

Nguyen Chi Thien

Nguyen Chi Thien, who has died aged 73, spent nearly 30 years in prisons and “re-education” camps in Vietnam because he had the temerity to insist on historical truth and to write poems which attacked communist repression.

Nguyen Chi Thien Photo: AP

6:36PM GMT 13 Dec 2012

Thien first ran foul of the North Vietnamese authorities in 1958 when he asked permission to start a literary magazine. The police searched his home and found some romantic poems that, they claimed, were anti-communist. He was sentenced to two years’ hard labour.

While working as an assistant teacher, in 1960 he was imprisoned again after telling Vietnamese school pupils that the end of the Second World War in the East had not come about because of the heroism of Soviet forces in Manchuria, as claimed in their textbooks, but because of American nuclear attacks on Japan. In 1966 he was arrested again and imprisoned until 1977 because of poems he wrote that decried communist oppression. He used his time in jail, much of it spent in solitary confinement, to compose poetry and commit it to memory by reciting it to himself.

After being released in 1977, Thien lived with a friend and wrote down almost 400 poems from memory. He chose Bastille Day 1979 to smuggle his work to the French Embassy in Hanoi, but was deterred by Vietnamese security guards outside. Two days later, pursued by another security detail, he plunged into the British Embassy, shouting in English: “I am not a madman, I am a poet and I have something important to give to you.” As three British diplomats managed to hold back the guards, he handed over a manuscript with a covering letter which read: “Most of [the poems] were written during my years of detention. I think it is incumbent upon us, the victims, more so than upon anyone else, to show to the world the incredible suffering of our mercilessly oppressed and tortured people. Of my broken life there remains but one dream, that is to see the greatest possible number of people realise that communism is a great calamity for mankind.”

On leaving the embassy Thien was re-arrested. Detained under a law which enabled the authorities to hold “obstinate counter-revolutionary elements who have committed acts detrimental to general security” without trial, he spent a further 12 years in prison and composed a second collection of poems.

The smuggled-out verses mocked Karl Marx and Ho Chi Minh and were consciously intended to expose the rottenness at the heart of communism. In translation one poem reads: “I kept silent when I was tortured by my enemy:/With iron and with steel, soul faint in

agony/— The heroic stories are for children to believe./I kept silent because I kept telling myself:/Has anyone, who has entered the jungle and who was run over by the wild beast/Been stupid enough to open his mouth and ask for mercy?"

By 1980 poems from his first collection began to circulate among the Vietnamese diaspora and in 1982 an English translation was published as *Flowers From Hell* (an allusion to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*). The work was then translated into eight other languages and in 1986 Thien won the Rotterdam International Poetry Prize.

His plight prompted increasingly vociferous demands for his release from organisations like Amnesty and Pen (the international writers' group) and from a few political leaders, including Britain's Prime Minister John Major. In 1991 he was released from prison, but kept under house arrest until 1995 when, weak in body (he had developed tuberculosis in prison), but indomitable in spirit, he was allowed to emigrate to the United States.

"Poetry was what kept me alive and thinking. It kept me sane," Thien explained. "What also kept me going was that I believed that right would always win out in the end in a fight against evil."

The youngest of five children, Nguyen Chi Thien was born in Hanoi, in what was then French Indochina, on February 27 1939. His father was a court clerk. When communist North Vietnam was established in 1954 under the Geneva Accords, he welcomed the new dispensation. But like many North Vietnamese, he turned against the regime during the ensuing reign of terror when the dictatorship embarked on a disastrous Soviet-inspired land reform programme, during which many thousands of people were denounced as "class enemies" and shot.

As a young man Thien wrote love poems, happily lending them to friends so that they could impress their girlfriends. When in 1958 the Hanoi regime inaugurated a Chinese-style "100 flowers" campaign of liberalisation, Thien, encouraged by the implied promise of freedom of expression, asked permission to publish a literary journal to be called *For the People*. The next day the police came calling.

Thien's poetry made hard reading for Western apologists for communism. After Bertrand Russell praised the Hanoi regime in evidence at the Stockholm "tribunal" that judged America guilty of war crimes, Thien composed a Letter to Bertrand Russell: "The world respects you as a philosopher/But in politics, you are only a novice./ After all your noisy defences of the Vietcong,/ Can you in truth say you really know them?/Please come and have a look at our country,/Come and see for yourself our system of slavery,/Come and visit our countless prisons/Where even pigs and cows fare better than people./Just come and seek one angry testimony:/ You will learn how we have been hushed forever./Only then will you

understand them, your allies,/Whom you will want chopped into many pieces./My dear Sir, you're a hundred years of age/But in 'Communistology' you're a mere babe."

After moving to America, Thien continued to campaign for the thousands of political dissidents still languishing in Vietnam's jails and was scathing of those who sought to build economic links with Vietnam. "If politicians in the Free World think that they can de-link business and human rights," he said in 1996, "they deserve, and can expect the contempt that people living under a totalitarian regime will reserve for them."

Thien never married and had no children.

Nguyen Chi Thien, born February 27 1939, died October 2 2012

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2012