doctors e.V. [registered volunteer organization]". Neudeck appealed on television for donations and saved more than 10,000 Vietnamese from the South China Sea with the "Cap Anamur."

"The support of German society was overwhelming," seventy-six-year-old Neudeck remembers today. Thousands of Germans donated; numerous families took in Vietnamese. Dang, too, found his first home with a German couple until his parents followed him to Germany. Dang graduated from high school and then studied public administration and law. Now he works at the traffic fines collection department of the Berlin police.

Mai Thuy Phan-Nguyen is a physician today. "We were received with open arms," says the thirty-nine-year-old woman. Their German courses and education were made possible without any problem. Kim Hoa Trinh, who today works for a telecommunications company, also recalls a great welcoming culture. "We should receive the new refugees with open arms again today," he says, "Back then I found it very important for our first steps in Germany."

The Vietnamese were also victims of attacks

However, there were also dark sides, very dark ones. In 1980, neo-Nazis carried out an arson attack on a refugee home in Hamburg. Two Vietnamese died. Ten years later, renewed attacks: Even though this time it was Vietnamese contract workers in the German Democratic Republic and not boat people, the violence in 1991 in Hoyerswerde and in 1992 in Rostock-Lichtenhagen was again directed against Vietnamese.

At the beginning of the eighties, far fewer foreigners lived in Germany than today. The Vietnamese were the first

who came from outside Europe. “Back then there were not so many different groups,” says Hong Phuc Nguyen. He views taking in refugees today as more difficult for that reason. But not just because of cultural differences. Also because of the sheer number of refugees and the authorities being overwhelmed, he can well understand why many people have their doubts. He is at a loss himself as to how taking in 800,000 asylum applicants can be managed.

Nguyen came to Germany as a nine-year-old and in the beginning had a lot of trouble with the language. Consequently, he first had to go to *Hauptschule* [lower level secondary school], then to *Realschule* [higher level secondary school], and finally to the *Gymnasium* [college-preparatory high school]. [At the university,] he studied industrial engineering and now works for German Telekom.

Neudeck sees the integration of the Vietnamese boat people as a model. “The Vietnamese show that integration need not be a process which just costs the taxpayer money, but that we stand to gain a lot from it,” says the founder of Cap Anamur. “Their integration worked wonderfully, when we see that many Vietnamese have good jobs, belong to the educated middle class, and urge their children to be the best in school.” Admittedly, this was facilitated at the time in that the federal government decided already in 1979 to grant asylum immediately to the Vietnamese who were rescued by German ships. They were spared the arduous, months-long applications.

“I hope that it gets to that point again,” says Neudeck, and calls for a new, more open immigration system, such as, for example, that of America, which draws lots for visas once a year. “We must get away from the idea that asylum is the only means of entering Germany. I am convinced that we would then see completely different results.”

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